Potential Constructions and Case Checking in Japanese

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This paper presents an analysis of the so-called "potential" constructions in Japanese within the framework of the Minimalist Program of Chomsky (1993). Of particular concern is how the Nominative objects in these constructions are licensed. We argue that AGRs is responsible for the licensing of the Nominative object and show that the Case realizations in potential constructions are explained straightforwardly on the assumption that the Japanese potential verb -eru has syntactic properties similar to "psych-verbs" in Italian discussed in Belletti and Rizzi (1988). We also argue that our analysis leads to a unified account of the passive constructions in Japanese.

KEYWORDS: syntax, Japanese, Case, potential verbs

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to propose a syntactic analysis of potential constructions in Japanese, particularly the distribution of the Nominative Case in these constructions, under the framework of the Minimalist Program proposed by Chomsky (1993). We argue that the Nominative objects in these constructions are checked at the AGRs-SPEC, contrary to Tada (1992), who claims that the relevant checking takes place at the AGRo-SPEC. We propose that the lexical properties of the -eru pattern are like those of the "psych-verbs" in Italian discussed in Belletti and Rizzi (1988).

This paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we present a brief description of the analysis proposed here and show how the Case arrays in (4) in section 1 are accounted for. In section 3, Tada’s (1992) account of the Nominative objects in potential constructions is outlined, and two major problems are pointed out. In section 4, we present evidence in support of our analysis, including scope of negation, a subject-oriented adverb itibanyoku discussed in Shibatani (1986), and Case marker drop. Two apparent problems with our analysis are discussed in section 5, and in the concluding section 6, we discuss a consequence that our analysis has for passive constructions in Japanese.

2. Nominative NPs in Japanese

In Japanese; Nominative NPs can appear in various circumstances, as shown in (1)–(3) below (cf. Kawasaki (1991: 132)):

1) the subject of a tensed clause:
   Sensyu John-ga amerika-e kaet-ta (koto)
      last week John-Nom America-to go back-Past (fact)
      ((The fact that John went back to America last week.)

2) the multiple subject construction:
   Sendai-ga koogai-ga jyuutaku-ga ooi (koto)
       Sendai-Nom suburbs-Nom houses-Nom many (fact)
      ((The fact that there are many houses in the suburbs of Sendai.)

3) the "object" of a stative predicate:
   a. Taro-ga huransugo-o hanase-eru (koto)
      Taro-Nom French-Acc speak-Pot-Pres (fact)
      ((The fact that Taro can speak French.)
   b. Taro-ga huransugo-ga hanase-eru (koto)
      Taro-Nom French-Nom speak-Pot-Pres (fact)
   c. Taro-o ni huransugo-ga hanase-eru (koto)
      Taro-Dat French-Nom speak-Pot-Pres (fact)

This paper is primarily concerned with Nominative NPs in stative sentences of the type in (3). These sentences display complicated Case arrays, as in (4) below, and contrast with such "regular sentences with transitive predicates as (5):

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(4) a. NP-Nom NP-Acc V-eru [+ stative] (3a)
b. NP-Nom NP-Nom V-eru [+ stative] (3b)
c. NP-Dat NP-Nom V-eru [+ stative] (3c)

(5) Taroo-ga huransugo-o hanashi-ta (koto)
Taro-Nom French-Acc speak-Past (fact)
((The fact that) Taro spoke French.)

The treatment of the Nominative objects in (3) has been controversial since Kuno (1973). The previous studies are roughly divided into the following two approaches (cf. Tada (1992: 94)):

(6) a. Stative predicates assign Nominative Case to objects.
   (cf. Kuno (1973), Tada (1992))
b. INFL assigns Nominative Case to objects.
   (cf. Takezawa (1987), Dubinsky (1992))

In the following discussion, we support (6b) and elaborate this approach, and demonstrate that (6a) cannot be retained.

3. An Analysis

As mentioned in the previous section, the Case patterns of potential constructions as in (4) are somewhat complicated in comparison with those of "regular" sentences. In this section, along the line of the approach of (6b), we propose an account in terms of Chomsky's (1991) Agreement-based Case theory and Belletti and Rizzi's (1988) analysis of Italian psych-verbs. Crucially, we claim that the AGRs-SPEC plays an important role in the checking of Nominative objects:

(7) Nominative object are licensed at the AGRs-SPEC.

In the following, we try to show how this claim (7), together with some properties of the potential verb -eru, directly account for the Case arrays in (4).

The relevant lexical properties of -eru are listed below:

(8) a. a stative verb
   b. freely subcategorized for either VP or AGRoP
   c. assigning the \(\theta\)-roles Experiencer and Theme
   d. not assigning structural Accusative Case
   e. optionally assigning Inherent Case to Experiencer

we crucially assume that these properties of -eru pattern like those of psych-verbs in Italian.\(^3\)

It is well-known that in Romance "deep" subjects can bind reflexive clitics, whereas "derived" subjects cannot, as shown in (9).

(9) a. Gianni si è fotografato.
   Gianni himself photographed
b. *Gianni si è stato affidato.
   Gianni himself was entrusted.
   (Belletti and Rizzi (1988: 295))

The deep subject Gianni in (9a) can bind a reflexive clitic si, while Gianni in (9b), which is the derived subject, cannot.

