

## Functions of tense/aspect markers (RU/TA) in Japanese oral narratives

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### Abstract

This study examines the effect of non-past/imperfective marker RU in past reference discourse and explores the principle that governs the alternation between RU and past/perfective marker TA in Japanese oral narratives. Four narratives embedded in natural conversations between two close female friends are analyzed. The results indicate that the instances of RU forms tend to appear at the main point or the affective center of the narrative from the narrator's point of view, and therefore exhibit vividness. Thus, the current data suggest that non-past forms in Japanese narratives are qualitatively similar to historical present in English and other languages.

### 0. Introduction

Narratives attracted considerable degree of attention by the researchers in the field for the noticeable and interesting switch between past/perfective and non-past/imperfective temporal markers after the past temporal frame is set. In this context, tense markers are assumed to be freed from mere temporal deictic function, and to exhibit discourse-determined meanings and reflect speaker's perspective. A typical example of this is so-called *historical present* in English, which refers to non-past forms used in past reference discourse. Historical presents are said to occur at the main points of the narrative and are considered to give vividness to the reported action (Jespersen 1931, Leech 1971, Palmer 1974, Schiffrin 1981, Silva-Corvalan 1983). However, there have been controversial findings about the role of tense markers in Japanese narratives, both spoken and written (Soga 1983 for written discourse; Szatrowski 1985a, 1985b, Iwasaki 1988, and Takahashi 1992, 1996 for spoken discourse). Especially, whether or not Japanese non-past/imperfective marker RU in past reference is equivalent to historical present in English is an unsettled debate. Thus, in the current study, I will analyze the function of non-past forms (RU forms) in Japanese spoken narratives and examine whether or not they are similar to historical present in English. A careful discourse analysis focusing on

the communicative goal of the speaker will be presented, and the relationship between the narrator's emotional involvement to the story and the use of RU form and its vividness effect is explored.

Before elaborating on the data, I will give a brief review of the previous studies on tense alternation in narratives and the function of non-past forms in English, Spanish and Japanese discourse.

## 1. Tense form variation in narrative texts

### 1.1 Historical present in English and Spanish

It has been generally accepted that the present forms that appear in narrative texts, so-called *historical present*, are typical evidence of non-referential use of tense forms in a discourse. The flexibility of tense form is possible in narratives, because the temporal frame is set to the past and the reported events are sequenced in the order of actual occurrence, and therefore denoting deictic tense becomes unnecessary. Historical present in English has been claimed to give *vividness* to the reported event by bringing the event to the moment of speech (Jespersen 1931, Leech 1971, Palmer 1974). It is considered as a stylistic device that adds dramatic effect to the actions being reported.

This claim was challenged by Wolfson (1979), in which she argues that tense switch marks the separation of *events*. She further argues that the assumption that present form exhibits the vividness effect is misleading because present tense is different from present time (p.179). However, the explanation using the term *event* was criticized by first, the insufficient definition of the term, and second, the fact that using one tense form does not always mean there is no change of events (Schiffrin 1981: p.56).

Schiffrin (1981) supports the vividness interpretation of the historical present. Her study shows that historical present typically occurs with direct quotation and progressives, which also add vividness to the clause. She further claims that historical present is an *evaluation device*, that is, it establishes the main point of the narrative or the event in which the narrator feels most involved. Using her Spanish data, Silva-Corvalan (1983) also reports that present forms co-occur with climactic events in the narrated story. She thus concludes that historical present in Spanish serves as an *internal evaluation mechanism*.

Thus, there seems to be a general agreement on the assumption that present form in past reference adds vividness to the reported event, and it further functions to establish the main point or the affective center of the story—exhibiting the evaluation of the narrator.

## 1.2 Tense variation in Japanese discourse

There have been various attempts to account for the non-deictic uses of non-past/imperfective marker RU and past/perfective marker TA<sup>1</sup> in Japanese narrative discourse; however, there seems to be no firm agreement yet. Especially, whether or not Japanese non-past/imperfective marker RU in past reference is equivalent to English historical present has been a controversial issue.

