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## Grammatical Aspects of an Interlanguage: the Potential Expressions of Yapese Japanese

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This is a report, based on research conducted in Yap, concerning the second language maintenance of Yapese people who learned Japanese as a second language under Japanese rule during the Second World War. More than fifty years have elapsed since they stopped learning and speaking the language, but they still maintain a good command of it.<sup>1,2)</sup>

In this chapter, we will illustrate the grammatical structure of Japanese spoken by Yapese, specifically focusing on the potential expressions.

Abbreviations used in the glosses are listed at the end of the paper.

### 1. Research Outline

Our research was conducted in the summer of 1994. Three researchers from our project (Osamu Sakiyama, Kikuko Yui, and the author) met one Yapese speaker at a time and tape-recorded the conversation. The tapes were transcribed in Japanese orthography (*kanji* and *hiragana*) for analysis. The topics of the conversations included: life at Japanese public schools, life during the Japanese era, how the traditional Yapese life changed during war time, and the like. These topics were appropriate to investigate the informants' competence in using past tense forms, aspect forms, discourse markers, polite forms etc. They were, however, not suitable for gathering data for analyses such as on epistemic modality, future tense and voice systems with the exception of potential expressions. These defects were later detected, and a revised interview method was developed and employed in the research in Palau in 1995 and 1996.

Table 1. Attributes of each informant

	sex	age	education	occupation during Japan era	data
F	M	69	5 years	agriculture	80 min.
C	M	74	5 years	Nan'yo Aluminum	60
T	M	69	5 years	(not known)	60
P	M	75	5 years	teacher, interpreter	60
G	F	75	5 years	nurse, telephone operator	60

The data for this report consist of five conversations between Yapede informants and the researchers, all in Japanese with only a few scattered English words. Attributes of the five informants, the length of the data and their vocational experience among the Japanese are shown in Table 1. They all entered Japanese public schools and were educated principally in Japanese for at least five years. Refer to the chapter by Yui for detail of the Japanese school system during the war time.

## 2. Japanese Potential Expressions

### 2.1 The Forms

Japanese has several predicate forms for expressing the notion that, in the case of affirmative, some action can be done because of either agents' abilities or their circumstantial conditions, or both. We will call these predicate forms 'potential forms' and refer to the entire sentences with these predicates as 'potential sentences' hereafter.

The forms include the following three types.

- (1) *kak -e-ru* ('to be able to write')  
write can
- (2) *ki -rare-ru* ('to be able to put on (clothes)')  
put on can
- (3) *deki-ru* ('to be able to do')  
can do

In standard Japanese, the three potential forms stand in complementary distribution according to the verbs with which they co-occur: (1) *-eru* with consonant-stem verbs which are the largest in number, (2) *-rareru* with vowel-stem verbs and the irregular verb KURU 'to come'. (3) *dekiru* is a suppletion form for the verb SURU 'to do'. Small capitals denote dictionary forms or lexemes.

Compared with (1), (2) is more analytic in that the preceding verb-stem ends in a vowel and matches the basic syllable structure of Japanese (CV). Thus such over-generalized, double-potential forms as *kak-e-rareru* 'to be able to write' and *yom-e-rareru* 'to be able to read' are observed in the language of children acquiring Japanese as their first language (Shibuya 1992). (3) *dekiru* is the most analytic in that it can be used alone or in combination with a noun plus the nominative particle *ga*.

(4) *Taroo wa eego ga dekiru*

Taro TOP English NOM can

'Taro can speak English.'

It can also be used incorporated into a verbal noun producing such compound verbs as *benkyoo-dekiru* 'to be able to study', *kaishi-dekiru* 'to be able to start'.

(5) *suru -koto -ga -dekiru*

to do NOMI NOM can

is a periphrastic form for all of the three potential forms listed above.

(6) *kaku-koto-ga-dekiru* 'to be able to write'

(7) *kiru-koto-ga-dekiru* 'to be able to put on'

(8) *suru-koto-ga-dekiru* 'to be able to do'

are the corresponding substitution forms for (1), (2), (3), with *koto-ga-dekiru* attached to the dictionary form of each verb.

## 2.2 Current Changes in Japanese Potential Forms

Historically, *-areru*, which is now employed productively for passive and honorific constructions, was once used as a potential form as well for consonant-stem verbs, but has been replaced by *-eru*, resulting in the semantic redistribution of *-eru* and *-areru*.