Making use of this phenomenon for determining whether the subjects are deep or not (i.e. derived), Belletti and Rizzi argue that the psych-verbs in Italian are divided into two classes: i.e., the temere (fear) class and the preoccupare (worry) class.\(^4\) Thus, compare (10) with (9) above:

(10) a. Gianni si teme.
   Gianni himself fears
b. *Gianni si preoccupa
   Gianni himself worries
   (Belletti and Rizzi (1988: 296))

In (10a), si can refer to the subject, whereas in (10b) it cannot. Assuming that the subject of temere in (10a) is deep and the subject of preoccupare in (10b) is derived, Belletti and Rizzi explain the situation in (10) exactly in parallel with (9).\(^5\) Belletti and Rizzi argue that (11a) and (11b) have the structures as shown in (12a) and (12b), respectively.

(11) a. Gianni teme questo
   (Gianni fears this.)
b. Questo preoccupa Gianni
   (This worries Gianni.)
   (Belletti and Rizzi (1988: 291))
Note that under the Agreement-based Case theory, the AGRo phrase is required to project in (11a) to check the Accusative marked NP *questo*, while in (11b) it is not needed because of the lack of such NPs.

Returning to the lexical properties of *-eru* we assume that they pattern like those of the Italian psych-verbs. We further assume that there exist two kinds of *-eru* just as there are two classes of psych-verbs: i.e., the *temere* (fear) class and the *preoccupare* (worry) class. Note that (8b) indicates that *-eru* selects either a VP or an AGRoP as its complement, so that the complex predicate of the form V-*eru* is created by head-movement of the verb in complement to *-eru*. Finally, (8c) is derived from (8d) in terms of Burzio’s Generalization (Burzio (1986)).

(13) *Burzio’s Generalization*

A verb assigns an external θ-role iff it can assign Case.

Hence, given (8c), the effect of (8d) is reduced to Burzio’s Generalization. Note also that the structures of the psych-verbs in (12) directly reflect (8), except that NP is selected as the complement of the verb. This means that potential sentences have structures parallel to (12), on the assumption that *-eru* and the psych-verbs share the properties in (8). We are now in a position to present an analysis within Agreement-based Case theory.

The structures of potential constructions such as (3), repeated here as (14a-c), are shown in (15a-c), respectively:

(14) a. Taroo-ga huransugo-o hanas-e-ru (koto)
   Taro-Nom French-Acc speak-Pot-Pres (fact)
   ((The fact that) Taro can speak French.)
   b. Taroo-ga huransugo-ga hanas-e-ru (koto)
   Taro-Nom French-Nom speak-Pot-Pres (fact)
   c. Taroo-ni huransugo-ga hanas-e-ru (koto)
   Taro-Dat French-Nom speak-Pot-Pres (fact)

(15) a. AGRsP
    
    SPEC  AGRs'  
    TP  AGRS  
    VP  T  
    SPEC  V'  
    Tarooi-ga AGRoP V  
    SPEC  AGRo' eru  
    VP  AGRo  
    PROi  V'  
    NP  V  
    huransugo-o hanas(u)
   
   b. AGRsP
    
    SPEC  AGRs'  
    TP  AGRs  
    VP  T  
    PP  V'  
    PROi  V'  
    NP  V  
    huransugo-ga hanas(u)
In each structure, the arguments of - eru are properly realized: Taroo is an Experiencer, and VP is a Theme. In addition, Taroo controls PRO which is the subject of hanasu. Note that the positions occupied by Taroo-ga and Taroo-ni in (15b) and (15c) are not the SPECs but adjuncts.

The derivation of (15a) is parallel to that of a "regular" sentence with a transitive verb. That is, the movement of Nominative NP Taroo-ga to the AGRs-SPEC takes place before Spell-out. At LF, after the lower verb hanasu is incorporated into the head of AGRo, the Accusative marked NP huransugo-o is raised to the AGRo-SPEC to check off the Case feature. Then, the verb moves further into - eru to create a complex predicate.

The derivations of (14b) and (14c), given in (15b) and (15c), respectively, are essentially the same. The head-movement of the lower verb hanasu to - eru, and the raising of the Nominative NP huransugo-ga to the AGRs-SPEC to have its Case feature checked off, take place before Spell-out. The movement of PPs Taroo-ga/ni is a case of "scrambling", and hence it is optional.

Note that the movement of the Nominative NP huransugo-ga in (15b) and (15c) skips Taroo-ga/ni. As mentioned above, the skipped position is an adjunct. According to Chomsky (1993), adjunct position is "not narrowly L-related" (i.e. A'-position), and hence it does not block the raising of the NP huransugo-ga.

We have shown the derivations of the sentences in (14). The point of our analysis is that - eru in (14a) and - eru in (14b-c) pattern as the temere and the preoccupare classes, respectively. Thus it follows that, details aside, the structure (15a) is parallel to (12a), and (15b-c) to (12b). Now the claim (7) at the beginning of this section naturally follows: questo in (12b) and huransugo-ga in (15b-c) are both surface subjects (i.e. the derived subjects as in passive constructions), and therefore they are licensed at the AGRs-SPEC.

In this section, we have discussed an analysis of potential constructions in Japanese, on the assumption that there exist two kinds of - eru, each of which correspond to one of the two types of Italian psych-verbs. We have also seen that the Nominative objects are consequently licensed at the AGRs-SPEC, which is compatible with (6b) as indicated earlier. We now turn to a review of the analysis proposed by Tada (1992), which is a development of (6a), and contrast it with ours.


As given in (6) above, two approaches to the treatment of Nominative objects have been proposed. One is that INFL is responsible for it, and the other is that static predicates play an important role. The analysis proposed in the previous section is along the lines of the former (i.e. (6b)). In this section, we will review an analysis proposed in Tada (1992), which is along the lines of the latter (i.e. (6a)), and critically examine it.