Soga (1983) and Takahashi (1992, 1996) are basically in line with the historical present view outlined in the previous section. Soga views tense switch as temporal transfer within the past time reference, and that transfer to the present moment creates vividness. Takahashi's (1996) proposal supports the vividness effect in terms of speaker's emotional involvement to the reported event. Based on her analysis on first- and third-person narratives, she argues that the shift between the *character's* and the *narrator's perspective* is the key to account for the switch between RU and TA in her data. She argues that RU marks the character's (or the participant's) perspective in first-person narratives, and it shows the narrator's involvement in third-person narratives. In contrast, TA is used to mark the narrator's (or the reporter's) perspective. Her data shows that RU is used when the speaker is reporting as a character of the story, describing events as if they unfold in front of their eyes; whereas TA typically appears when the speaker tells the event from outside the story, that is, as a narrator.

Larson (1991: p.41) states that Japanese temporality is based on narrator's consciousness in terms of the process/result situation, and that this applies to the notion of perfectivity and imperfectivity in Comrie's (1976) sense. If we assume that RU is related to imperfectivity and TA to perfectivity, we can make the following connection: RU denotes the described event as an ongoing process in the speaker's consciousness; while TA indicates that the described event is perceived as a completed action or result of the action. This is consistent with the above claim that RU is used when the speaker is the participant, or witnessing the event, and TA is used when the speaker is the reporter, or viewing the event as completed.

The vividness effect has been challenged by several studies. Szatrowski (1985a, 1985b) conducts an experimental study to measure the vividness effect of RU forms in narratives. She reports that not only RU but also TA gives vivid impressions to the listeners, indicating that vividness effect is not unique to RU forms. However, the definition of 'vividness effect' in these studies is qualitatively different from the definition used in the traditional studies of historical present. Vividness effect that accompanies non-past forms is limited to such dramatic effect caused by the internal evaluation of the narrator. In Szatrowski's studies, on the other hand,

vididness effect is determined by how the audience perceives the narration. Therefore, such effect of RU and TA may derive from different sources although they give similar impressions to the listeners. Thus, Szatrowski's data does not constitute counter-evidence to the view that Japanese RU forms function in similar ways as English historical presents.

Iwasaki (1988: p.49) contends that vividness is not caused by the tense form but it is created by rarer association of tense forms and the types of predicate forms or subjects. For example, nominal predicate with non-past form is unmarked, therefore the occurrence with past form exhibits vividness; and third-person with non-past form is unmarked, therefore the occurrence with past form brings vividness. This may be true, if we interpret the meaning of the word 'vividness' as tantamount to 'something different'. Again, I argue that vividness in Iwasaki's terms is qualitatively different from vividness associated with historical present, which is caused by the speaker's inner evaluation of the event. Therefore, Iwasaki's analysis does not exclude the vividness effect that may be caused by RU form.

Iwasaki (1988) also offers a different explanation to the alternation between RU and TA in narratives. He claims that *perspective principle* and *information accessibility*— notions which represent the metaphorical distance between the speaker and the reported information— explain the tense form variation in Japanese spoken narrative. In his data, which consists of 16 first-person narratives, there is a clear relationship between the sentence subject and the tense form: The past tense form typically appears with a first-person subject and the non-past tense form appears with a third-person subject. His explanation to this co-occurrence of first-person subject and TA form is that the speaker has a high degree of accessibility to the information being reported, which makes the speaker to choose the realis marker TA (higher transitive member), rather than the irrealis marker RU (lower transitive member). Iwasaki argues that grounding theory of Hopper and Thompson (1980) fails to explain this skewed distribution of tense forms according to the type of subject, since it would predict that first and third person, both of which are likely to be the main participants in a story, would behave similarly, in contrast with inanimate subjects (p.37). Historical present interpretation does not work either, since historical present appears in a sequence of actions, where both first person and third person might appear. Thus the distribution of tense forms for first and third person should also be similar. Instead, he claims that the theory of speaker's perspective can provide a satisfactory explanation to the asymmetrical distribution. The theory predicts both the split between first-person and third-person/inanimate subjects, and the forms associated with these subjects.

Although his analysis is supported by firm evidence, there are several flaws in his

arguments. First, the relationship between information accessibility and realis/irrealis form is unclear. Second, Iwasaki argues that when the first person is the subject, the speaker has a high degree of accessibility to the information. This may not necessarily be so. Even if the subject is a third person, information accessibility may be as high as when the subject is the speaker him/herself. Third, since his data is limited to first-person narratives, his analysis cannot explain the tense alternation in third-person narratives.

It is also important to note that the opponents of historical present view do not take into account the communicative goal of the narrator, or the existence of affective center in a narrated story. This is one of the crucial features of narratives and it may affect the verb forms, word choice and expressive devices of the whole narrative. Without considering the communicative goal of the speaker, one may fail to observe significant phenomena in narratives.

