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Pragmaticalization of Hedging Markers in Japanese

Abstract

This paper proposes a three-stage pragmaticalization path for a class of hedging discourse markers in Japanese. In the first stage, full-fledged nouns, the semantic structure of which contains the *degree* component, shift their categorial status to degree adverbials that are also used as markers of approximation. In the last phase (pragmaticalization), the approximation realized by means of the aforesaid adverbials is used within a discourse strategy aimed at marking speaker's restrained stance or avoiding direct confrontation that could possibly lead to Face Threatening Acts.

Keywords: Japanese language, pragmaticalization, hedging markers, adverbials

1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to further elaborate one of the issues touched upon in Grzelak (2006) where Japanese degree adverbials were analyzed as a means of vague quantification. In the present paper, such functional change that occurred in the aforesaid adverbials will be considered an instance of grammaticalization. Subsequently, the analysis will be extended by an additional step in the process of language change, i.e. pragmaticalization of the degree words. The earlier study merely alluded to some pragmatic ramifications of the emergence of degree-based hedging expressions without considering them a stage in a broader linguistic change. This paper offers an integrated analysis of the process that will be considered an instance of pragmaticalization mediated by a preceding stage of grammaticalization of nouns that possess a component of degree (scalarity) in their semantic structure. The resulting expressions, obtained at the end of the three-stage process, play the role of discourse markers in Japanese.

Among many functions possessed by discourse markers, such as encoding epistemic modality (certainty, probability, possibility), marking of phatic meanings, text

hierarchization, logical ordering, re-formulating, explanation, indicating information source, pejorative connotation, transition, background providing, marking of dispreferred responses and many others, this paper looks into the class of hedging (mitigation, vagueness) markers. The findings presented here should possibly be applicable to at least some of these functional categories.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2. briefly discusses the notions of grammaticalization and pragmaticalization in order to position this study in the current pragmatic research. The two subsequent sections, partially based on the work presented in Grzelak (2006), discuss the respective phases of the aforesaid language change proposed in the current analysis.

2. Grammaticalization and pragmaticalization in the linguistic theory

This section overviews some of the accounts that deal with the notions corresponding with the respective stages of the process outlined in the preceding section that could be illustrated by means of the following diagram:

lexical items → grammaticalization → pragmaticalization

The question whether pragmaticalization necessarily involves an intervening grammaticalization phase is still under debate, but the data from Japanese presented in this study indicate that it is indeed the case at least in some instances. Alternatively, one can assume that pragmaticalization starts from items that have either lexical or grammatical meaning, regardless of their previous development paths.

2.1. Grammaticalization

Among numerous approaches to this type of linguistic change, the following definition by Lehmann (2002) should be considered sufficient for the scope of the current study:

Grammaticalization is a process leading from lexemes to grammatical formatives. A number of semantic, syntactic and phonological processes interact in the grammaticalization of morphemes and of whole constructions. A sign is grammaticalized to the extent that it is devoid of concrete lexical meaning and takes part in obligatory grammatical rules. (Lehmann 2002: vii)

As far as the data analyzed in the current study is concerned, one reservation seems to be necessary. The terms ‘semantic bleaching’ (Givon, 1979) or ‘semantic attenuation’ (Langacker, 1990), commonly found in the literature, seem more appropriate here, since the grammaticalized degree expressions analyzed in the subsequent sections still retain the abstract semantic component of scalarity. Grammaticalization is a complex process

that involves several interrelated changes occurring concurrently on different language levels. As a result, content words (or whole constructions) assume the characteristics of function words (cf. Hopper and Traugott, 1993: 4). Another perspective assumes shift from the propositional to syntagmatic level (Willems & Demol, 2006). The process seems to be unidirectional, and grammaticalized items are capable of development of further grammatical and pragmatic functions.

