

# Time of Evaluation for Definite Descriptions in Japanese

## In Relation to the Lack of Covert Raising in Japanese

Byron Ahn

### 0 The Issue at Hand

In this paper, I will be exploring the possible denotations of definite descriptions in Japanese. Specifically, I will be looking at the possible interpretations of definite descriptions in relation to the tense of the verb in Japanese. That is, does the Japanese equivalent of the following sentence parallel the ambiguity in English example?

- (0) Barbara spanked the president.
  - (i) In the past, Barbara spanked the person who was the president at that past time.
  - (ii) In the past, Barbara spanked the person who is the president at the time of utterance.

Whether we find that Japanese has this kind of ambiguity or not, we will obtain a theoretically important result. That is to say, if we do not find this ambiguity in Japanese, we would have evidence that a raising approach should be the cross-linguistic cause of the ambiguity of the time of interpretation – as it would seem that Japanese’s lacking of covert raising in general (which I will discuss more throughout this paper) should be culpable for the facts. If we do find this ambiguity, it would suggest that we should find a non-movement solution (such as time variables) to account for the the facts.

### 1 Introduction

Standard Tokyo-dialect Japanese is known to have only “rigid scope” readings available in unscrambled (SVO) word-order utterances, as has been attested by Kuno 1973 and Hoji 1985 (among others).<sup>1,2</sup> Data to this effect can be seen in (1).

- (1) Daremo ga dareka o aisiteiru  
**everyone** NOM **someone** ACC **is-loving**  
“Everyone loves someone”
  - (i) ✓ everyone >> someone
  - (ii) \* someone >> everyone

In order to make available an inverse scope reading, one must scramble the object in the overt syntax, as in (2).

---

<sup>1</sup>Other dialects Japanese are said to have the inverse scope reading as possible, but only with a change in the pitch accent.

<sup>2</sup>There are other times (though they are few) at which inverse scope readings seem to be possible in Japanese. However, these data seem to be insensitive to islands, thus suggesting to a non-raising analysis (which of course supports the idea that I aim to prove – that Japanese lacks a covert raising operation). Nakanishi’s (2001) suggests these can be dealt with by a Choice Function.

- (2) Dareka o, daremo ga aisiteiru  
**someone** ACC, **everyone** NOM **is-loving**  
 “Someone – everyone loves.”
- (i) ✓ everyone >> someone  
 (ii) ✓ someone >> everyone (Nakanishi 2001)

This seems to suggest that Japanese does not allow for covert raising to occur (at least Quantifier Raising is not possible or able to cause an inverse scope reading).

## 2 Sloppy vs Strict Identity Readings in Japanese

Japanese also has an ambiguity between strict and sloppy readings in a similar way to English, as we can see below in (3).<sup>3</sup>

- (3) a. John wa [jibun no tegami o] suteta.  
**John** TOP [**self** GEN **letter** ACC] **discarded**.  
 ‘John threw away self’s letters...’
- b. Mary mo [ ] suteta.  
**Mary also discarded**.  
 (i) = ‘Mary threw away John’s letters too.’  
 (ii) = ‘Mary threw away self’s letters too.’ (Otani and Whitman 1991)

Assuming that sloppy readings are derived by some covert movement, as ‘Bill’ and ‘John’ do in (4), it seems like there might be some covert raising in Japanese based on the data in (3).

- (4) SLOPPY READING (as derived by covert raising)  
 John<sub>1</sub> [t<sub>1</sub> loves the he mother], and Bill<sub>1</sub> [~~t<sub>1</sub> loves the he mother~~] too.

However, let us now look at the data in (5).

- (5) a. [Jibun<sub>i</sub> no hatake no ninjin ga] Makuguregaa ojisan<sub>i</sub> no daikoubutu  
 [**self** GEN **garden** GEN **carrot** NOM] **McGregor Mr.** GEN **big-favorite**  
 desita.  
**was**.  
 ‘The carrots from self<sub>i</sub>’s garden were Mr. McGregor<sub>i</sub>’s big favorite.’
- b. Piitaa mo [ ] daisuki desita.  
**Peter also very-fond was**.  
 (i) = ‘Peter was also very fond of the carrots from Mr. McGregor’s garden.’  
 (ii) ≠ ‘Peter<sub>j</sub> was also very fond of the carrots from self<sub>j</sub>’s garden.’ (Otani and Whitman 1991)

Based on this data whereby reading (ii) in (5) is unavailable, it seems that covertly raising the subjects would be insufficient. If covert raising were operative in Japanese sloppy readings, we shouldn’t encounter any problem getting reading (ii) above. It seems, then, that we have found even more evidence that Japanese does not have a covert raising operation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Although it seems the V is not elided, I will assume that that does not matter for the purposes of this paper. I will comment more on this later in footnote 4.

<sup>4</sup>Otani and Whitman end up opting for a verb raising analysis. However, I don’t believe this affects the argument against covert raising in Japanese, as this verb raising should be able to take place in the overt syntax.

### 3 Temporal Interpretation of Definites

#### 3.1 Definite DPs

Let's take a look at the possible readings of a Japanese sentence with a definite DP (one that is sufficiently similar to (0), above).

- (6) (1988 ni) Mary ga souridaijin o kissu shita  
**(1988 in) Mary** NOM **prime-minister** ACC **kiss did**  
 “(In 1988,) Mary kissed the prime minister”

- (i) ✓ In the past, Mary kissed the person who was prime minister at that past time.  
 (ii) ✓ In the past, Mary kissed the person who is prime minister in the current time.