Thus, in this study I will conduct a detailed discourse analysis focusing on the communicative goal of the speaker and the affective center of the narrative, and attempt to relate the narrator's emotional involvement to the use of RU. I argue that Japanese non-past form RU behaves in a similar way to English historical present: It functions as an internal evaluation device and gives vividness to the reported event.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Data

The data used in this study are four audiotaped narratives, all of which are embedded in a spontaneous conversation between two young women who are close friends. The conversation was audio-taped and transcribed by the author. Among the four narratives, two of them are first-person narrative and the other two are third-person narrative. The selected stories consist of orientation, complicating action and evaluation, which is consistent with Labov's (1972) definition of narratives.

All the verbs marked with non-past marker RU and past marker TA are analyzed (e.g., *tabe-RU* 'eat', *tabe-TA* 'ate'). In Japanese, RU/TA can also be combined with other morphemes such as progressive/resultative marker, I-RU/TA, which is attached to the te-gerundive forms (TE-forms) of the verbs. If the marker is followed by RU, it indicates that the action is on-going at the moment of speech (e.g., *tabe-TE-I-RU* 'eating'), and if the marker is followed by TA, it indicates that the on-going action was in the past (e.g., *tabe-TE-I-TA* 'was eating'). Similarly, other aspectual markers that are attached to the TE-forms of the verbs, i.e., TE-IKU ('proceed

towards that way') and TE-KURU ('proceed towards this way') can indicate tense by alternating IKU (non-past) and ITTA (past), KURU (non-past) and KITA (past), respectively. Some examples of the combinations of tense markers and different types of morphemes are listed in the table below. These are also included in the analysis since the functions of RU and TA in these verbs are the same as those directly attached to the verb.

| Types of verbs/morphemes   | Non-past forms | Past forms    |
|----------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| Base form                  | tabe-RU        | tabe-TA       |
| Progressive/resultative    | tabe-TE-I-RU   | tabe-TE-I-TA  |
| Process (moving towards)   | hai-TTE-KU-RU  | hai-TTE-KI-TA |
| Process (moving away from) | hai-TTE-IK-U   | hai-TTE-I-TTA |
| Causative                  | tabe-SASE-RU   | tabe-SASE-TA  |
| Passive                    | tabe-RARE-RU   | tabe-RARE-TA  |
| Potential                  | tabe-RARE-RU   | tabe-RARE-TA  |

Table 1. Different verb forms with RU/TA marking

## 2.2 The observed clauses

Contrary to my expectation, there were very few occurrences of RU forms in complicating action section—one to four occurrences in each narrative—in spite of the high possibility of emotional involvement and concern towards the past event, either in first- or third-person narrative.

The few occurrences of RU and TA forms may be due to clause-chaining phenomena in Japanese. In Japanese, clauses can end with TE-forms, which are neutral to tense<sup>2</sup>. It is still not very clear in what particular situation these forms are used by the speaker, but it occurs frequently especially in spontaneous narration of events. Thus, we have fewer chances to observe either RU or TA in a narrative in Japanese compared with other languages, where every event is encoded with a form that obligatorily carry tense. Refer to Table 2. below. The figures indicate the number of RU/TA/TE marked verbs in each narrative.

|    | First-person (1) | First-person (2) | Third-person (1) | Third-person (2) |
|----|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| RU | 4                | 2                | 1                | 1                |
| TA | 5                | 7                | 5                | 13               |
| TE | 22               | 11               | 6                | 3                |

Table 2. The number of occurrences of RU, TA, and TE in the four narratives

The following excerpt is an example of clause-chaining using TE-forms. Throughout the paper, the underlined verbs are complicating actions, and non-past and past forms of the verbs

in the complicating actions are boldfaced.

049 rikkaa shoppu ni, gootoo ni haitte,  
liqure shop GL<sup>3</sup> break-into:TE  
*the robber broke into a liqure shop, and*

050 soko no shujin o koroshite,  
there GEN owner ACC kill:TE  
*killed the owner of the shop, and*

051 de okane o totte,  
and money ACC take:TE  
*and took money, and*

052 de sono ashi de kita wake.  
and on the way back come:PAST SE  
*and came (to their place) on his way back from the place where he committed crime.*

Observe the first three clauses that end with TE-form. These would be translated into past or present forms in English, as is clear from the English translations presented in italicized letters. Thus, the instances of RU and TA may be more or less limited in Japanese data<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 Research question

The research question is the following: What are the discourse functions of RU and TA in narratives? That is, how are the two forms distributed within the discourse, and why? My prediction is that RU typically occurs at the main point of the story; since that is when the speaker is likely to put him/herself in the event time triggered by the retrieval of the emotion. On the other hand, TA would be used in unmarked situation or objective reporting of events, since the speaker sees the event from outside or speech time and therefore as completed.

