

# The Existence of Empty Relative Operators in Japanese

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## Abstract

It has widely been claimed in the literature, especially in the field of Japanese linguistics, that Japanese shares with other major languages in that it possesses relative constructions, but unlike English and many other languages, it lacks relative pronouns. However, I will claim in this work that Japanese also has a relative pronoun, the one we also find in English, i.e., an empty non-lexical operator.

Key words: relative construction, relative pronoun, operator, non-lexical

## 1 Introduction

Many researchers studying Japanese believe that although Japanese has relative constructions, it lacks relative pronouns. Thus, they believe relative sentences like (1) below have the structure as in (2).

(1) Kore-ga kabe-ni shoutotsushita kurunma desu.

This is the car that hit the wall.

(2) Kore-ga [kabe-ni shoutotsushita] kurunma desu.

This wall hit car is

This is the car that hit the wall.

However, I will claim in this paper that there is also a relative pronoun in Japanese but it is always non-lexical. Thus, in my view, the structure for (1) will rather be as in (3).

(3) Kore-ga [OP kabe-ni shoutotsushita] kurunma desu.

This wall hit car is

This is the car that hit the wall.

•OP = a non-lexical empty relative pronoun

## 2 Relative Sentences in Japanese

It is often claimed that Japanese does have relative

constructions but does not make use of relative pronouns. Thus, the structure for such sentences as in (1) above is thought to be as in (2).

(1) Kore-ga kabe-ni shoutotsushita kurunma desu.

This is the car that hit the wall.

(2) Kore-ga [kabe-ni shoutotsushita] kurunma desu.

This wall hit car is

This is the car that hit the wall.

But, as you may have noticed, this structure seems to be a little bit strange as it lacks a subject in the relative clause marked with [ ] in (2). At least in a tensed clause, a subject is always required, and this is an essential part of the Extended Projection Principle of Chomsky(1982). The structure in (2), therefore, seems to be problematic as the structure for (1).

## 3 *pro-drop* Languages

Japanese is a language that can delete subjects and objects if certain conditions are met. Thus, in Japanese the sentences in (4) and (5) are as good as those in (6) and (7) with an overt subject or object.

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- (4) Soko-ni iku deshou. (without an overt subject)  
 There-to go will  
 I will go there.
- (5) Answer to the question; Did he buy the car there?  
 Kare-ha soko-de kattayo.(without an overt object)  
 He there-at bought  
 He bought it there.
- (6) Watashi-ha soko-ni iku deshou. (with an overt subject)  
 I there-to go will  
 I will go there.
- (7) Answer to the question; Did he buy the car there?  
 Kare-ha soko-de sore-wo kattayo. (with an overt object)  
 He there-at it bought  
 He bought it there.

What needs to be re-emphasized here is that not only (4) and (5), without an overt subject or object, but also (6) and (7), with an overt subject or object, are acceptable in Japanese.

In order to produce such sentences as (4) and (5) in Japanese and some other languages without violating the Extended Projection Principle, it has been proposed that in such languages, often referred to as *pro*-drop languages, empty subjects and objects(=*pro*) can be present instead of overt ones. If this proposal is on the right track, the sentences in (4) and (5) would rather have the structures in (8), where *pro* shows this empty subject/object. ;

- (8) a. *pro* soko-ni iku deshou. = (4)  
 there-to go will  
 I will go there.
- b. Answer to the question; Did he buy the car there?  
 Kare-ha soko-de *pro* kattayo. = (5)  
 He there-at bought  
 He bought it there.

In this short section, we have seen that Japanese is one of the languages that allow non-lexical subjects and objects.

### 3 The Existence of Empty Relative Operators

In the previous section, we have seen that Japanese can make use of non-lexical subjects and objects(=*pro*). If this is true, we might think that (9) would be the structure for such sentences as (1), repeated here solely for the convenience of the readers.

- (1) Kore-ga kabeni shoutotsushita kurunma desu.  
 This is the car that hit the wall.
- (9) Kore-ga [*pro* kabe-ni shoutotsushita] kurunma desu.  
 This wall hit car is  
 This is the car that hit the wall.

Although (9) seems to be the right structure for (1), it is still too early to make a final decision. That is because we also need to take into account the fact that in *pro*-drop languages, sentences with and without a lexical subject/object are interchangeable. In other words, as we have seen above, all the sentences in (4) through (7) are equally acceptable in these languages.

- (4) Soko-ni iku deshou..  
 There-to go will  
 I will go there.
- (5) Answer to the question; Did he buy the car there?  
 Kare-ha soko-de kattayo.  
 He there-at bought  
 He bought it there.
- (6) Watashi-ha soko-ni iku deshou.  
 I there-to go will  
 I will go there.

(7) Answer to the question; Did he buy the car there?

Kare-ha soko-de sore-wo kattayo.

He there-at it bought

He bought it there.

If a relative clause involved *pro* as in (9), we would naturally expect that a relative clause with an overt subject should also be equally acceptable, which is not the case as you can see from the ungrammaticality of (10) below.

(10) \*Kore-ga [kuruma-ga kabe-ni shoutotsushita]

kurunma desu.

This car wall hit

car is

This is the car that hit the wall.

If the subject of the relative clause were to be *pro*, we would wrongly expect that an overt version of this subject as in (10) would also be acceptable.

Here I will propose that (1) actually has the structure in (11), where OP is a nonlexical relative pronoun

(11) Korega [OP kabe-ni shoutotsushita] kurunma-desu.

This wall hit car is

This is the car that hit the wall.

In (11), the subject position of the relative clause is already filled by an empty relative pronoun OP. As the subject position is occupied, it can never be filled by another item as in (10) above.

Such non-lexical empty relative operators are widely found in English as well. Consider the following sentences in (12).

(12) a. This is the book which he wrote.

b. This is the house I live in.

c. This is the park I met him first.

These sentences are supposed to have the structures in (13), where empty relative operators are involved.

(13) a. This is the book

OP he wrote t.

b. This is the house

OP I live in t.

c. This is the park

OP I met him first t.

The writer believes the same type of operator is involved in (11).

#### 4 Conclusion

Up until now, it has widely been assumed that Japanese does not have a relative pronoun, but in this paper I have presented evidence to prove that this is not the right thing to say. I have here proposed instead that an empty relative operator is at work in Japanese relative sentences, just as in sentences without an overt relative pronoun/adverbial in English. This means English and Japanese are common in that both use the same type of a relative pronoun, i.e., an empty relative operator (OP), although relative pronouns can also be overt in English but not in Japanese.

#### References

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