2.2. Pragmaticalization

This term arose from the necessity of devising an additional notional category that would supplement the traditional two-fold distinction between the lexical and grammatical aspects of language, that would extend to the realms of discourse in order to account for the pragmatically motivated language change. In this study, we shall adopt a somehow simplified understanding of pragmaticalization, similar to the view presented in Erman and Kotsinas (1993, cf. also Traugott, 1995). The authors consider the process a linguistic change in which lexical items, such as nouns, or grammatical items (e.g. coordinators) change their category to become pragmatic items, not fully integrated into the syntactic structure, that have a textual or interpersonal meaning. Since pragmaticalization is a process observed in both lexical and grammatical items, it does not necessarily presuppose a preceding grammaticalization stage, present in the analysis of Japanese degree expressions demonstrated in the subsequent sections (cf. also Beeching, 2009, Simon-Vandenberg & Willems, 2011; Degand & Simon-Vandenberg, 2011).

As far as the formal properties of pragmaticalization are concerned, they can be mostly observed in the distributional, phonetic and syntactic properties of analyzed expressions. For example, Frank-Job (2006: 364) enumerates the features that are indicative of pragmaticalization process of discourse markers: frequency of use, phonetic reduction (resulting from frequency), syntactic isolation, co-occurrence in contiguity (other items in the direct linguistic context can express the original lexical meaning lost by the discourse marker in the pragmaticalization process), and deletion. Some of these conditions seem rather tangential to the material of Japanese presented in this paper, possibly with the exception of a slight phonetic modification of *kurai* with voicing of the initial syllable. Also, some degree of syntactic isolation and omissibility can be observed. This, however, might be very different in case of other discourse markers of Japanese.

More recently, the interrelation between grammaticalization, subjectification and pragmaticalization was discussed by Diewald (2011). Subjectification has been defined, in line with Traugott, as “type of semantic change belonging to the subclass of metonymic change” being a “particular type of semantic change, leading to meanings ‘based in the speaker’s subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition’” (Ibid.: 373). Even though grammaticalization involves subjectification, the latter notion has been clearly differentiated as leading not towards grammar, but being a semantic change rooted in the speaker-based meaning.

The analysis of particular importance for Japanese was proposed by Onodera (2004). In her diachronic study, the author traced the language change process of two discourse markers: *demo* and *na*. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the work of Traugott mentioned above, that is to say it rests on the assumption that lexical items extend their initially limited functions to the area of discourse. In Onodera's analysis, pragmaticalization is "a process of meaning/functional change involving shifts from the semantic to the pragmatic domain" (Ibid.: 12). Each marker changes its functions according to a different scenario with various degrees of grammaticalization, pragmaticalization and syntactic change. In line with Traugott, the pattern of change assumed in the study is 'ideational > ((textual) > (expressive))' or, in other words, it consists in moving to meanings that are 'speaker-based' and 'discourse-based'. As far as the issue of interrelation of grammaticalization and pragmaticalization is concerned, Onodera argues for their independence, differently from the early studies by Traugott.

In summary, in this paper we assume a three-stage process from nouns that undergo grammaticalization to become degree adverbials and, subsequently, turn into expressions with functions related to discourse strategy or speaker's stance. However, an important caveat needs to be made that the change paths might be different for other notional categories underlying the semantic structure of discourse markers, such as the enumerated in Section 1.

3. Grammaticalization of degree nouns

In this section, we shall look into the first stage of the process outlined in the preceding sections, i.e. grammaticalization of some Japanese nouns that are semantically related to the notion of degree, exhibiting thus several scalar properties.

In the initial stage of the process outlined above (i.e. before the grammaticalization occurs), degree words, such as *hodo* 'degree, extent, limit, bounds', *kurai* 'rank, (imperial) dignity', *bakari* (nominalization realized in the adverbial/infinitive form, *renyookei* of the verb *hakaru* 'measure'), and *dake* (developed from *take* 'height, length, scale' in the Edo period) possess the categorial status of full-fledged nouns, capable of heading noun phrases, topicalization or occupying the complement slot of verbal predicates. For example:

- (1) Hodo ga sugiru.
 degree NOM. exceed
 'That's too much.'
- (2) Takai kurai ni tuku.
 high rank DAT take up
 'To assume a high rank.'