In the following section, I will elaborate on the relationship between the use of RU/TA and the narrator's emotional involvement or the affective center of the story in each of the four

narratives.

## 3.2 Analysis

### 3.2.1 First-person narrative (1)

There were four occurrences of RU forms in this narrative. What happens in the story is that the narrator and her roommate encounter a shooting scene at a supermarket late in the evening. Since it was the very first time for her to hear a shooting sound closeby, she was extremely shocked and terrified.

The first RU that appeared in the narrative was the following:

(1)

023     nan daro,     yada             naa,  
          what TEN    uncomfortable IT  
*I wonder what it is, I feel uncomfortable about it.*

024     tte omottetara,  
          QT think:TE:PROG:TARA  
*I was wondering like that, and then*

025     moo ikkai “paan” te oto ga shite,  
          once again     QT sound NOM was heard:TE  
*once again we heard the sound “paan”*

026     juusee na     no yo, sore ga.  
          shooting COP:NP IT IT that NOM  
*the sound is that of shooting!*

In line 26, “juusee na no yo,” the verb is actually a copula, which typically describes situation and does not denote action. However, I counted it as part of action that has moved the situation forward, since it refers to the realization of the fact by the narrator that the big, abnormal sound was that of “shooting.” This event is the first significant point of the whole story, and we can also infer that it was the most shocking moment for the speaker (as she implies in other parts of the narrative). Thus, it is plausible that the speaker switched to the participant of the story; or since it was such a shocking experience the realization is being



re-experienced in her consciousness at the moment of speech.

The second and the third are in a sequence.

(2)

047 hito- hitobito ga koo, hatte saa, crowling shite  
 person, people NOM FIL cowl:TE IT crawling do:TE  
*all the people, by crawling,*

048 koo, wara wara wara wara kuru wake yo, kaimonokyaku ga  
 FIL (onomatopoeia) come:NP SE IT shopping customers NOM  
*all the customers come, being afraid of what's going on.*  
 kowagatte nee?  
 to be afraid:TE IT

049 de, kotchi no hoo ni nanka hikaeshitsu tteiuka, sooko mitaino ga  
 and this way LOC FIL waiting room FIL store house like NOM  
*and over here there is a waiting room, or what do you call it, a storeroom?*  
 atte,  
 exist:TE

050 soko ni minna koo haitteiku no yo.  
 there GL everyone FIL enter:TE-go:NP SE IT  
*everyone goes into that place.*

This is when the speaker and her roommate see the other customers in the store escape into a store room. They are feeling very insecure and not being able to decide whether or not they should follow the other people, since to be trapped in a small room might be even more dangerous. On line 48, the speaker describes the people coming towards the store room crawling, where she uses RU form with the verb 'to come' (kuru). On line 50, again, she uses RU (non-past) form with the verb 'to enter towards that way' (haitteiku). Based on the speaker's introspection of what was on her mind both at the time she saw it and at the moment of speech, I speculate that the speaker uses RU because she suddenly puts herself back into the time of event, triggered by the striking memory of the shooting and the people trying to escape from it. Thus, this segment also shows that RU is associated with the events which

hit the speaker as striking and therefore causes vivid, clear retrieval of the event, that is, the affective center of the reported event.

The last one appears when the shooting is over and everything seems to be back to normal, and she and her roommate are at the cashier.

(3)

144 nanigoto mo nakatta youni saa,  
nothing happen:PAST as if IT  
*as if nothing has happened,*

145 futsuu ni rejistaa shite, nee?  
normally cashier do:TE IT  
*(we) went to the cashier, and*

146 “paper or plastic?”