4.1 Tada's (1992) Analysis

The analysis in Tada (1992) is a reformulation, within the Agreement-based Case theory, of the hypothesis
originally formulated by Kuno (1973) that stative predicates assign the Nominative Case to their objects. Let us consider (16), the central claim of Tada (1992).

(16) AGRo [+ stative] checks Nominative Case in its SPEC at S-Structure.

(Tada (1992: 103))

According to Tada (1992), Nominative objects are licensed under the condition (16) in this analysis, the relevant part of the derivation of (14b) is illustrated in (17).

(17) a. \[ \text{AGRoP} \]
\[ \text{SPEC} \]
\[ \text{AGRo'} \]
\[ \text{VP} \]
\[ \text{huransugo}-ga \]
\[ \text{ERU} \]
\[ \text{[+stative]} \]

b. \[ \text{AGRoP} \]
\[ \text{VP} \]
\[ \text{t}_{j} \]
\[ \text{t}_{i} \]
\[ \text{eru}_{i} \]
\[ \text{AGRo} \]

In (17), the incorporation of the stative verb - eru into the head of AGRoP renders AGRo have the feature [+ stative]. Then the Nominative object huransugo-ga moves overtly to the AGRo-SPEC to have its Case feature checked by AGRo [+ stative].

Tada's (1992) analysis is motivated by the scope of Nominative object and - eru. Consider the examples in (18):

John-Nom right-eye-only-Acc close-Pot-Pres
(John can close only his right eye.)
(i) can > only (John can wink his right eye.)
(ii) *only > can (It is only his right eye that John can close.)

John-Nom right-eye-only-Nom close-Pot-Pres
(John can close only his right eye.)
(i) *can > only
(ii) only > can

(Tada (1992: 94))

Tada (1992) observes that Nominative objects in potential constructions have the scope over - eru as in (18b), while the Accusative objects are within the scope of - eru, as in (18a). Thus, unlike (18a), (18b) does not entail that John can close his left eye. Assuming that this observation is correct, Tada (1992) conclude that, in (18b), the Nominative object migime-dake-ga is licensed at the AGRo-SPEC, which is higher than VP at “S-Structure”, for Nominative Case checking. On the other hand, in (18a), the Accusative object migime-dake-o undergoes movement to the AGRo-SPEC at LF for Accusative Case checking: it remains in situ at the “S-Structure”. Accordingly, those two NPs differ with respect to their positions at “S-Structure”, resulting in the wide and narrow readings observed in (18).

To summarize, the paradigm (18) motivates Tada's (1992) analysis of the way Nominative object is licensed: AGRo, being higher than VP, licenses it at the “S-Structure”.

4.2 Criticism of Tada (1992)

Although Tada’s (1992) analysis seems to be successful in providing an account of Nominative objects in stative sentences neatly, it raises two major problems.

The first problem is concerned with (16), which is the crucial assumption in Tada’s (1992) system: it is not clear why AGRo [+ stative] can check Nominative Case. Recall that in Tada’s (1992) analysis, the nominative object is checked at the AGRo-SPEC under the SPEC-Head relation with the head of AGRoP bearing the feature [+ stative]. In addition, it is predicted from this account that in a stative sentence, a stative predicate can license a Nominative object via the head of AGRo which inherits the feature [+ stative] from the predicate. However, stative predicates do not always allow Nominative objects. Consider the following:

(19) a. Boku-wa sono-uta-o sit-teiru
I-Top the song Acc know Pres
(I know the song.)

b. *Boku-wa sono-uta-ga sit-teiru
I-Top the song Nom know Pres

c. *Boku-ni-wa sono-uta-o sit-teiru
I-Dat-Top the song Acc know Pres
The unacceptability of (19b-c) cannot be explained in Tada’s (1992) analysis. The verb *siru* is a stative predicate, as is its English counterpart *know*. Then, (16) predicts that the Nominative objects in (19b-c) are properly licensed. Although this paradigm begs an explanation, there is no way to account for it in Tada’s (1992) system.

The second problem concerns (18). What we would like to point out is that the scope property of Nominative object observed in (18) is not crucial evidence in favor of Tada’s (1992) analysis. As we discussed earlier, Tada (1992) makes use of the paradigm (18) for determining the position at which Nominative objects are licensed. The contrast in (18) indeed ensures that the Nominative object quantifier *migime-dake-ga* is licensed at some “higher” position than NP, whereas the Accusative object *migime-dake-o* is licensed within VP. However, this fact itself does not directly lead to the conclusion that nominative objects are checked at the AGRoSPEC. In other words, (18) just provides the condition which must be satisfied by the position where the Nominative object’s checking takes place. In the analysis presented in section 2, we proposed that relevant checking takes place at the AGRs-SPEC, which is completely outside VP. In the next section, we provide evidence strongly supporting this proposal.

5. **Nominative Objects as Derived Subjects**

In this section, we discuss the scope of negation, a subject-oriented adverb *itibanyoku*, and Case marker drop, all of which provide substantial evidence in favor of the proposal (7), repeated here as (20).

(20) Nominative objects are licensed at the AGRs-SPEC.

5.1 **Scope of Negation**

According to the standard assumption, negation has clausal scope in Japanese. First consider the following:

(21) Minna-ga Taro-ga ko-nakat-ta to itta

   everyone-Nom Taro-Nom call-Neg-Past comp said
   (Everyone said that Taro did not come.)

   (i) *Neg > every
   (ii) every > Neg
   (Miyagawa (1993: 223, 225))

What we would like to stress here is that the only reading of (21) is the one with the quantifier being outside the scope of negation. Thus, (21) cannot have the meaning “not everyone said that Taro did not come”. This fact entails that if an element takes scope wider than clausal negation, it has clausal scope: it is licensed at a position higher than AGRoP. Now, with this in mind, let us examine the sentences below:


   John-Nom right-eye-only-Acc close-Pot-Neg-Pres
   (John cannot close only his right eye.)