(6i) is uncontroversially good, and it is what we would expect, no matter what. However, in (6ii), we find that the definite DP **can be evaluated at the current time**, even though the past tense morpheme (at least seems to) scopes over it. Japanese definite DPs do in fact have the ability to be evaluated with respect to a different time (that is, one that is different from the one which is given by the tense that c-commands it).

This kind of reading whereby the definite description is evaluated at a distinct time can also be found with definite descriptions that are buried within an island. Data to this effect with an *if* island can be seen below in (7).<sup>5</sup>

- (7) (2003 ni) souridaijin to a.eba, Mary ga kissu shita  
**(2003 in) prime-minister with meet.COND, Mary** NOM **kiss did**  
 “Had she met the prime minister (in 2003), Mary would have kissed him”

- (i) ?/✓ In 2003, Mary found Koizumi (p.m. in 2003) attractive. Had she met Koizumi then, she would have kissed him.  
 (ii) ✓ Mary was single up through 2003. She currently finds Abe (current p.m.) attractive. Had Mary met Abe back when she was single, she would have kissed him.

This kind of data would be impossible to account for under an analysis that depends on raising to achieve different temporal interpretations. This also lends further support to the assertion that Japanese lacks covert raising.

#### 3.2 Definite Quantified Phrases

Moreover, it should be noted that the QPs, too, can be interpreted distinctly from the c-commanding time operator. In fact, as we see below in (8), it would be impossible to interpret the QP as being evaluated at either the c-commanding tense or at the time of utterance.

- (8) subete no toubousha ga ima kouchisho ni irerareteiru  
**all GEN fugitive NOM now jail LOC is-placed**  
 ‘Every fugitive is now in jail.’

As the sentence is grammatical and possibly true, we can only interpret *toubousha* (‘fugitive’) in the past, as the sentence could never be true if *toubousha* were only interpretable at the current

---

<sup>5</sup>It seems that reading (ii) is preferred. However, this maybe be due to some complicating factor such as world variables, context or pragmatics. I believe that, if given the correct circumstances, a Japanese speaker would accept reading (ii) as available and natural.

time. Thus it seems to be that we have a certain degree of freedom in determining the time at which we interpret a definite description.

## 4 Ideas

Given the data that we have seen with respect to (i) the fact Japanese DPs and QPs can be interpreted at a unique time and with respect to (ii) that Japanese seems to lack a covert raising operation, we need to assume a theory for temporal interpretation of definites that does not involve raising (specifically covert raising, as this kind of movement would not be reflected in the overt syntax). Perhaps we can assume a theory whereby an (possibly unpronounced) time operator can be adjoined to definite description.

However, this kind of a solution is not without problems. We should want to constrain this operator to only allow the definite DP to be evaluated at certain times (but not any other random time). After looking at (6) and (7), it seems as if we should want to restrict the possible times of interpretations on the DP to either the c-commanding temporal operator (tense) or to the time of utterance. If this were the case, we should wonder what will happen if there were multiple c-commanding tenses? Would all of them be available as times of interpretation for the definite description?

However, it seems that even this solution is unsatisfactory. If we look back at (8), we notice that ‘fugitive’ is not being interpreted at either the time of utterance or the c-commanding tense (which happen to refer to ‘now’); ‘fugitive’ is being interpreted at some past time. If it were interpreted at ‘now’, the sentence would never be true, as a fugitive, by its very definition, cannot be in jail.

What does constrain the time of interpretation of the definite description? That is, if we can interpret a definite description at a previously unmentioned time (as in (8)), what is stopping us from interpreting it at some other time, such as a random future moment?

## 5 Further Research

Most importantly, we need to further investigate the possible temporal interpretations of definites in Japanese. That is, can we find examples of a definite description being interpreted at other times that are not referenced by the discourse or context? If we do find other times, does there seem to be any pattern? That is, we might expect to find a word/context that might imply a future interpretation in a similar way that ‘fugitive’ and ‘in jail’ forces a past interpretation.<sup>6,7</sup>

Moreover, we should test examples that have more than one c-commanding tense, and see if all of those tenses are acceptable interpretations for the definite description.

Also, we should return to (7) and see if we can’t get reading (i) as acceptable. Perhaps, for example, using a more salient context that would falsify reading (ii) could force reading (i).

## 6 Conclusion

Overall, the picture is clear enough to show that a raising analysis cannot account for the facts of temporal interpretation in Japanese. Furthermore, this paper also seems to suggest that Japanese does not have a covert raising operation. In the weakest form of this statement, at least some of

---

<sup>6</sup>This issue also arises with any time variable system; it is not restricted to just this Japanese data.

<sup>7</sup>A similar problem also arises with analyzing pronouns using variables. It is distinctly possible that the pragmatics will govern over the possible interpretations of variables in both of these cases (temporal and individual).

what is generally achieved through covert raising (e.g., scope inversion, sloppy readings) are not possible operations in Japanese.

## References

- HOJI, H. 1985. Logical form constraints and configurational structures in Japanese. University of Washington dissertation.
- KUNO, S. 1973. The structure of the Japanese language. MIT Press Cambridge, Mass.
- NAKANISHI, K. 2001. Indefinites and Frozen Scope in Japanese: Restriction on QR and Choice Functions. Proceedings of WCCFL 20.456–469.
- OTANI, K., and J. WHITMAN. 1991. V-raising and VP-ellipsis. Linguistic Inquiry 22.345–358.