Japanese Noun Clauses: Functions and Historical Changes

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ABSTRACT

An embedded sentence that expresses the content of an utterance or perception in nominal form may be referred to as a content clause. Content clauses in modern Japanese are grouped morphologically into those that deploy koto as the head noun (koto clauses) and those that deploy no as the head noun (no clauses). Many similarities and differences between these two types of noun clauses have been identified, mainly from the perspective of their combinations with verbs, but here I give particular attention to the fact that koto clauses can be subjects of predicates indicating existence (aru) and non-existence (nai) while no clauses cannot. In this paper, I argue that this distinction arises from differences in part of speech and semantic type between no and koto clauses. Specifically, I claim that koto clauses are Determiner Phrases that can be bound with quantifiers whereas no clauses are Complementizer Phrases that cannot be bound with quantifiers. Viewing historical linguistic materials from this perspective, one can identify the following characteristics.

1. Examples of koto clauses appearing as subjects of existential predicates can be found consistently throughout the historical corpus. This means that the syntactic and semantic characteristics of the koto clause have remained unchanged throughout the history of the Japanese language.

2. On the other hand, no clauses appear as content clauses in the corpus from the 16th century onward, but before then one finds Headless Relative Clauses (HRC) and, before the 8th century, ku clauses. Based on the absence of examples of the HRC and ku clauses appearing as subjects of existential predicates, it can be hypothesized that these clauses possessed the same characteristics as the modern Japanese no clause and were similarly distinguished from the koto clause.

This analysis not only provides a unified morphological, syntactic, and semantic account of Japanese content clauses, but also promises new analyses of the many historical changes originating in these clauses.