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A gap in the interpretation of embedded tense in Japanese

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This snippet investigates the interpretation of embedded tense in Japanese. We point out that there is one environment in which the tense of an embedded (relative) clause must be interpreted relative to the utterance time and cannot be evaluated with respect to matrix event time, while in all other environments both interpretations are available.

Tense in relative clauses in Japanese generally permits two interpretations (Ogihara 1996, Kusumoto 1999, among others). The *matrix relative* interpretation temporally orders the event time of relative clause (henceforth TE) in relation to the event time of the matrix clause (TM). The *utterance relative* interpretation orders TE in relation to the utterance time (TU). Consider examples (1) and (2):

(1)   [Hasit-tei-ru   hito]-ni   hanas-u.   (TU=TE<TM or TU<TE=TM)
        Run-progressive-pres   person-Dat   talk-non.past
        Utterance relative: 'I'll talk to the person who is running (at the time of uttering
          the whole sentence).'
        Matrix relative: 'I'll talk to the person who is running (at the time of talking).'

(2)   [(kinoo/asita)   Hasit-ta hito]-ni   (raisyuu)   hanas-u.
        (yesterday/tomorrow)   Run-past person-Dat   (next week)   talk-non.past
                                                       (TU<TE<TM or TE<TU<TM)
        Utterance relative: 'Next week I'll talk to the person who ran (yesterday).'
        Matrix relative: 'Next week I'll talk to the person who will run (tomorrow).'

As we see in (1) and (2), then, Japanese seems to generally allow both matrix relative and utterance relative readings.

Example (3), however, allows only an utterance relative interpretation. Consider the following scenario: I've decided to talk to someone tomorrow, but I don't know who to talk to at this point. If I see anybody running by tomorrow, that's who I'll talk to. In this scenario, (3) is infelicitous. On the other hand, (3) is felicitous in the following scenario: I saw a person who was running yesterday and I've now decided to talk to him tomorrow. That is, this construction allows only utterance relative interpretation of the embedded tense.

(3)   [Hasi-tte-ita   hito]-ni   hanas-u.
       run-prog-past   person-Dat   talk-non.past
       <u>Utterance relative</u>: 'I'll talk to the person who was running.'
       *<u>Matrix relative</u>: 'I'll talk to the person who will be running.'

In (3) the tense in the relative clause is past progressive and the matrix tense is non-past. (3) contrasts minimally with (1) where the embedded tense is present progressive and with (2) where the embedded tense is non-progressive past .

That the reading in which TE is evaluated relative to TM is missing can be confirmed in (4), where the insertion of a temporal adverbial *asita* 'tomorrow' causes a mismatch in tense interpretations.

(4)   *[Asita   hasi-tte-ita   hito]-ni   hanas-u.
       Tomorrow   run-prog-past   person-Dat   talk-pres

        We have shown that though Japanese generally allows both matrix relative and utterance relative readings, when past progressive is embedded in non-past, only utterance relative interpretation is possible. The question, then, is: Why is the utterance relative interpretation forced?

<u>References</u>
Kusumoto, Kiyomi (1999) *Tense in Embedded Contexts*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
Toshiyuki, Ogihara (1996) *Tense, Attitudes, and Scope*, Dordrecht, Kluwer.