147 toka kiku kara,  
QT ask:NP so,  
*(he/she) asks, so*

148 chotto “plastic” toka nanka itte sa?  
FIL QT FIL say:TE IT  
*I say, “plastic” .*

The verb *kiku* (‘to ask’) with RU form is not unusual when it co-occurs with direct quotation, according to Schiffrin (1981), who pointed out that such usage exhibits vividness (p.58). It could also be argued that such vividness is caused by the speaker’s inner feelings; that is, this is another point she was trying to make. She explains in the narrative that she was surprised by the fact that there was no explanation by the owner of the store about the shooting. She had expected some announcement, or at least an apology or words of comfort by the person at the cashier. However, contrary to her expectation, the cashier went through his/her routine as if nothing had happened; and this was another memorable, unexpected moment in the whole event.

To summarize, it was confirmed that RU was used to establish the main point of the story,

functioning as an internal evaluation device.

### 3.2.2 First-person narrative (2)

This narrative is shorter than the first one, and only two RU forms were used. The narrator talks about a small, funny, but slightly surprising incident when she and a number of her friends went to eat out at a restaurant. One of her friends orders a Pepsi, but since it was not very hard (which she does not like) she asks the waitress to bring another glass. However, since the second glass was no better than the first one, she asks the waitress for another glass. The waitress was trying to be nice and polite and comes back with a different kind of soda, with which her friend was not satisfied either. This was funny but rather surprising to the narrator since she herself was not accustomed to such a persistent negotiation for not so much of an important matter in life. The narrator seems to rest her affective center on the following two scenes.

(4)

029        mooikkai tanonde,  
              once again order:TE,  
              *she ordered (her to bring a harder one) again.*

030        “kondo pepsii o mottekita”  
              this time pepsi ACC bring:TE-come:PAST  
              *this time I brought pepsi for you.*

031        tte iu        wake, kanojo.  
              QT say:NP SE she  
              *she says.*

The RU form in line 31 is another case of co-occurrence with direct quotation, which is assumed to have vividness effect together with the quotation. This also coincides with one of the points of this story—the speaker expresses sympathy to the waitress, who had to go back and forth with the Pepsi. (Note that other similar uses of *iu* (‘to say’) all appear in TE-form.)

The next part is the major point of this narrative.

(5)

- 037 sorede, mada yada,  
so still unacceptable  
*so I'm not satisfied yet.*
- 038 toka itte,  
QT say:TE  
*she says,*
- 039 sorede, danko toshite hikanai wake yo.  
and decisively yield:NEG:NP SE IT  
*and she does not yield.*

Here the speaker's friend does not like the second pepsi either, planning to ask for a third glass. The fact that 'she still does not give in' (hikanai) was the most striking behavior for the speaker and the most significant point of the story; thus the use of RU.

The second story was not very long, but we were able to confirm that the point of the story and RU forms co-occur, suggesting that RU functions as an internal evaluation device.

### 3.2.3 Third-person narrative (1)

There was only one case of RU in the entire complicating action in this narrative. The speaker talks about a story which she heard from her friend. It is about two girls who met a stranger in New York and gave him their telephone number at their hotel where they were staying at. After the guy visits them and leave, they find out from the police that he was a criminal, who came to their place right after he killed somebody and grabbed some money. The speaker expresses despise to their thoughtless deed.

(6)

- 035 soshitara kita wake.  
then come-PAST SE  
*and then, they came.*
- 036 de, sonotoki wa nani mo okoranai te iuka,  
and at that time TOP nothing happen:NEG:NP QT FIL  
*and at that time, nothing happens, or*

037      maa nanigoto mo nakute      ne,  
             well nothing      happen:TE IT  
             *well, nothing happened, and*

The only occurrence of RU was on line 36: okoranai ('does not happen'). According to Takahashi (1992), negation denotes affective evaluation of the speaker; since it places the event (in this case, 'does not happen') background of the other event that may have occurred (in this case, 'something happened') (p.27). If we take this view, okoranai has an evaluative tone in it. However, this evaluative statement seems to be caused by the speaker's "relief" to the fact that nothing occurred, not by the significance of the event in the narrative as a whole. In other words, the occurrence of non-past form does not correspond to the point of the story. The climactic part of this story (according to my interpretation) comes towards the end, when the police comes to the girls' room and asks them about that guy. There are direct quotations, which show that the speaker is highlighting the events, followed by either TE form or TARA form (conditional), both of which have no tense. Thus, in this narrative, the observed RU form does not appear at the main part of the story; however, we cannot conclude that RU does not occur in the climax because the tense-neutral forms obscure the phenomena I intend to observe.

