encoding a speaker's consciousness in japanese: 'signlal words' and falsetto voice

清心語文
Encoding a Speaker’s Consciousness in Japanese:
‘Signal words’ and falsetto voice

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日本語における主体的表現とその記号化：
「信号語」と声の裏返り現象

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要 旨:

日本語の「主体的表現」は話し手の意識を直接表すものとして何種か存在し、その意識を声調等で示すことの多い言語に比べ、発達を見ていると言えよう。主体的表現は (1) 話し手の内的意識状態、(2) 聞き手に対する意識状態、をそれぞれ表ずするものに分類できる。(1) は過程構造をもつ語であり、(2) はコミュニケーション行動において聞き手に直接呼びかけることを主眼とし、(A)一連の終助詞、(B)対者敬語として、共に文末部分に現れる。

(2) の(A)は聞き手へ指向する心的態度を通常は一定の音調を伴って発し、察知、理解されるという特性をもつ。信号性を強く保持する、言わば「信号語」とでも呼べるもので、主体的表現の始源的姿を示す。声の裏返り現象としての裏声はこれら主体的表現のさらに根源にあるものと位置づけることができる。「信号語」は信号性を保持しつつも一定の記号化に至ったものだが、裏声は記号化以前の、声調という周辺言語としての位置づけとなる。資料の分析からは認識活動が活発化する中で具体的なもの、明確なものが話し手の脳裏に浮かんだ時、出現すると判断される。以上の、単純な記号化と記号化以前の姿とは日本語の主体的表現が記号化に至るプロセスに存在するものと認めることができる。

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1. Introduction

Subjective words are an integral part of the Japanese language, and these words
present a feature significantly characteristic to communication using Japanese. This paper focuses on the specific functions of subjective words in the interaction between a speaker and a listener in Japanese communication. We also discuss the function and usage of falsettos.

Words in Japanese consist of subjective and objectified words. Subjective words are used to express a speaker’s mental activity and are personal, while objectified words have content that has been conceptualized and are impersonal. The concept of subjective words was introduced by Tokieda [1941] and they play an essential role in discourse. Our analysis points out that there are two different sorts of functions of subjective words: some particles (e.g. *wa*, *ga*) and predicative adverbs (e.g. *yappari*) express a speaker’s consciousness of his/her own internal world, and sentence particles (e.g. *yo*, *ne*) and auxiliary verbs (compound words, generatively) (e.g. *desu*) show that a speaker has concern for a listener.

We compared the use of subjective words in spoken Japanese and English and the results are described below.

2. Japanese words enfolding a speaker’s cognition

We noticed that one group of subjective words are used to express a speaker’s consciousness of his/her own internal world. We already discussed the property of the particle ‘*wa*’ that puts the focus on a speaker’s cognitive activities [Ujiie 1996]. After examining a speaker’s mental activities, Ujiie [1986] introduced the existence of structure of words which enfolds a speaker’s mental processes [SEMP]. The SEMP has the following properties in contrast with English expression:

- Used to express a speaker’s subjective world
- Possessing a form of word
- Functioning as a (pseudo-) predicate in English

To look closer at Japanese subjective words, we first examine predicative adverbs which show a significant contrast between Japanese and English.


As shown in the following example sentences, Japanese predicative adverbs can be contrasted with:

- English intonation, in particular placing stress on a predicative part (a-1),
- an additional, separate sentence (a-2) in spoken language, or
- English clauses in spoken language (b).

English expressions such as (a-1) and (a-2) mainly belong to the restricted code while (b) belongs to the elaborated code after Bernstein [1973].
Ex.1) “Yappari kirei (-da).”
  a-1. “It is pretty.”
  a-2. “It’s pretty, you see!”
  b. “As I expected / As you said / As people say, it’s pretty.”

3. A speaker’s concern for a listener

Secondly, in example [2] we turn to subjective words which show that a speaker clearly has concern for a listener.


Japanese sentence-final particles can be contrasted with:
· English intonation, particularly, placing a stress on a predicative part (2-1 a),
· an additional sentence (2-1 b) by using a compound sentence structure or,
· tag question (2-2 b) in English.

Ex.2-1) “Kirei (- da) yo!”
  a. “It is pretty.”
  b. “It’s pretty, I tell you.”
Ex.2-2) “Kirei (- da) ne!”
  a. “It is pretty.”
  b. “It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

Since Hinds [1976] pointed out, through his investigation of Japanese, that conversation of all discourse types permits a full view of various speaker-addressee interactions, the issue of speaker-addressee interactions in Japanese has attracted much attention as studied by McGloin [1990], Maynard [1997], Hidasi [1997], Horie [2003] and [Ujiie 2007].

Finally, we look at example [3] of subjective words that show a speaker’s concern for a listener.

[3] Japanese auxiliary verbs or compound words showing addressee honorifics

Japanese auxiliary verbs or compound words showing addressee honorifics can be contrasted with the absence of such words (or paralanguage) in English.

Ex.3-1) “Kirei -desu.” --- “It’s pretty.” (polite expression)
  [ ”Kirei.” --- “It’s pretty.” (ordinary expression)]
Ex.3-2) ”Chikai-masu.” --- “I swear.” (polite expression)
  [ ”Chikau.” --- “I swear.” (ordinary expression)]
Comrie [1978] pointed out that the existence of addressee honorifics itself is very characteristic to Japanese [Brown and Levinson 1987] and to no other language with the possible exception of Javanese [Comrie 1998, 2000] [Ujiie 2000].

