

A NOTE ON NONSENTENTIALS IN JAPANESE*

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1. Introduction

This squib is concerned with the syntax of so-called ‘nonsententials,’ by which I refer to utterances smaller than a complete sentence. (1) and (2) below, cited from Merchant (2004: 661) and Barton and Progovac (2005: 881), respectively, illustrate nonsententials in English.

(1) [Abby and Ben are at a party. Abby asks Ben about who their mutual friend Beth is bringing as a date by uttering: “Who is Beth bringing?” Ben answers:]
Alex.

(2) Q: What does John do all summer?

A: Play baseball.

At least on the surface, the answers in (1)-(2) (*Alex* and *play baseball*) are obviously smaller than full sentences.

The syntax of nonsententials has been hotly debated so far, the persisting controversy in the literature being (3).

(3) Are nonsententials derived from sentential syntactic structures?

Researchers who advocate the ‘ellipsis approach’ to nonsententials reply to the question (3) by saying ‘yes.’ Representative work incorporating this approach include Morgan (1973), Stanley (2000), Merchant (2004) and Ludlow (2005), just to mention a few. By contrast, those who countenance the ‘base-generation approach’ (also commonly referred to as the ‘direct interpretation approach’) to nonsententials answer the question, to varying degrees, in the negative. This line of analysis has been endorsed by scholars including but not limited to Barton (1991), Barton and Progovac (2005), and Stainton (2006).

Against this backdrop regarding (3), in this squib I suggest the core insight behind the base-generation approach should be sustained, by examining nonsententials in Japanese. After quickly going over the nuts and bolts of the two major analyses of nonsentential speech in Section 2, in Section 3 I demonstrate that nonsententials in Japanese involving the

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demonstrative *kono* ‘this’ strongly indicate the unavailability of any possible sentential sources. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. Ellipsis and/or Base-generation?

Let us first succinctly review the ellipsis approach to nonsententials by taking up Merchant’s (2004) analysis, which seems to be the most explicit and sophisticated one. He proposes that the nonsentential in (1) above originally has the sentential syntactic structure, to which ellipsis applies to produce the surface nonsentential speech. To be more precise, he argues that the nonsentential in (1) is derived by movement followed by ellipsis, as schematically shown in (4); *Alex* first moves to the specifier of FP placed above TP, and then phonological reduction applies to TP.

(4) [_{FP} Alex_i [_{TP} ~~Beth is bringing t_i~~]].

The ellipsis approach represented by Merchant successfully accounts for various kinds of connectivity effects that nonsententials exhibit. The data in (5)-(8) below (taken from Merchant 2004: 679-680), show that R-expression, pronouns and anaphors in the nonsententials behave in the same way as those in the sentential counterparts with respect to Binding Conditions.

(5) Where is he_i staying?

- a. *In John_i’s apartment.
- b. *He_i is staying in John_i’s apartment.

(6) Who did John_i try to shave?

- a. *Him_i.
- b. *John_i tried to shave him_i.

(7) Who does John like?

- a. Himself.
- b. John likes himself.

(8) Who does John think Sue will invite?

- a. ??Himself.
- b. ??John thinks Sue will invite himself.

These patterns are readily predicted if nonsententials, despite their superficial appearances, covertly have sentential syntactic structures. The reader is referred to Merchant (2004) for

other important connectivity effects found in nonsententials including case-matching and quantifier scope.

According to the base-generation approach, on the other hand, nonsententials look structurally small precisely because the grammar generates no more structure than meets the eye. To take a concrete example, Barton and Progovac (2005) argue that the nonsentential in (2) above is categorially a VP, as shown in (9), with no further structure built by the grammar. In short, Barton and Progovac (and others similarly putting forth the analysis of this sort as well) maintain that nonsententials are base-generated constituents, which obtain without getting embedded inside larger structures (i.e., sentences).

(9) [_{VP} play [_{DP} baseball]]

One piece of evidence for the base-generation approach comes from the fact that nonsentential speech may appear discourse-initially. (10)-(11) below are cited from Stainton (2006), and (12) is from Merchant (2004).

(10) [A father was worried that his daughter was going to spill her chocolate milk. The glass was very full, and she was quite young, and prone to accidents. He said:]
Both hands!

(11) [Said to the cab driver as his passenger enters the car:]
To Segovia.

(12) [Abby and Ben are at a party. Abby sees an unfamiliar man with Beth, a mutual friend of theirs, and turns to Ben with a puzzled look on her face. Ben says:]
Some guy she met at the park.