The same sort of mechanism underlying this change is currently operating on vowel-stem verbs alike, bringing about new potential forms such as *kir-eru* (or *ki-reru*) for *ki-rareru*, which is produced as the result of recategorizing KIRU as a token of consonant-stem verbs, and thus delimiting the use of *-rareru* to passives and honorifics, parallel to the case of *-areru* with consonant-stem verbs. In Tokyo, this change is said to have started at the beginning of Showa-period (around 1930; Nakamura 1953).

## 2.3 Syntactic Structures of Japanese Potential Sentences

Japanese potential sentences with predicate forms *-eru* and *-rareru* can have

either of the following case patterns with slight differences in meaning:

- (9) a [Taroo ga eego ga yom-eru] koto  
           NOM English NOM read can NOMI  
       b [Taroo ga eego o yom-eru] koto  
           NOM ACC  
       c [Taroo ni eego ga yom-eru] koto  
           DAT NOM  
       ‘that Taro can read English’

*Dekiru* is different from the other two forms in that it takes only *ga* to mark an immediately preceding object noun phrase.

- (10) a [Taroo ga/ni eego ga dekiru] koto  
           NOM/DAT English NOM can  
       b\* [Taroo ga eego o dekiru] koto  
           NOM ACC

In cases where some words or phrases intervene between an object phrase and *dekiru*, however, the accusative can also be used, or sometimes even preferable in such cases as (12) when the noun phrase in question is another argument:

- (11) a [Taroo ga eego ga totemo joozuni dekiru] koto  
           NOM English NOM very well can  
       b [Taroo ga eego o totemo joozuni dekiru] koto  
           NOM ACC  
       ‘that Taro can speak English very well’  
       (12) a [Taroo ga kodomo o isha ni dekiru] koto  
               NOM child ACC doctor DAT can  
           b\* [Taroo ga kodomo ga isha ni dekiru] koto  
               NOM NOM DAT  
           ‘that Taro can make his son/daughter a doctor’

To the *dekiru* with an incorporated verbal noun, the same rule for *-eru* and *-rareru* applies, and both nominative and accusative objects are grammatical in this case.

- (13) a [Taroo ga/ni kono mondai ga rikai dekiru] koto  
           NOM/DAT this problem NOM understand can  
       b [Taroo ga kono mondai o rikai dekiru] koto  
           NOM ACC

'that Taro can understand this problem'

More detail on Japanese potential expressions can be found in Shibuya (1995a).

### 3. The Potential Expressions Used by Yapese Speakers

Now we turn to the analysis of the potential expressions employed by the five Yapese speakers of Japanese during the conversation held with Japanese native speakers.

Table 2. Raw number of Yapese-Japanese potential forms

S \ forms	-(r) areru		-(r) eru		dekiru			other forms	features	
	CSV	VSV	CSV	VSV	koto	VN	-		koto	ARC
F	1	-	-	2	-	-	3		-	+
	1	-	-	1	-	-				
C	1	1	-	-	-	-	1	nom-e-re-nai		
	1	1	-	-	-	-				
T	2	1	1	-	13	-	10	kikeru-koto-dekiru	+	
	2	1	1	-	5	-				
P	1	-	1	-	4	-	2			-
	1	-	1	-	4	-				
G	1	6	1	-	4	-	2			
	1	1	1	-	3	-				
NS	-	6	19	-	1	2	6			
(M)	-	3	11	-	1	2				

(Upper: token, lower: type. S = speaker, NS = native speaker, CSV = consonant-stem verbs, VSV = vowel-stem verbs, koto = *suru-koto-ga-dekiru*, VN = verbal noun + *dekiru*, - = other *dekiru*, ARC = archiform *dekiru*.)

All the potential forms used by the informants are listed in Table 2. In each cell, the upper number indicates the number of tokens of the potential forms and the lower number type of the verbs which co-occurred with the potential predicates in question respectively. The data of NS (native speaker, about the age of fifty) is obtained from the scenario of a TV drama "Sooshun Sketchbook" written by Taichi Yamada as baseline data for comparison.

We will first discuss the use of *dekiru* which is used by all the informants rather productively (§ 3.1) and then turn to the other potential forms in § 3.2.

#### 3.1 *Dekiru*

Concerning the use of *dekiru*, we can draw from Table 2 the following argument.