#### 3.2.4 Third person narrative (2)

Again, there was only one occurrence of RU in this narrative. The speaker elaborates on a Japanese teenager boy who was shot to death at a Halloween party during his stay in the United States as an exchange student. She explains about the boy and how such an incident happened in the narrative - The boy was invited to a Halloween party, but visits the wrong house wearing Elvis's costume; and probably because of some miscommunication between him and the owner of the house, he was shot to death by the owner. Observe the following excerpt in which RU form is used:

(7)  
 033      nanka atchikotchi      mawatta      n dakedo,  
             FIL      here and there      visit:PAST SE      but  
             *well, they went over to several other places, but*

034      “yappari kono uchi shikanai,”  
          after all this house only  
          *this is the only house after all,*

035      tte iu        wake yo.  
          QT say:NP SE IT  
          *he mentions like that.*

One instance of RU in this entire narrative is with the verb *iu* (‘to say’) following direct quotation (line 35). This is when the two boys, after trying several other houses, come back to the first house they visited since one of the boys judged this is the only possible place. This may be one of the main points of the narrative; however, there are events that are more significant in the story but highlighted by other devices, and thus I was not able to observe the relationship between the inner feelings of the narrator and the use of RU.

In sum, in the third-person narratives I have observed in the current study, the occurrence of RU forms which denote the speaker’s emotional involvement to the climax of the narrative was very rare. However, I cannot draw any conclusion from this concerning the distribution of tense forms, because of the frequent use of tense-neutral forms at the main points of the narrative in the particular data used in this study.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Transitivity and the use of nonpast forms

In the previous sections I have shown that in most cases the RU forms express internal evaluation of the speaker, since the forms appeared in the climactic or most striking and memorable scene of the whole narrative. However, if we take a closer look at all the RU forms in my data, we find a common characteristic among all the predicates: They are all lower in transitivity except for the verbs that accompany direct quote.

#### *a) Verbs after direct quote*

(3)  
147      toka kiku    kara,  
          QT ask:NP so,  
          *'cause he/she asks,*

(4)

031 tte iu wake, kanojo.  
QT say:NP SE she  
*she says.*

(7)

035 tte iu wake yo.  
QT say:NP SE IT  
*he mentions like that.*

b) Negative predicates

(5)

039 sorede, dankotoshite hikanai wake yo.  
and decisively yield:NEG:NP SE IT  
*and she does not yield.*

(6)

036 de, sontoki wa nani mo okaranai te iuka,  
and at that time TOP nothing happen:NEG:NP QT FIL  
*and at that time, nothing happens, or*

c) Copula (stative predicate)

(1)

026 juusee na no yo, sore ga.  
shooting COP:NP IT IT that NOM  
*that is shooting!*

d) Plural subject/Aspectual marker (process)

(2)

048 koo, wara wara wara wara kuru wake yo, kaimonokyaku ga  
come:NP SE IT shopping customers NOM

*all the customers come, being afraid of what's going on.*

kowagatte      nee?

to be afraid:TE IT

050      soko   ni   minna   koo   hайтеiku      no yo.

there GL everyone FIL enter:TE-go:NP SE IT

*everyone goes into that place.*

As in b), two of the instances are negative predicates. Iwasaki (1988) states that negative predicates tend to co-occur with non-past forms because they are lower in transitivity. This is also consistent with Reid's (1977) French data, where imperfectives tend to take negative forms. c) is actually a stative predicate, which also places itself on the lower degree of transitivity scale. The verbs in d) are lower in transitivity as well, since :1) the verb *kuru* ('to come') in line 48 has plural subject ('all the customers'), and therefore the action depicted by the speaker is more like a process and not a unitary event; and 2) the verb *hайтеiku* ('to enter towards that way') in line 50 takes TE-IKU form which is one of aspectual markers in Japanese that describes the process, in this case, of people entering the room.

What this characterization of the predicates with RU implies is that the use of RU may not have been triggered by the impact of the event to the speaker, but should be explained by the notion of transitivity: That elements that are lower in transitivity (negative predicates, plural subjects, process) co-occur with the imperfective or non-past form RU. Schiffrin (1981) also states that the use of historical present is in some cases caused by the co-occurrence of verbs with the progressive form. Since progressives are lower in transitivity, the same suggestion may apply: The form itself may trigger the use of present form, not the intention of the speaker. However, we must be careful in drawing conclusions, since we may have to take into consideration the TE forms. In some situation, the predicates that occurred with TE-forms have the possibility to be expressed in RU forms. Thus, although it is hard to draw generalization due to the use of TE forms, as far as the observable data are concerned, most of the non-past forms in my data may be explained by the degree of transitivity of the predicates. This does not disconfirm the possibility that RU is associated with the speaker's point of the story; however, it may weaken the association.