   (i) Neg > only (John cannot wink his right eye.)
   (ii) *only > Neg (It is only his right eye that John cannot close.)


   John-Nom right-eye-only-Nom close-Pot-Neg-Pres
   (John cannot close only his right eye.)

   (i) *Neg > only
   (ii) only > Neg

(22a) cannot have a reading with the negation taking scope narrower than - eru, whereas, in (22b), it is the only possible reading. Thus, this contrast shows that the Accusative object and the Nominative object differ with respect to the positions where they are licensed: *migime-dake-o* in (22a) is licensed at the AGRo-SPEC, while *migime-dake-ga* in (22b) is licensed outside it.

The contrast in (23) leads us to the same conclusion:

(23) a. Mary-wa John-ga zenbu-no-syukudai-o itiniti-de-wa

   Mary-Top John-Nom all-Gen-homework-Acc one day-within-Top
   shiager-are-nakat-ta to itta
   finish-Pot-Neg-Past comp said
   (Mary said that John could not finish his homework within one day.)

   (i) Neg > all (It is not all of his homework that John could finish.)
   (ii) *all > Neg (It is all of his homework that John could not finish.)

b. Mary-wa John-ga zenbu-no-syukudai-ga itiniti-de-wa

   Mary-Top John-Nom all-Gen-homework-Nom one day-within-Top
   shiager-are-nakat-ta to itta
   finish-Pot-Neg-Past comp said
   (i) *Neg > all
   (ii) all > Neg
The scope interpretation observed in (23) is dealt with in parallel with (22). That is, (23a) cannot mean that John finished nothing, whereas (23b) has only that interpretation. Given these facts concerning scope of negation, it seems quite plausible to maintain that Nominative object is licensed at a position higher than the AGRoP, contrary to Tada’s (1992) claim (16).

At present, however, it is hasty to conclude that the position in question is the AGRs-SPEC because the discussion above only shows that the position is outside the AGRoP. In what follows, we will show that the movement which the Nominative object undergoes is an A-movement, and consequently its landing site is the AGRs-SPEC.

Let us consider (21b) again, repeated here as (24):

(24) Minna-ga Taroo-ga ko-nakat-ta to itta
everyone-Nom Taro-Nom call-Neg-Past comp said
(Everyone said that Taro did not come.)
(i) *Neg > every (Not everyone said that Taro would not come.)
(ii) every > Neg (Everyone said that Taro would not come.)

This indicates that the subject minna-ga always has scope over negation. Now, let us look at the following:

(25) Zen’in-ni, Mary-wa Taroo-ga t a-e-nakat-ta to itta
all-Dat Mary-Top Taro-Nom t meet-Pot-Neg-Past comp said
(i) Neg > all (Mary said that Taro could not meet someone.)
(ii) all > Neg (Mary said that Taro could meet no one.)
(Miyagawa (1993: 225))

(25) is almost the same as (24) in its complexity. However, this sentence exhibits a sharp contrast with (24) in that it allows both wide and narrow readings of the universal quantifier. This contrast needs an explanation. Note that (25) involves a long-distance scrambling of the universal quantifier zen’in-ni, whereas the quantifier in (24) is base-generated in place. Miyagawa (1993) suggests a way to capture this phenomenon. Miyagawa’s (1993) account states that although the scope of a quantifier is basically determined according to the surface position of the quantifier, a scrambled element such as zen’in-ni in (25) is sensitive to the effect of reconstruction, and it can take scope in both its original or scrambled positions. This can account for the contrast of (24) and (25): the universal quantifier in (24) was base-generated, while that in (25) was scrambled, and hence only (25) is ambiguous with respect to the scope of the universal quantifier.

Miyagawa (1993) further provides the following:

(26) a. Everyone, appears [t, not to be sick].
(i) *Neg > every
(ii) every > Neg
b. I expect everyone, [t, not to show up for the meeting].
(i) *Neg > every
(ii) every > Neg
(Miyagawa (1993: 225, 226))

The sentence in (26) are cases of raising construction and ECM construction, respectively. As Miyagawa (1993) observes, these sentences are unambiguous. What is interesting here is that the scope property of (26) is paralleled to that of (24), whereas it contrasts with (25). As we indicated above, Miyagawa (1993) argues that an A’-moved element is sensitive to reconstruction, and can take scope in both its original and surface positions. Assuming that A-movement is involved not only in a raising construction but in ECM construction, as discussed in Chomsky (1993), Miyagawa (1993) explains the contrast between (24) and (25). That is, only elements sensitive to reconstruction can be ambiguous with respect to their scopes: an element in an A-position does not exhibit scope ambiguity.

Now let us return to (22) and (23). As we observed above, they show unambiguous scope interpretations: each allows only one interpretation, in which the Nominative object always takes wider scope than negation. Given the discussion above, this fact in turn leads us to the conclusion that the Nominative object determines its scope at an A-position higher than negation.

Recall that we discussed earlier in this subsection that the Nominative object is licensed outside AGRoP. We are now in a position to identify the position where the Nominative object is licensed as the AGRs-SPEC, since it is a Case position as well as an A-position higher than AGRoP. 7

In this subsection, we have discussed the first evidence in favor of (20): Nominative objects are licensed at the AGRs-SPEC, based on the observation concerning the scope of negation in Miyagawa (1993). If this is correct, Nominative objects can be identified as derived subjects like the surface subjects in passive constructions.