Significantly, the nonsentential utterances in these examples occur out of the blue; they can be felicitously uttered without any obvious antecedent. Adopting the general assumption that ellipsis requires linguistic antecedents (Hankamer and Sag 1976), Stainton concludes that these nonsententials cannot be reasonably assimilated to ellipsis phenomena, but they are base-generated constituents.¹

¹ Being aware of the existence of well-formed antecedentless nonsententials, Merchant (2004) invokes what he dubs ‘limited ellipsis,’ which exceptionally allows for phonological reduction of a limited set of expressions without the help of linguistic antecedents. According to Merchant, the nonsentential in (12) has the following underlying structure:

(i) [_{FP} some guy she met at the park_i [_{TP} he’s t_i]]

He maintains that the limited ellipsis strategy applies to TP in (i), stating that “[t]he linguistic form of the deleted material need not be present in the discourse: an entity or action brought to perceptual salience is enough” (Merchant 2004: 724). Merchant thus concludes that his own example (12) does not undermine the overall validity of the ellipsis approach he pursues. Stainton (2006) adduces the examples (10)-(11) in an attempt to object to the limited ellipsis strategy Merchant proposes; see Stainton (2006: 108ff) for details.

The crucial aspect of the base-generation analysis is that the grammar is, the proponents maintain, permitted to generate structures below sentential level such as DP, VP and PP. Within the framework of government and binding theory, Barton (1991) proposes the following generalization to ensure that constituents smaller than sentences are generable on their own.

- (13) X^{\max} Generalization:
The initial node of a generative grammar is X^{\max} .

The X^{\max} generalization (13) is a radical departure from the classical assumption that the grammar generates sentences (S/CP) but nothing else. In the same spirit, Barton and Progovac (2005) and Fortin (2007), within the Minimalist Program, claim that the grammar generates not only sentences but also ‘convergent’ XPs below sentential level. Note in passing that the nontrivial amendment to the grammar that these scholars engage in would not be necessitated if all cases of nonsententials are to be analyzed as covertly sentential, a conservative stance taken by Ludlow (2005).

As one might have already noticed, the two distinct analyses we have briefly reviewed are not in principle mutually exclusive, though it might be desirable, in view of parsimony, for either one to trump the other as a ‘unified’ analysis of the syntax of nonsentential utterances. In fact, some researchers put forward the ‘hybrid approach,’ whereby some nonsententials are derived via phonological reduction but others are base-generated. See Morgan (1989), Barton (1998) and Fortin (2007) for this line of approach; see also Stainton (2006) and Merchant (2010), where the possibility that the grammar is equipped with more than one way to generate nonsententials is alluded to.

Before moving on to the next section to look at nonsententials in Japanese, one caveat is in order here. As I have mentioned in the introduction, what I primarily aim to do in this paper is to defend the idea that nonsententials are not necessarily derived from sentential syntactic structures; I attempt to merely suggest that the ellipsis approach in its strongest form, according to which possibly all cases of nonsentential speech are covertly sentential (Ludlow 2005), is difficult to maintain. In the remainder of the paper, I therefore do not discuss whether there are cases of nonsententials that can be derived solely by ellipsis, though I believe there are.

3. Nonsententials in Japanese: *Kono N* and the Evaluative Interpretation

In this section, I discuss nonsententials in Japanese with the demonstrative *kono* ‘this’, focusing on some peculiarity which those of the form [*kono* N] exhibit. But before investigating complicated cases in which the peculiarity shows up, let us first see less complicated cases of *kono N* nonsententials.

Consider the following scenario:

- (14) Hanako, a personnel manager, made a list of candidates for layoff, in which four employees are included, and described by Hanako briefly but caustically. Yasu, Taro, Yoshi and Shin are described as *inakamono* ‘rustic,’ *tinpira* ‘hoodlum,’ *kosinuke* ‘coward,’ and *osyaberi* ‘blabbermouth,’ respectively. Yesterday, she finally decided who to fire, and handed the list to Ziro, her secretary, telling him that the list is confidential. Now, Hanako and Ziro are at a party.

With this in mind, suppose that Ziro and Hanako hold the dialogue in (15). Here, Hanako’s nonsentential utterance *kono osyaberi* ‘this blabbermouth’ can be naturally understood as an answer to Ziro’s question, conveying the meaning in (16). To put it differently, the nonsentential serves as a ‘short answer’ to the question.

- (15) Ziro: [Showing Hanako the list secretly, Ziro utters in a whisper:]

Dare-ga kubini narimasu ka?
 who-NOM fired become Q

‘Who will be fired?’

- Hanako: [Pointing to Shin in the list:]

Kono osyaberi.
 this blabbermouth

‘This blabbermouth.’

- (16) Kono osyaberi-ga kubini naru.
 this blabbermouth-NOM fired become

‘This blabbermouth will be fired.’

The syntax of short answers in Japanese has been vigorously studied; see Nishigauchi (1990), Saito (2004), Nishigauchi and Fujii (2006), and referenced cited therein. Saito (2004: 43), for example, convincingly proposes that the short answer (18) to the question (17) may take the form in (19), where the empty pronoun *pro* stands in the subject position.