### 3.1.1 Overview of the competence

There seems to be a strong correlation between the speakers' competence in potential expressions and the use of *suru-koto-ga-dekiru*. Two speakers F and C, who are on the whole less fluent in Japanese, seem unable to use this form. The following utterance by speaker F illustrates this point. (Examples below are simplified for the sake of demonstration.)

- (14) *Sono tameni o-kome o deki-nai, Nihon no*  
 that for HON rice ACC can NEG Japan GEN  
*o-kome o, yosono uchi ni motte-iku.* (F)  
 HON rice ACC other's home LOC take go  
 'We cannot take (as a gift) Japanese rice to the marriage partner's house  
 for that purpose.'

In this utterance, the speaker tried to convey potential meaning but failed to construct a potential sentence by embedding a subordinate clause [*sono tameni Nihon no o-kome o yosono uchi ni motte-iku*] within a matrix sentence which had the predicate *deki-nai*.

### 3.1.2 Archiform *dekiru*

As is well documented, archiforms (semantically overgeneralized forms) are observed typically in languages in the process of development (child language in FLA and interlanguage in SLA) and in simplified registers (baby talk and foreigner talk). Since *dekiru* is a lexical potential form for SURU 'to do', and can be used without any verbs which specify the kind of action, speakers F, C, T tend to resort to it when they want to express an idea that it is possible to do some action.

- (15) *Soshite sakana deki-nai* (F)  
 and fish(n.) can NEG  
 'And we cannot fish.'  
 (16) *Porokporok gatu yon -dara deki-nai deki-nai* (T)  
 [ONOM] (in Y) cat (in Y) call COND can NEG can NEG  
 'If you call a cat by saying porok porok, they will not come near you.'

In (15) and (16), speakers F and T could have used another potential verbs such as *tsur-e-nai* 'not to be able to fish' and *yob-e-nai* 'not to be able to call' specifying the actions which are unable to be done.

Speakers F and C's use of the archiform *dekiru* could be due to their lack of suffi-

cient competence in Japanese. As regards T, however, the same explanation will not hold. T is a very fluent speaker and offers many topics voluntarily. We have to conclude at this stage that T was so rushed to say what was in his mind that he could not spare enough time to compose an appropriate potential form using *-eru*, *-rareru* or *suru-koto-ga-dekiru*. This indicates that T's use of an archiform *dekiru* is attributable to a performance error or mistake which can be observed among native speakers of Japanese as well.

### 3.1.3 The overuse of *suru-koto-ga-dekiru*

Even those speakers who can use potential sentences without much difficulty (speakers T, P, G) tend to prefer *suru-koto-ga-dekiru* to *-eru* or *-rareru*.

- (17) *Ima Nihon demo tsukamaeru-koto-dekiru yo* (T)

now Japan even catch NOMI can FP

'Even Japanese radio broadcasting can be caught here in Yap without difficulty now'

- (18) *Watashi datte gakkoo o de -temo*

I even school ACC graduate even if

*hanasu-koto-ga -deki-mase-n* (P)

speak NOMI NOM can POL NEG

'Though I graduated from a Japanese school, I cannot speak Japanese well.'

Speaker G, who uses *-rareru* as many as six times, is only repeating the same form (*oboe-rareru* 'to be able to remember'), as the lower number of the cell in Table 2 indicates.

This tendency to 'overuse' *suru-koto-ga-dekiru* is quite evident when compared to the use of potential forms by NS, who overwhelmingly choose *-eru* and *-rareru* over *suru-koto-ga-dekiru* which is used only once.

The explanation for this can be threefold:

- (a) First, since *suru-koto-ga-dekiru* is the most formal form in Japanese (Kanda 1983[1961]), it was the principal input form the informants received at least at school and they are still most accustomed to it.
- (b) Second, the situation in which our interview was held was rather formal in that the researchers were strangers to them.



Among these three sorts of explanation, we can say that (a) may be possible but cannot be confirmed with limited data currently available. (b) is completely discarded because one of the researchers had been acquainted with T and P for more than fifteen years, and furthermore, as (17) shows, it is not always the case that *suru-koto-ga-dekiru* is used with polite markers *-desu* and *-masu*. The explanation most probable at this stage, therefore, is (c), which provides further evidence of the universal tendency towards a preference for analytic forms which has been well-documented in the literature on language acquisition, maintenance and attrition (Slobin 1985, Silva-Corvalán, Dorian 1977 to name a few). Evidences which show that speakers have difficulty with *-eru* and *-rareru* will be discussed in § 3.2.