5.2 A Subject-Oriented Adverb itibanyoku

Next, we will show that the interpretation of an adverb itibanyoku provides evidence in favor of (20), and consequently supports an implication indicated at the end of the previous subsection.

Making use of the adverb itibanyoku as a diagnostic of subjectionhood, Shibatani (1986) argues that what is
modified by this adverb is the subject of the sentence:

(27) a. Hanako-ni-wa Yamada-sensei-no koogi-ga itibanyoku wakar-u
   Hanako-Dat-Top Prof. Yamada-Gen lecture-Nom the best understand-Pres
   (To Hanako, Prof. Yamada’s lecture is the easiest to understand.)

b. Taroo-wa Hanako-ga Yamada-sensei-no kimoti-ga itibanyoku
   Taro-Top Hanako-Nom Prof. Yamada-Gen feeling-Nom the best
   wakar-u to omottei-ta
   understand-Pres comp think-Past
   (Taro thought that Hanako can understand Prof. Yamada’s feeling the best.)
   (Shibatani 1986: 161)

In (27a), *itibanyoku* goes with *Prof. Yamada’s lecture*, whereas in (27b) it goes with *Hanako*. Thus, it is predicted, from the modification properties of the adverb, that the modified element in each sentence is the subject.

With this in mind, let us next observe the following:

(28) a. John-ni-wa Tanaka-sensei-no koogi-ga itibanyoku kike-u
   John-Dat-Top Prof. Tanaka-Gen lecture-Nom the best listen-Pot-Pres
   (To John, Prof. Tanaka’s lecture is the most interesting.)

b. John-wa Tanaka-sensei-no koogi-ga itibanyoku kike-u
   John-Top Prof. Tanaka-Gen lecture-Nom the best listen-Pot-Pres
   (To John, Prof. Tanaka’s lecture is the most interesting.)
   (John can listen to Prof. Tanaka’s lecture the most clearly.)

The contrast between (28a) and (28c) with respect to the element modified by the adverb corresponds to that between (27a) and (27b): *itibanyoku* in (28a) goes with *Prof. Tanaka’s lecture*, whereas in (28c) it goes with *John*. Sentence (28b) is slightly complicated: both *Prof. Tanaka’s lecture*, and *John* can be interpreted with the adverb (however, in the primary reading, *itibanyoku* is interpreted with *Prof. Tanaka’s lecture*). Adopting Shibatani’s (1986) argument, we identify the element modified by the adverbs as the subject of the sentence in (28). The point of this observation is that the element modified by the adverb is a Nominative object. As a result, we are led to the conclusion that the Nominative object functions in a sentence as the subject. On the standard assumption, the subject NP is checked at the AGRs-SPEC. Hence, we also conclude that the Nominative object, functioning as the subject of the sentence, is licensed at the AGRs-SPEC. This conclusion substantially supports (20).

5.3 Case Marker Drop

Fact about Case marker drop argue for (20). It has often been pointed out in the literature that there exists a subject/object asymmetry concerning Case marker drop, as in the following (cf. Saito 1985), Dubinsky (1992), etc):

(29) a. (Kimi-wa) nani-(o) yonderu-no
    you-Top what-Acc reading-Q
    (What are you reading?)

b. Dare-*(ga) kita-no
   who-Nom came-Q
   (who came?)
   (Takezawa 1987: 123)

This shows that Accusative Case marker “*o*” can be dropped, whereas Nominative “*ga*” cannot. Observing this phenomenon, Saito (1985) accounts for it on the assumption that the object is assigned an abstract Case, while the subject is not assigned any abstract Case in Japanese. That is, the object in Japanese can satisfy the Case filter without “*o*”, but the subject, on the other hand, violates it without “*ga*”. This means that Nominative Case differs from Accusative Case in status. Note that Saito’s account cannot be maintained in the framework of the Agreement-based Case theory where Case assignment is uniformly formulated in terms of the SPEC-Head relation, regardless of whether it is Nominative or Accusative. Thus, in the Agreement-based Case theory, the status of Accusative Case is the same as that of Nominative Case. In fact, it is worth pointing out here that the judgement of the paradigm (29) is subtle. To me, (29b) without “*ga*” is not so bad, and its acceptability is almost the same as that of the following examples:

(30) a. (Kimi-wa) ittai nani-(ga) taber-are-ru-no
    (What on earth can you eat?)

b. Aifu-(ga) Masao-no tokei-o tot-ta-no-ka
   (Did that fellow steal Masao’s watch?)

Nine of ten native speakers, including me, find (30) perfectly acceptable. Now suppose that the Case markers of
subjects and objects can be deleted freely, whereas markers of Topics and Major subjects cannot.\(^{8}\) Consider the following:

(31) a. Dono-hito-ni/ga huransugo-ga hanas-e-ru-no
   (Which person can speak French?)

   b. *Dono-hito huransugo-ga hanas-e-ru-no

   c. Dono-hito-ni/ga huransugo hanas-e-ru-no

   d. *Dono-hito huransugo hanas-e-ru-no

(32) a. Dansei-to josei-de-wa dotira-ga hekinjumyoo-ga mijikai-nodesuka
   (Of which average lifespan is longer, men or women?)

   b. *DANSEI-TO JOSEI-DE-WA DOTIRA HEKINJUMYOOGA MIJIKAI-NODESUKA

   c. Dansei-to josei-de-wa dotira hekinjumyoo mijikai-nodesuka

   d. *Dansei-to josei-de-wa dotira hekinjumyoo mijikai-nodesuka

Note that most native speakers do not find any significant difference in acceptability between (31c) and (32c). This means that the syntactic status of that of huransugo-ga in (31) is the same as hekinjumyoo-ga which is the subject of (32). Thus, again, we are led to the conclusion that Nominative objects such as huransugo-ga in (31c) are the subjects. With this in mind, we can account for the paradigm in (31) and (32) as the Topic (major subject)/subject asymmetry. That is, sentences with their Topic or major subject markers dropped are ungrammatical, as in (31b), (31d), (32b), and (32d), while those with their Nominative Case markers dropped are perfectly grammatical, as in (31a), (31c), (32a), and (32c). To conclude, on the assumption that the Nominative object is the subject surface, we obtain a natural account of the facts concerning Case marker drop. As mentioned at the end of the previous subsection, we take it that the subject is licensed at the AGRs-SPEC. Hence, the discussion of Case marker drop provides further evidence in favor of (20).