- (17) Kimi-wa [NP [TP dono sensei-kara moratta] tegami]-o nakusita
 you-TOP which teacher-from received letter-ACC lost
 no desu ka?
 that is Q

‘(lit.) You lost the letter that you received from which teacher?’

- (18) H-sensei desu.
 -Prof. is

‘It is Prof. H.’

(19) [_{TP} *pro* H-sensei desu]

Saito's analysis is based on his observation that the full answer with the overt pronominal subject *sore* 'it' in (20) sounds completely fine.

(20) Sore-wa H-sensei desu.
it-TOP -Prof. is

'It is Prof. H.'

Hanako's nonsentential utterance in (15) is amenable to the same analysis. It could be argued that the nonsentential underlyingly has the sentential structure in (21a), and concomitant copula drop in (21b) gives rise to the surface form of the nonsentential.

(21) a. [_{TP} *pro* kono osyaberi da]
this blabbermouth is

b. [_{TP} *pro* kono osyaberi ~~da~~]

This cannot be the whole story, however. Let us turn to more complicated cases of *kono N* nonsententials. Consider the scenario in (14) above again, and suppose that Hanako utters the nonsentential speech as in (22):

(22) [Being unaware of Hanako's presence right behind him, Ziro carelessly starts to tell his company how relentlessly Hanako describes the candidates in the list. Hearing him let out the contents of the confidential list, Hanako walks over to Ziro and says to him with frustration:]

Kono osyaberi!
this blabbermouth

'You blabbermouth!'

In this case, the nonsentential is antecedentless, occurring discourse-initially. What is of particular interest to us here is that Hanako's utterance is interpreted as her evaluation of the addressee (Ziro) as being a blabbermouth, as indicated by the translation. Likewise, if Hanako says *kono tinpira!* '(lit.) this hoodlum!' in the same context as in (22), the utterance conveys Hanako's evaluation of Ziro as being a hoodlum. The peculiarity of *kono N* nonsententials can be stated in (23), which, to the best of my knowledge, has eluded attention (or has been grossly neglected) in the literature.

(23) Discourse-initial nonsententials of the form [*kono N*] convey the speaker's evaluation of the addressee as being N.

It is worth noting at this point that the evaluative interpretation like the one found in (22) does not arise if the form [*kono N*] occurs inside a sentence, no matter where the position is.

The examples in (24)-(26), for instance, do not express the speaker's evaluation of the addressee as being a blabbermouth.

- (24) Sore-wa [kono osyaberi] da.
it-TOP this blabbermouth is

'It is this blabbermouth.'

- (25) [Kono osyaberi]-ga kubini naru.
this blabbermouth-NOM fired become

'This blabbermouth will be fired.'

- (26) [Kono osyaberi]-o damaraseru no-wa muzukasii.
this blabbermouth shut.up that-TOP difficult

'It is tough to shut this blabbermouth up.'

The presence or absence of the evaluative interpretation we are interested in can be confirmed by checking whether the continuation in (27) leads to pragmatic anomaly or not; whereas (24)-(26) may be felicitously followed by (27), (22) absolutely cannot. If Hanako utters the nonsentential in (22) and then goes on to say (27), the result would be egregiously anomalous.

- (27) Tinamini, kimi-ga osyaberi da to-wa omotteinai.
by.the.way you-NOM blabbermouth is that-TOP think.not

'I don't think you are a blabbermouth, by the way.'

Now, an empirical challenge to the ellipsis analysis that *kono N* nonsententials pose is this: why does the evaluative interpretation obtain in (22)? We know from (24)-(26) that the form [*kono N*], when embedded inside sentences, does not support the evaluative interpretation. This being so, if the nonsentential in (22) covertly has a sentential structure (whatever it exactly is) in which *kono osyaberi* 'this blabbermouth' originates, then it would be wrongly predicted that the evaluative interpretation is absent in (22) precisely because its putative sentential source lacks that interpretation. The peculiarity of discourse-initial nonsententials described in (23) thus seems to indicate that not all cases of nonsententials are full sentences in disguise, contrary to Ludlow's (2005) conjecture.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this squib, I attempted to defend the view that (some) nonsententials can be derived without ellipsis operating on fully sentential structures, on the basis of the evaluative interpretation that discourse-initial nonsententials yield. Due to the limited scope of the paper, many important issues are left untouched; most of all, although I mentioned that the facts about the evaluative interpretation are not predicted under the ellipsis approach, I have been unable to discuss if (and how) the base-generation approach can handle them. A more

detailed study of the syntax of nonsententials in Japanese (and other languages, of course) awaits another occasion.

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