We can find no examples of verbal noun plus *dekiru* in the data. This may be simply because the informants had no occasion in our conversation to use this form. But it is also highly likely that they do not have the ability to compose this morphologically complex form with noun incorporation.

To sum up the findings up to this stage, we can construct the following hierarchy for the use of forms with *dekiru* in which the form located at the right on the scale is more difficult for the speakers in Yap than the ones located to the left:

- We can, incidentally, find a parallel sequence of the development of forms with *dekiru* in the history of Japanese (Shibuya 1993).

As I have illustrated in § 2.3, *dekiru* (with the exception of verbal noun plus *dekiru*) takes nominative exclusively to mark its immediately preceding object noun phrase or clause, and Yapese speakers normally follow this pattern.

(20) *Sokode nanika ga dekiru no da to omoi-masu-ne* (P)

then something NOM can NOMI COP that think POL FP

'Then we can do something, I think.'

In some utterances, however, the object phrase has an accusative case marking.

(21) *Sono o-kome o deki-nai-yooni* (F)

that HON rice ACC can NEG so that

'So that they cannot produce rice.'

This example may be in a somewhat special grammatical condition in that *dekiru* is overgeneralized semantically. But it is also possible to see it as another illustration of the tendency toward a transparent construction in Yapedse Japanese which employs the prototypical accusative case marking 'o' to show the grammatical relation 'object - predicate' or the semantic relation 'theme - action'.

### 3.2 Two Kinds of Simplification on the Use of *-Eru* and *-Rareru*

Now we turn to the problems informants have with the use of *-eru* and *-rareru*.

Concerning the choice between *-eru* and *-rareru*, we have noted in § 2.1 that the former is used with consonant-stem verbs which constitute, in terms of forms, the majority of Japanese verbs, and the latter, with vowel-stem verbs and an irregular verb *KURU* 'to come'. It would be helpful at this stage to have a glance at the following characteristics of Japanese verbs in order to identify the source of troubles Yapedse speakers tend to have and the way they solve these problems in speaking Japanese:

(a) Many consonant-stem verbs have the form (-) *CVr-u* and this group constitutes the prototype of Japanese verbs in that it has the potential to produce new verbs. For example, *MAKURU* 'to eat at MacDonald's' has been recently coined in younger people's Japanese from the already existent noun *MAKKU* 'Mac'.

(b) All the vowel-stem verbs end in *-ru*, and thus it is sometimes difficult for non-native speakers to tell by its form only whether the verb in question is a consonant-stem verb or a vowel-stem verb. *KIRU* is a good example to illustrate this point. Putting aside pitch accent, *KIRU* with a consonant-stem verb conjugation means 'to cut' and the same form with a vowel-stem verb conjugation means 'to put on'.

(c) Passive and polite forms of verbs are produced with *-areru* (with consonant-stem verbs) and *-rareru* (with vowel-stem verbs), the latter being the same form as the one for the potential. *-Aru* with consonant-stem verbs has almost declined as a

potential form in the standard Japanese, but some old people and sometimes even younger generation speakers use this form occasionally. What is important here is that verbs with *-areru* can still be understood as having potential meaning by almost all native speakers.

Keeping these characteristics in mind, let's look at the potential forms employed by the informants.

Table 2 shows that NS uses *-eru* and *-rareru* complementarily according to the conjugation types of verbs, while Yapese speakers do not follow this pattern. The differences between the two groups or among informants are:

- (i) that F uses *-reru* with a vowel-stem verb.
- (ii) that Yapese speakers seem to prefer *-areru* to *-eru* with consonant-stem verbs.
- (iii) that Yapese speakers use *-eru* and *-rareru* far fewer times than NS.

The reason for (i) would be attributable to F's lack of sufficient knowledge on the conjugation type of each verb. (22) is the utterance in question.

(22) *Sore sut -tara gohan takusan taber-eru* (F)

it smoke COND rice much eat can

'If you smoke it (marijuana), you can eat a lot.'