6. Apparent Problems

Thus, far, we have argued that the Nominative object, being the surface subject, is licensed at the AGRs-SPEC. There are two apparent problems for that conclusion: reflexivization and Subject honorification. These two phenomena have been used as tests for subjecthood. In fact, it has often been argued that the Nominative object fails to behave like the subject under these tests. In this section, we re-examine reflexivization and Subject honorification, and argue that the analysis proposed earlier provides a natural account of them.

6.1 Reflexivization

It is well-known that the reflexive zibun in Japanese must generally take the subject as its antecedent, as shown below:

(33) John-ga okusan-yori zibun-yori oya-no mae-de sikat-ta
    John-Nom wife-Gen self-Gen parent in front of scold-Past
    (John scolded his wife in front of his parents.)
    (Takezawa (1987: 30))

The only possible interpretation of this sentence requires "zibun" and the subject John to corefer. Shibatani (1977) observes that the Nominative object cannot serve as the antecedent of zibun.

(34) John-ni Mary-ga zibun-yori oya-de sikat-e-ru (koto)
    John-Dat Mary-Nom self-Gen room-in scold-Pot-Pres (fact)
    ((The fact that) John can scold Mary in his room.)

Only John can antecede zibun in this sentence. In fact, this observation has long been taken as evidence against a subject analysis of the Nominative object. This seems to present a challenge to our analysis.

It seems, however, that the fact that the Nominative object fails to antecede the reflexive zibun straightforwardly follows from the reflexive binding property of the psych-verbs in Italian. As we indicated above, "deep" subject in Romance can bind the reflexive clitic, whereas a "derived" subject cannot. Belletti and Rizzi (1988) make crucial use of this phenomenon to classify the psych-verbs into two groups: one with the derived subject (preoccupare class), and the other with the deep subject (temere class). Now let us again look at (10), repeated here as (35):

(35) a. Gianni si teme.
    Gianni himself fears

   b. *Gianni si preoccupa
    Gianni himself worries

According to Belletti and Rizzi (1988), configurations of the form of (36) are rule out (see Note 5).

(36) *NP: si: t

The same contrast observed in (35) can be seen in the Japanese counterpart of (35), shown in (37) below:

(37) a. Taro-ga zibun-o osoreteiru (koto)
    Taro-Nom self-Acc fears (fact)
b. *Taroo-ga zibun-o nayamaseteiru (koto)  
Taro-Nom self-Acc worries (fact)

Adopting the analysis in Belletti and Rizzi (1988) to the Japanese psych-verbs, we see that (37b) has the same configuration as (36). That is, *Taroo-ga is not a deep subject but a derived subject just like Gianni in (35b), and hence has skipped the reflexive in the course of derivation, resulting in the configuration (36). Recall that our analysis of potential constructions is based on the assumption that -eru patterns like the Italian psych-verbs. Given that assumption and the paradigm in (37), it is expected that -eru’s property of reflexive binding is the same as that of Italian psych-verbs. Now let us consider the following:

(38) a. John-wa zibun-o warat-ta  
John-Top self-Acc laugh-Past
b. John-wa zibun-o wara-e-ta  
John-Top self-Acc laugh-Pot-Past
c. *John-ni-wa zibun-ga warat-ta  
John-Dat-Top self-Nom laugh-Pot-Past
d. *Zibun-ni John-ga warat-ta  
self-Dat John-Nom laugh-Pot-Past

This paradigm is exactly what our analysis predicts. First, since (38a) is a typical case of the regular transitive sentence, zibun can refer to the subject John. The situation in (38b) is parallel to that in (38a). That is, according to the analysis proposed in section 2, -eru in this sentence falls in the temere class, and hence John-wa is the subject serving as the antecedent of zibun. In contrast, since -eru in (38c) follows the pattern of the preoccupare class, it follows that John-ni is not the subject, hence it cannot bind the reflexive. Note that (38c) is also ruled out by the binding theory. Given our analysis, this sentence reaches a stage illustrated as below in the course of the derivation:

(39)

This configuration is ruled out by the Condition C of the binding theory, which states that a referential expression must not be bound, since a referential expression John-ni is bound by zibun-ga in (39). Thus, our analysis explains the unacceptability of (38c). The same is true of (38d). Our analysis predicts that the derivation of this sentence reaches a stage as in (40):

(40)

Although the configuration in (40) raises no problem concerning binding theory, it exhibits the situation of (36) and hence it is ruled out just as is (37b). Note also that this account is available only under our analysis. As a result, the unacceptable examples of (38c) and (38d) provide further evidence in favor of the analysis of potential constructions proposed in this paper. To summarize, our analysis naturally accounts for the phenomenon of Reflexivization in potential constructions.

Now let us return to (34). The problem was why the Nominative object Mary-ga fails to bind the reflexive zibun. This problem is solved straightforwardly: assuming -eru in this sentence patterns like a psych-verb preoccupare, the Nominative object Mary-ga is a derived subject, and therefore cannot anteced the reflexive.