4. Signal words developed in Japanese

Sentence-final particles such as “yo”, “ne” shown in Ex. 2 above seem to function as just simple markers, much different from objectified words established through a conceptualization process. We refer to these as signal words. The origin of these words is connected with an exclamatory feeling or a speaker’s awareness of a listener. This sort of word seems to be developed more substantially in Japanese while English primarily uses paralanguage, intonation, stress, falsettos, etc., contrary to the use of the elaborated code. The reason for the appearance of signal words in Japanese is believed to be it’s the communicative environment and the “topic-comment” syntactic structure.

In what is called “collectivistic” society [Hofstede 1997], even a sigh can become a signal, because a listener can understand what it means, and so it is fully communicative. Signal words in Japanese sentence-final particles can function along these lines, and falsettos taken up in “the basic material” of this symposium seem to have a similar function. We could get closer, by use of the basic material, to “parole” itself which involves momentary interaction between a speaker and a listener.

5. The function of falsetto voice in Japanese

Falsetto voice as a communicative behavior in Japanese has been analyzed extensively in the basic materials and the following conclusion has been reached.

Falsetto voices are used in some communicative behaviors to:
① present one’s own opinion while accepting another’s opinion
② make a question/supposition while wondering
③ give information while recalling

This conclusion was made using the following classification:
① Falsetto voice with concessive comment
   (1) In concessive clause [See example (1)]
   (2) In one’s own opinion, after accepting another’s comment [See examples (2)(3)]
   (3) No comment accepting another’s opinion, but … [See example (4)]

② Falsetto voice with wondering
   (1) In a question [See example (5)]
   (2) In a supposition [See example (6)]

③ Falsetto voice with recalling of collected materials Ex. (1)-(7): [See example (7)]

Ex. (1) [ano kirai tokajya nakutte] I don’t mean I dislike them.
but what bothers me is that I can’t do a part-time job.

Yes, but, I’m not as busy as other people.

No, it’s interesting!

Sometimes I wonder why on earth am I here.

Because she lives apart from my mother, I wonder.

And that school merged with Akatsukayama high school, and…

In these examples, the particular parts which falsetto voices emerged are shown in brackets [ kirai ] with their English equivalents.

We believe that research on falsetto voice as a communicative behavior in Japanese is evolutionary and extremely important in spoken language analysis. However, we are still in the early stages of the study of spoken Japanese, many different views and approaches may be useful for further research.

We propose here our view of falsetto voices in Japanese. Falsetto seems to express a speaker’s subjective, momentary mental movement occurring during the process of communicating with a listener. Their implications are not necessarily contextual as have been suggested in cases ① – ③ in the basic material. To clarify this point, we use the following two falsetto classifications:

A. When a concrete image or example of the topical target emerges in a speaker’s mind

Ex. (1), (2), (3), (6) and (7) in the basic materials can be referred to for this usage.

B. When a distinct emotion or an awareness of conviction emerges in a speaker’s mind

Ex. (4) and (5) in the basic material can be referred to for this usage.

For instance, the use of falsetto in Ex. (4) does not necessarily have to occur in a concessive clause.

We notice that falsettos are intentionally used in most cultures [Laver 1994], although “the communicative value of falsetto varies among cultures” as stated in the basic material. On the other hand, in Japanese they are not always used intentionally. They emerge spontaneously in both A and B above. In other words, they are reflections of speakers’ mental activities which are spontaneous and physiological, not under a speaker’s conscious control. However, there seems to be a limitation of the use of falsetto voice: a speaker should be allowed to use a particular voice. This means that the scene allows a speaker to utter his/her mind. Such an environment or context is necessary. This utterance is, in its function, far from an established linguistic sign, but efficiently functions as a signal. To the extent that a listener understands what it means, this sign, as a paralanguage, is very communicative. Moreover, in Huichol (a Uto-Aztecan Mesoamerican language of
Mexico) falsetto in voiced sounds is used to express excitement [cf. Grimes 1959, Suárez 1983] [Laver 1994], and this is similar to the use of falsetto in Japanese.

Our results indicate that falsetto voices can be regarded as a predecessor of signal words. The investigation of functions of falsetto voices leads us to find a motivation and processes of the formation of various subjective words used to communicate in Japanese.

6. Conclusion

Subjective words are an integral part of the Japanese language, and these words are a characteristic feature of communication in Japanese. This paper focuses on the specific functions of subjective words in the interaction between a speaker and a hearer in Japanese communication. We also relate them to the function and usage of falsettos.

We examined two sorts of Japanese subjective words: one enfolding a speaker’s cognition, mainly predicative adverbs (e.g. *yappari*) or modality adverbs, if you like, and one showing a speaker’s concern for a hearer. The latter is divided into two types: sentence-final particles (e.g. *yo, ne*) and auxiliary verbs or compound words showing addressee honorifics (e.g. *desu*). We point out that sentence-final particles function as “signal words”. The origin of these words is often connected with exclamatory feeling, or a speaker’s awareness to a hearer. This sort of word seems to be developed more substantially in Japanese while English primarily uses paralanguage; intonation, stress, etc.

Our results indicate that falsettos are used to express a speaker’s subjective, momentary mental movement occurring during the process of communicating with a listener. We identified two situations when falsetto is used: (A) When a concrete image or example of the topical target emerges in a speaker’s mind, and (B) when a distinct emotion or an awareness of conviction emerges in a speaker’s mind.

In Japanese, falsettos are not used intentionally in every case. They emerge spontaneously in both situations (A) and (B). In other words, they are reflections of a speaker’s mental activities which are spontaneous and physiological, not under a speaker’s conscious control. This utterance is, in its function, far from an established linguistic sign, but efficiently functions as a spontaneous “signal”. As far as hearers understand what it means, this sign, as a paralanguage, is very communicative.

Falsetto voices can be regarded as a predecessor of signal words. The investigation of functions of falsetto voices led us to identify the motivation and processes of the formation of various subjective words through communication using Japanese.

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