TABERU is a vowel-stem verb whose standard potential form should be *tabe-rareru*. *Taber-eru* (or *tabe-reru*) is a newer form currently spreading among younger generations in Japan (cf. § 2.2) but not likely to be used productively by a Japanese speaker of the age of our Yap informants. F's use of *taber-eru* seems to be the result of reanalyzing TABERU, on the part of F, as a consonant-stem verb. *Kowara-nai* in (23), supposed to be a negative form of mono-morphemic verb KOWARERU 'to break down', is also produced by F partially following the morphological process for consonant-stem verbs.

(23) *kowara-nai-yooni* (F)

break NEG in order to

'so that it will not break down'

*Nom-e-re-nai* in (24) by speaker C is another type of peculiarity with the use of *-eru*.

(24) *Soo shi-nai-to sake ga nom -e -re -nai* (C)

so do NEG COND alcohol NOM drink can can NEG

'If you do not do so, you cannot have a drink.'

NOMU 'to drink' is a consonant-stem verb and *nom-e-nai* is the standard negative potential form. C seems to have a schema for a potential form something like *-re-ru*, which is understandably brought about by the highly productive rule of consonant-stem verbs ending in *(-)CVr-u* which produces potential forms with *(-)CVr-eru* (ex. *nar-eru* 'to be able to become', *hashir-eru* 'to be able to run' etc.). *Nom-e-re-nai* in (24) was thus produced by modifying the standard form *nom-e-nai* in the direction of the schema of potential forms *-re-ru*. These sorts of forms, incidentally, are also widely observed in the various dialects of Japanese and not limited to Yapese Japanese. Thus, native speakers seem to have a schema of the same sort as well. The difference in the number of moras and the shape of the older form *nom-areru* (four moras with *-re-*) and the newer *nom-e-ru* (three moras without *-re-*) may have also contributed much to produce such apparently "double-potential" forms in Yap as well as in Japan.

The second difference, that Yapese speakers seem to prefer *-areru* to *-eru* with consonant-stem verbs, could be explained by ease of memorization. It is normally the functional explanation that is given to the change from *-areru* to *-eru* in native Japanese, which says that a sentence with the former form often brings about confusion among the interpretations as a passive, an honorific and a potential.

(25) *Sensee wa tatak -are -nai.*

teacher TOP hit PASS/HON/POT NEG

This sort of explanation, however, is possible only in a condition in which the language in question is used for daily communication. In Yap, Japanese is currently employed by an older generation only in such rare cases as communicating with Japanese tourists, and, as a lingua franca, with old people from other islands in Micronesia. Some even said that they spoke Japanese to us for the first time in fifty-years. In such circumstances, it would be reasonable to assume that the economy of memory will operate prior to the efficiency of communication so long as it does not bring about interlocutor misunderstandings, and that the former mechanism motivates the preference for *-areru* rather than the standard form *-eru*.

It is thus evident from the above discussion that Yapese speakers have difficulty employing the two, more synthetic forms *-rareru* and *-eru*. And this difficulty explains the third difference that Yapese speakers tend to choose *dekiru*, and use *-eru* and *-rareru* far less than the NS.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have been able to identify the following morphological and syntactic characteristics of Yapese Japanese in this paper:

- (a) morphological preference for an analytic *suru-koto-ga-dekiru* over synthetic *-eru* and *-rareru*.
- (b) the tendency to employ *-areru* rather than *-eru* for consonant-stem verbs, perhaps reflecting the speakers' memory storage patterns which avoid coining an extra form which can be used for only some limited notions.
- (c) *dekiru* is widely used compensating for speakers' lack of competence both in the above mentioned morphological process and in individual words.

Syntactically, even *dekiru*, which is the last form that would take the accusative to mark its immediately preceding object phrase sometimes takes this form in this variety.

All the features above are manifestations of a simplified language in some way or other. We can perhaps conclude from these findings that some grammatical structures undergo simplification during second language maintenance over a long period of time.

Nonetheless, it is highly remarkable that Yapese speakers of Japanese are, despite the fact that they have seldom used Japanese in these fifty years, still fluent and have little difficulty in conversing with native speakers for more than an hour.

#### Abbreviations used in the glosses

ACC	accusative	HON	honorific	PASS	passive
COND	conditional	LOC	locative	POL	polite
COP	copula	NEG	negative	POT	potential
DAT	dative	NOM	nominative	TOP	topic
FP	final particle	NOMI	nominalizer	Y	Yapese
GEN	genitive	ONOM	onomatopoeia		

#### Notes

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- 2) This is a revised version of a previous article written in Japanese (Shibuya 1995b).

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