To conclude, reflexivization does not undermine the validity of our analysis proposed in this paper. Rather its
effect directly follows from the analysis itself.

6.2 Subject Honorification

The second apparent challenge to our analysis is Subject honorification, a type of honorific expression in Japanese with verbs of the form “o-V-ni-nar”. The licensor of this morphology is the subject which refers to a person socially superior to the speaker (SSS) (cf. Harada 1976):

(41) a. Sensei-ga denwa-o o-kake-ni-nat-ta
teacher-Nom telephone-Acc dial-Hon-Past
(Our teacher made a telephone call.)

b. *Aitu-ga denwa-o o-kake-ni-nat-ta
that brat-Nom telephone-Acc dial-Hon-Past
(That brat made a telephone call.)

(42) a. Sensei-ga sono otoko-o o-tasuke-ni-nat-ta
teacher-Nom that guy-Acc help-Hon-Past
(Our teacher helped that guy.)

b. *Sono otoko-ga sensei-o o-tasuke-ni-nat-ta
that guy-Nom teacher-Acc help-Hon-Past
(That guy helped our teacher.)

(Kitagawa 1986: 156, 157)

This phenomenon has also been taken as evidence against a subject analysis of the Nominative object (cf. Shibatani 1977, Takezawa 1987). Dubinsky (1992), for example, argues, following Shibatani (1977), that not the Nominative object but the Dative NP in the subject position licenses Subject honorification, as in (43) below:

(43) a. Sensei-ni gakusei-ga o-mukae-ni-nar-e-ru (koto)
teacher-Dat student-Nom greet-Hon-Pot-Pres (fact)
((The fact that) our teacher can greet the students.)

b. *Boku-ni sensei-ga o-mukae-ni-nar-e-ru (koto)
I-Dat teacher-Nom greet-Hon-Pot-Pres (fact)
((The fact that) I can greet our teacher.)

(Dubinsky 1992: 342, 343)

Since our analysis recognizes that the Nominative object is the surface subject, it is expected to license Subject honorification. However, as (43) shows, that expectation is not fulfilled. In (43a), the Nominative object gakusei-ga is not an appropriate element for licensing Subject honorification, while, in (43b), although the Nominative object sensei-ga is appropriate enough, it cannot license the honorified verb.

Here, following Kitagawa (1986), we assume that honorified verbs are licensed at the level where “complementation” exists. We tentatively assume that the relevant level is “D-Structure” in the sense of GB theory. Note that under the VP-internal subject hypothesis, the complement is a VP. Now let us again look at (43a) whose “D-Structure” is illustrated below:

(44) [VP sensei-ni [vr PRO, gakusei-ga o-mukae-ni-nar] eru]

In our analysis, Experiencer sensei-ni is coindexed with PRO in the subject position of the lower VP, while the Nominative object gakusei-ga is in the VP theme. Recall that Subject honorification is triggered by the subject of a sentence. In (44), not Experiencer sensei-ni but PRO is in the subject position of the complement VP.

This is because PRO is the only potential licensor of the honorified verb. Note that the Nominative object gakusei-ga is not a potential licensor since, in the structure (44), it is still within the VP theme: it is in the object position of the lower verb.

To summarize, our analysis correctly predicts the licensor of an honorified verb and explains that the Nominative object cannot trigger Subject honorification.


The discussion above has focused on potential constructions in Japanese. As is well-known, there are some other predicates morphologically similar to the potential predicate -eru (e.g. passive, middle, and ergative) in Japanese. From the viewpoint of learnability, it seems plausible to assume that morphologically similar words have similar syntactic properties.

Hasegawa (1988) points out that the passive morpheme cannot attach to the potential predicates. According to her, this complementary distribution of potential and passive morpheme indicates that they are one and the same morpheme with different manifestations. We extend our analysis of potential constructions to passive constructions, and subsume Hasegawa’s (1988) insight.

It is well-known that the passive morpheme in Japanese can attach to any type of verb. Besides the “pure” passive, as in (45), there exist another two types of passive construction, as in (46) and (47):

\[\text{Example (45):} \quad \text{O-kake ni-nar-e-ru (ktorno)}\]
\[\text{Example (46):} \quad \text{O-kake ni-nar-e-ru (tojiru)}\]
\[\text{Example (47):} \quad \text{O-kake ni-nar-e-ru (jiru)}\]
(45) (Pure passive)
  Kodomo-ga sensei-ni sikar-are-ta
  child-Nom teacher-Nom scold-Pass-Past
  (The child was scolded by the teacher.)

(46) (Adversity passive)
  a. John-ga sensei-ni kodomo-o sikar-are-ta
     John-Nom teacher-Nom child-Acc scold-Pass-Past
     (John was affected by the teacher's scolding (his) child.)
  b. John-ga ame-ni hur-are-ta
     John-Nom rain-Dat fall-Pass-Past
     (John suffered from the falling rain.)

(47) (Honorable passive)
  a. Sensei-ga kodomo-o sikar-are-ta
     teacher-Nom child-Acc scold-Pass-Past
     (The teacher scolded (Hon) the child.)
  b. Sensei-ga tat-are-ta
     teacher-Nom stand-Pass-Past
     (The teacher stood up (Hon).)
  c. sensei-ga kaze-de taorer-are-ta
     teacher-Nom cold-with collapse-Pass-Past
     (The teacher came down (Hon) with a cold.)

