

Mono as an Agent-obfuscating Device in Japanese Discourse

Nina Azumi Yoshida

University of California, Los Angeles

1. Introduction

As a bare noun, the *keisiki meisi* ('formal noun') *mono* roughly means 'thing(s)' and can reference tangible objects as well as abstract concepts, as seen in (1) and (2) below:

- (1) いろいろなモノを買った。
'(I) bought various things'
- (2) 日本人は、はっきりモノを言わない。
'Japanese people do not say things/state (their) opinions clearly.'

It also occurs in the *monoda* construction, which compositionally consists of a clause in the *rentaikēi*/'attributive' form +*mono* +the copula *da*. Past studies (e.g., Teramura 1981, Agetsuma 1991, Tsubone 1994, Fujii 2000) have noted the *monoda* construction's pragmatic effects of conveying a wide range of speaker modality (both deontic and epistemic) or emotive affect, such as reminiscences, conviction toward a natural truth, deep-seated desires, amazement, indirect commands, etc., as illustrated in examples (3) – (7):

- (3) 犬は吠えるモノだ。
'Dogs naturally bark./It's expected that dogs bark.'
- (4) 昔は、よくこの公園で遊んだモノだ。
'Back then, (I) sure used to play at this park alot'
- (5) こんな豪邸に一度は住んでみたいモノだ。
'If just once, I sure would want to live in a mansion like this.'
- (6) よくやったモノだ。
'How well (you) did!'/ 'It's amazing (you) did so well.'
- (7) 人には余り迷惑をかけないモノだ。
'(You) shouldn't cause people too much trouble.'

Mono also occurs in such clausal-connective constructions as *mononara*, *monodakara*, and *monono*, as shown in (8) and (9). Moreover, *mono* (and its contracted form *mon*) functions as an utterance-final particle to mark for the speaker's subjective attitudes of self-justification, an example of which is provided in (10):

- (8) 出来るモノなら、やってみるがいい。
'If (you) could even do (it), just (you) try..'
- (9) まだ小さかったモノだから、よく覚えていません。
'(I) was still young, so (I) don't remember (it) well.'
- (10) おれ、ピーマン食べない。だって、嫌いだモン。
'(I) won't eat the bell pepper. Because, (I) hate (them).'

2. Analysis

This study presents a unitary account of the discourse modal functions of *mono* in Modern Japanese. It does so by proposing that *mono*'s semantics primarily signals a "physically

perceived”, and by token of this notion, an “unrationalized” existence (i.e., one that is to be directly sensed, without the aid or use of one’s mind and its rationalizing powers) when this nominal takes on a referential¹ reading. A continuity is claimed to exist in the meanings born by *mono* in each of its different modal uses, where it takes on a non-referential² reading, and that these represent extensions (e.g., existence = truth/ obligation, unrationalized = non-identifiable/ inexplicable/ uncontrollable) inferable by metaphorical means (e.g., SPACE > TIME, PHYSICAL > SOCIAL) of *mono*’s underlying semantics that arise when this element occurs in certain constructions that have become grammaticalized (Hopper and Traugott 1993) in Japanese. It is moreover hypothesized that the obfuscation of the agent, and thus, of their control and responsibility over the event/situation named by the *mono*-marked proposition, underlie and motivate the employment of such *mono* constructions in discourse.

3. Conclusion

As noted by Ikegami (1991), a key characteristic of the Japanese language is its preference for grammatical patterns that suppress or obfuscate (individual) human agency (e.g., passives, honorifics, subject-ellipsis, etc.) This tendency is claimed to be a linguistic manifestation of Japan’s collectivistic behavioral and cultural norms (Yamamoto 2006). The present study examines the grammatical and interactional functions of *mono* in discourse as being yet another phenomenon in the Japanese language that is reflective of this cultural proclivity, citing tokens from authentic discourse data (e.g. telephone conversations, broadcast interviews and news reports, Internet blogs, newspaper articles, etc.) in illustration and support of these claims.

- 1 “Referential” means that *mono* is functioning in such instances as a nominal with a referent—i.e., the referential object of the wa-marked topic NP--and thus is acting much like a head noun within such nominalized predicate constructions.
- 2 In contrast, “non-referential” means that *mono* has mostly lost its nominal status as the head noun and referential object of the wa-marked topic NP, bearing only a grammaticalized modal meaning.

References

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List of Technical Terms

- Agent: The semantic role borne by an NP perceived as the conscious instigator of an action.
- Deontic Modality: The area of mood concerned with permission, obligation and prohibition.
- Epistemic Modality: The area of mood concerned with knowledge and belief, such as possibility, probability, and certainty (as perceived by the speaker).
- Grammaticalization: According to Hopper and Traugott (1993), it is the process of language change “whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions, and, once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions”. (p. xv)