As the result of the grammaticalization process, the above degree nouns (*hodo*, *kurai/gurai*, *bakari*, *dake*) whose lexical meanings contain the ‘degree/extent’ component, assume the grammatical function of phrase particles that form adverbial phrases with the following meanings (Imoto 2000, about *hodo*): degree, frequency of events, volume of objects, and amount of action. They can also function as adverbs of manner and occur in comparative sentences, as illustrated by the following examples from Grzelak (2006):

- (3) a. Sinu hodo hatarai-ta.
die degree work-PAST
‘I worked to death.’
b. Motenai hodo omoi.
cannot.carry degree heavy
‘So heavy that one cannot carry it.’
c. A wa B yori 3 cm hodo nagai.
A TOP B than 3 cm degree long
‘A is longer than B by 3 centimeters.’

In addition to the functions enumerated above where the adverbials follow the respective modifying forms or clauses, degree adverbials can be used as a means of vague numerical quantification appearing right to the numeral. Their syntactic characteristics is distinct from other approximation markers that precede the numeral, such as *yaku* or *oyoso*. This functional change, giving rise to further development, will be crucial for the next stage of the language change analyzed here, where such ambiguous expressions will play various pragmatic roles. Such ambiguating in Japanese is referred to as ‘generalized quantification’ (*gaikatu*, Nitta 1981), ‘estimated quantification’ (*gaisanteki suuryoo*, Okutsu 1986, cited in Imoto 2000) or ‘approximation’ (*gaisuu*, Masuoka and Takubo 1989). The following example demonstrates the possible syntactic configurations of vaguely quantified sentences, due to quantifier floating and various topicalization patterns.

- (4) a. Syooboosya zyuu dai gurai ga kita.
fire.engine ten CLASS degree NOM arrived
b. Zyuu dai gurai no syooboosya ga kita.
ten CLASS degree GEN fire.engine NOM arrived
c. Syooboosya ga zyuu dai gurai kita.
fire.engine NOM ten CLASS degree arrived
d. Syooboosya wa zyuu dai gurai ga kita.
fire.engine TOP ten CLASS degree NOM arrived
‘About 10 fire engines arrived.’

As far as the semantic model of approximation realized in the above sentences is concerned, they could be rendered as ‘Fire engines of the degree/extent of ten arrived’. Such vagueness is a secondary effect that results from conceptualization of the notion of

‘degree’ as ‘range of values’ or ‘order of magnitude’ that can be represented as a scalar interval. The approximators *hodo*, *bakari* or *kurai* (a phonetic variant of *gurai*) exhibit virtually identical semantic properties, with the exception of *dake* that could replace *gurai* in the above sentences, but it would denote an upper limit, and its interpretation would be ‘just’ or, under certain circumstances, ‘only’, unlike the other adverbials with the interpretation ‘more or less’ available.

Certain kinds of vague degree questions, corresponding to sentences presented in (3), in which the above adverbials occur as components of interrogative phrases constitute a peculiar property of Japanese. The sentence below is a typical instance of ‘scalar’ questions, based on the notion of degree.

- (5) a. Nihon wa sengo dore hodo kawatta no ka.
 Japan TOP after.the.war which degree changed NMLZ Q
 ‘How much did Japan change after the war?’

Interrogative phrases occurring in sentences of the above type consist of a demonstrative pronoun and one of the degree words discussed above (here: *dore* + *hodo* ‘which degree/extent’). Interestingly, in the cases, where the number inquired about is very large or difficult to estimate, the degree adverbials, normally pertaining to gradable properties, continuous in nature, can form interrogative phrases that inquire about quantities of discrete objects denoted by the head nouns.

- (6) Sekai ni wa dore kurai no kuruma ga arimasu-ka?
 world DAT TOP which extent GEN car NOM be-Q
 ‘How many cars are there in the world?’ [lit. ‘cars of what extent’]

Such questions, exhibiting a very low level of specificity, conceptualize countable entities as mass objects, the extent of which can be inquired about by means of expressions, normally applicable to continuous properties, phenomena or mass nouns. Some additional remarks on this subject as well as a specificity hierarchy of degree questions was proposed in Grzelak (2006).

In the following section, we shall proceed to the next stage in the process discussed in the current paper, namely the pragmaticalization of the degree-based adverbials that play the role of approximation markers.

4. Pragmaticalization of degree adverbials

The discussion of existing pragmaticalization accounts presented above leads to the conclusion that the core motivation of this process lies in the area of discourse and is subjective to the speaker. The goals that are to be achieved by means of the given

discourse strategy are, in turn, deeply rooted in the anthropological features of the given language community.