(Hasegawa (1988: 100))

On the assumption that the passive morpheme and the potential predicate -eru are the same, the passive morpheme is supposed to have the following lexical properties which are almost the same as those of the potential -eru:

(48) a. freely subcategorized for either VP or AGRoP
  b. assigning two \( \theta \)-roles: Theme and one other (e.g. Agent, Source, Goal, etc)\(^{10}\)
  c. not assigning structural Accusative Case
  d. optionally assigning Inherent Case

These properties (48) indicate that the passive morpheme also patterns like the psych-verbs, just as the potential -eru. In addition, we assume that, as in the case of the potential predicate, there exist two kinds of passive morpheme: the passive morpheme in (45) corresponds to the preoccupare class, and the one in (46) and (47), to the temere class. Given this assumption and (48), the “D-Structures” of the sentences in (45)–(47) will be (49)–(51), respectively.

(49) (Pure passive)
    \([\text{VP} \text{ sensei-ni \ [\text{VP PRO} \text{ kodomo-ga sikar] areta]}\]

(50) (Adversity passive)
  a. \([\text{VP} \text{ John-ga sensei-ni \ [AGRoP \ [\text{VP PRO} \text{ kodomo-o sikar]] areta]}\]
  b. \([\text{VP} \text{ John-ga ame-ni \ [AGRoP \ [\text{VP PRO} \text{ hur]] areta]}\]

(51) (Honorable passive)
  a. \([\text{VP sensei-ga \ [AGRoP \ [\text{VP PRO} \text{ kodomo-o sikar]] areta]}\]
  b. \([\text{VP sensei-ga kaze-de \ [AGRoP \ [\text{VP PRO} \text{ taorer]] areta]}\]
  c. \([\text{VP sensei-ga \ [AGRoP \ [\text{VP PRO} \text{ tat]] areta]}\]

Details aside, these “D-Structures” will have the following respective “S-Structures”:

(52) \([\text{AGRoP \ kodomo-ga \ [\text{VP sensei-ni PRO} \text{ t_j]] sikar-areta]}\]

(53) a. \([\text{AGRoP \ John-ga \ [\text{VP \ t_j sensei-ni \ [AGRoP \ kodomo-o \ [\text{VP PRO} \text{ t_s]] sikar-areta]}\]
   b. \([\text{AGRoP \ John-ga \ [\text{VP \ t_j ame-ni} \text{ hur-are-ta]}\]

(54) a. \([\text{AGRoP \ sensei-ga \ [\text{VP \ t_s kodomo-o \ [\text{VP PRO} \text{ t_t]] sikar-are-ta]}\]
   b. \([\text{AGRoP \ sensei-ga \ [\text{VP \ t_s PRO} \text{ tat-are-ta]}\]
   c. \([\text{AGRoP \ sensei-ga \ [\text{VP \ t_s kaze-de \ [\text{VP PRO}]] taorer-are-ta]}\]

Note that John-ga and Sensei-ga in (53) and (54) are in the VP-SPEC, and the phrases sensei-ni, ame-ni and kaze-de are adjuncts. Under our analysis, the three types of passive are determined by the lexical properties of the passive morpheme: whether the passive morpheme patterns like the temere class or the preoccupare class of the psych-verbs.

To summarize, our analysis of potential constructions straightforwardly accounts for the three types of passive in Japanese.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that the Nominative object in potential construction in Japanese is licensed at
the AGRs-SPEC, assuming that the potential predicate -eru in Japanese patterns like the Italian psych-verbs. In the course of the discussion, we have also shown that the apparently complicated Case arrays in potential construction turn out to be captured in quite a simple fashion within the Agreement-based Case theory without any special device. This is a welcome result. In addition, we have seen how the passive constructions in Japanese are accounted for in our system. This indicates that our analysis would possibly extend to other constructions with complex predicates morphologically similar to the potential predicate.11

REFERENCES


Saito, M., (1982), Case-Marking in Japanese: A Preliminary Study, ms., MIT.

1Potential construction falls under the class of static sentences. See Kuno (1973).

2This property is crucially related to the different Case arrays in potential constructions (i.e. (4)): -eru which is subcategorized for AGRoP shows the pattern of (4a), while that selecting VP allows those of (4b) and (4c).

3The same point is indicated in Dubinsky (1992).

4Belletti and Rizzi (1988) use other phenomena as well.

5Belletti and Rizzi (1988) argue that both (9b) and (10b) have the following configuration:

(l) NPi ··· sl ··· si

This configuration is, in general, ill-formed. This is why (9b) and (10b) are ungrammatical. Note that this account is available only if the surface subject Gianni in (10b) is analyzed as the "derived" subject: the movement of the NP from its original position yields the chain of (l).

We will return to this point in section 5.1.

6We assume that the Case feature of the Nominative object is "strong", and hence must be checked at the AGRs-SPEC before Spell-out. This implies that Nominative NPs are uniformly licensed at the AGRs-SPEC in the overt syntax, regardless of their "original" positions.

7Here we put aside the possibility that the TP-SPEC licenses a Nominative NP.

8Topics and Major subjects are different from "regular" subjects in that no θ-role is assigned to them: they are not arguments of the predicate.

9In Kitagawa's (1986) system, the level in question is "pre-LF" in his term.

10The θ-role except Theme is assigned to the counterpart of the by-phrase in English. In English passive constructions, by-phrases bear various θ-roles. See Jaeggli (1986) for arguments.

11Although we have shown that the status of the Nominative Case marker -ga is the same as that of "regular" subject, we have not discussed the status of the Major subject as in (2) and the first Nominative NP in (3b). At present we can only say that this issue might be related to the distinction between "kakujoshi" (Case particle) and "hukujoshi" (adverbial particle) in the sense of traditional Japanese grammar. We leave this issue for future research.