#### 4.2 Firstperson vs. thirdperson narrative

Takahashi (1992) claims that the speaker of a third-person narrative can be involved in the



story as one does in first-person narrative, since it is logically possible for the narrator to take the role of the participant in the story, if he/she chooses to. However, according to the current data, there is a tendency that RU is less likely to occur when one is reporting a second-hand information, in spite of the strong impact on the narrator and emotional involvement into the story. Thus, the data suggests that it is easier for the narrator to use RU in first-person narratives since the reported event is his/her own experience or what they actually saw, which is more likely to be perceived as an on-going process and thus result in imperfective form. Because of the limited data and the use of TE forms, this is a mere speculation, however, it would be an interesting hypothesis to pursue.

#### 4.3 The function of TE forms in narratives

The frequent use of TE forms in complicating actions obscure any generalization concerning the function of tense markers. We should not ignore the TE forms and discuss the results without any consideration of them, since in many cases clause chaining occurs in dramatic sequence of events, which may translate into historical present in English. Thus, thorough investigations of the function of TE forms in narratives are necessary in order to conduct a more reliable analysis of tense form variation in Japanese narratives and to draw firm generalization.

### 5. Conclusion

To summarize, the current data show that in first-person narratives, RU forms express internal evaluation of the speaker, since the forms appear in the climactic or most striking and memorable scene. In the third-person narratives, however, RU forms do not co-occur with the climax of the narrative, thus the relationship between the use of RU forms and the emotional involvement of the speaker is not clear. However, I am not able to draw any conclusion from this concerning the distribution of tense forms due to the frequent use of tense-neutral forms at the climax of the story. Thus, as far as the observable data is concerned, the results suggest that the non-past forms in Japanese oral narratives are qualitatively similar to historical present in English—RU forms function as an internal evaluation device, adding vivid impression to the reported event. This is consistent with Takahashi's (1996) findings. Furthermore, as is also pointed out by Takahashi (1996), if this is the case, we may speculate that the mechanism underlying the tense switch in narratives is more or less universal among different languages.

Finally, I would have to point out the crucial weak point in this type of study that I have conducted: The subjectivity involved in the judgment and the analysis of the text, which cannot be prevented. However, as long as a narrative or any spoken discourse is controlled by certain intentions or state of consciousness of the speaker, the forms being used in the utterances cannot be explained solely by some external examination of its effect (as in Szatrowski 1985a, 1985b). I consider this type of analysis still valid for the understanding of the functions of tense forms. Speaker's introspection on the narration as well as the event, which I used in part of my analysis, may add validity to the arguments in these types of studies.

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#### Notes

1. There has been a long controversy among linguists over whether verbal inflections RU and TA are tense markers or aspectual markers. I will not refer to the details of the debate since it is beyond the scope of this study. Following Takahashi (1992: p.4), I will treat RU and TA as tense markers (non-past and past respectively) in this paper, although I do not exclude the possibility that they could be interpreted as aspectual markers as well depending on the linguistic context in which they occur.

2. Tense in TE-forms is encoded in the sentence-final verb of the sequence. However, the final verb can also take TE-form. See Ono (1988) for its function within a discourse.

3. The following is the list of abbreviations used in the transcripts.

|      |                             |
|------|-----------------------------|
| TOP  | topic                       |
| NOM  | nominative                  |
| ACC  | accusative                  |
| GEN  | genitive                    |
| LOC  | locative                    |
| GL   | goal                        |
| COP  | copula                      |
| QT   | quotative                   |
| IT   | interactional particle      |
| SE   | sentence extension          |
| FIL  | filler                      |
| NEG  | negative                    |
| PROG | progressive                 |
| TARA | tara-connective/conditional |
| TE   | te-gerundive form           |
| TEN  | tentative form              |
| NP   | non-past                    |
| PAST | past                        |

4. However, the frequency of clause-chaining may depend on the formality of the situation in which the narrative took place. I speculate that it was frequent in the current data because the narratives were part of casual, natural conversation between close friends. Thus, such tendency may not apply to narratives that

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were elicited or that were part of conversation between strangers.

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