In order to demonstrate the pragmatic aspects of numerical approximation in Japanese, let us reiterate the following exchanges from Inoue (1993: 83–84).

(7) (In a fish shop)

Shop owner: O-kyaku-san, kyoo wa azi ga yasui desu yo.
‘Horse mackerels are cheap today.’

Customer: Soo ne. Sore zya, 3 mai gurai/3 mai hodo/3 mai bakari orosite
moraao kasira.
‘Oh yeah, right. Let me get *about three* filleted.’

(8) (In a pub. Two customers are sitting at the table.)

Waitress: O nomimono wa?
‘What would you like to drink?’

Customer: Eeto, biiru o ne, toriaezu nihon gurai/nihon hodo/nihon bakari
moraooka.
‘Oh, well, beer, let’s say *about two* for the meantime.’

Waitress: Otumami wa nani ni nasaimasuka.
‘What appetizer would you like?’

Customer: Soune. Zya, yakitori o ne, zyuuppon gurai/zyuuppon hodo/
‘Yeah, right. Okay, give me *about ten* some grilled chicken
skewers.’

(9) (At a lecture)

Kyoo wa nihongo no tokutyoo ni tuite, gutaitekina zirei o mitu gurai/ mitu
hodo/ mitu bakari agete o-hanasi sitai to omoimasu.
‘Today I’m going to give you *about three* specific examples of the
characteristic features of Japanese.’

The analysis provided by Inoue assumes that the use of vague quantification in the above utterances is motivated by reasons that are internal to the speaker, and apparently some actual calculating or optimization of the number of beers or fillets according to speaker’s needs is supposed to take place. However, it seems very apparent that the use of approximation markers in the above examples is motivated to a large extent pragmatically rather than epistemically, and the vague numerical expressions should be therefore given a different treatment. A standard analysis of the linguistic aspects of vagueness was proposed in the study by Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997) in which a relation was proposed between discourse strategy and some fundamental cultural concepts, such as Japanese *enryo* ‘restraint, reserve’, that “prevents people in Japan from clearly stating their preferences, even in response to direct questions. Many Japanese when asked about their convenience, decline to state it. [...] A related phenomenon is

the deliberate use of imprecise numerical expressions; when wanting to buy three apples, a Japanese person would prefer to ask for ‘about three’.” (Ibidem: 237). This claim can be also supported by examples (7)–(9) above, at least partially motivated by the fact that jeopardizing interlocutor’s face is not acceptable from the viewpoint of the social norm. More generally, this discourse strategy could be accounted for by referring to another Japanese virtue *omoiyari* ‘caring, consideration’, one of the fundamental features shared by the Japanese language community; see also Mizutani (1979: 105–106) and Nakamura (1983: 302) for similar discussion of the pragmatic aspects of hedging, *bokasi*, in Japanese discourse.

In the analysis presented so far, pragmaticalized scalar expressions served the purpose of hedging. It must be however noted that such markers can realize other functions as well, such as marking speaker’s stance by suggesting a position of the object denoted by a noun or clause on some contextually defined scale. Let us consider the following example:

- (10) Ocha gurai zibun-de irete yo.
 tea degree by-oneself brew-IMPT PART
 ‘Make [as little as] tea by yourself.’

The above utterance can be analyzed within a model that assumes the existence of a scale on which the speaker locates different activities according to their level of difficulty, and implies that tea making is located very low (due to its simplicity) and as such should be performed by the hearer herself.

In this section, two different discourse-oriented pragmatic meanings originating from the same cluster of expressions have been examined. The major conclusion is therefore that even in the cases where pragmaticalization involves a certain notional category, such a scalarity, its path has a branching structure with several routes possible, such as hedging or the above belittling utilized for rhetorical reasons.

5. Summary

In the current paper we have proposed a three-staged language change process that begins from nouns the lexical meaning of which is based on the notion of degree that grammaticalize to degree adverbials capable of functioning as approximation markers. In the final stage of the process, this approximation plays various pragmatic roles, being used as a means of linguistic hedging, or for marking speaker’s stance. The multiple grammatical and pragmatic functions of the degree words observed in each stage are indicative of the branching nature of the process, with multiple paths possible in the respective stages.

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