

ON THE SO-CALLED RA-DELETION IN JAPANESE
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The so-called *ra-nuki kotoba* (*ra*-deleted language) refers to a morphological change in progress in Japanese verbal forms with the meaning «potential.» This phenomenon, a reduction of the «potential» suffix *rare* to *re*, has been an object of wide prescriptive debate in Japan arguing whether or not the *ra*-deleted forms are part of «correct grammar.» In contrast to the prescriptive approaches, I examine the phenomenon in purely descriptive, structural domains, and argue that the change is best accounted for in terms of «*re*-extension,» rather than «*ra*-deletion.» An explanatory power of the scientific, structural approaches is ultimately argued for.

Keywords: *ra-nuki* (*ra*-deletion), prescriptive vs. descriptive accounts, the «potential» suffix *rare*, *re*-extension.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper draws attention to a morphological change set forth about some decades ago and currently in progress in Japanese spoken in the Tokyo area, often referred to as the standard Japanese. The change is so called *ra-nuki* (*ra*-deletion) since it involves a reduction of the «potential» suffix *rare* to *re*, apparently via *ra*-deletion. In contrast to prescriptive approaches that have been predominant in the domestic debate on the language change, I provide an analysis in purely descriptive domains and show how synchronic evidence bears diachronic traces. I argue in particular that the change is best characterized as *re*-extension rather than *ra*-deletion and discuss directions of the change in the entire paradigm of the «potential» suffix.

2. RA-DELETION PHENOMENA AND PRESCRIPTIVE APPROACHES

A focus of attention is the morphological change in progress in Japanese verbal forms with the meaning «potential» (hereafter glossed as PT), as illustrated in (1).

(1) *tabe-rare/mi-rare/sinzi-rare* > *tabe-re/mi-re/sinzi-re*
 eat-PT/see-PT/believe-PT

The input form of «V-*rare*» is part of the «standard» grammar, whereas the output form of «V-*re*» is the quickly spreading innovative one used by younger generations, teens and twenties in particular. Both forms «V-*rare*» and «V-*re*» coexist in contemporary Japanese as verbs conveying the meaning «potential.» In this change the morpheme *rare* is reduced to *re*, apparently via deletion of *ra*. This phenomenon is thus called *ra-nuki* (*ra*-deletion), which has

been an object of wide prescriptive debate throughout Japan. The two positions of the debate are: (i) the *ra*-deleted forms are viewed as «incorrect grammar» and should be avoided, at least in formal settings (Japan Cultural Agency 1995 and others), and (ii) the change cannot be stopped, regardless of the prescription against it, because the phenomenon is modeled on a deletion set forth in the Edo Era (150-400 years ago) and already fairly well-established in the class of such verbs as in (2) (Ohno 1995 and others).

(2) *yom-are/kak-are/hanas-are* > *yom-e/kak-e/hanas-e*
 read-PT/write-PT/talk-PT

The reduced output form of «V-e» in (2) has been well-accepted and assimilated in Japanese grammar forming an independent class of verbs with the meaning «potential.» The non-reduced input form of «V-are» may still carry the same semantic function but far more rarely than «V-rare» given in (1). The second position of the debate seems to be appealing to the notion akin to «analogy»; however, the claim is only intuitive since what is apparently deleted in (2) is *ar* and *ra*-deletion is not transparent. In other words, there is no real analysis presented as to how the two sets of phenomena in (1) and (2) are analogically related. In fact, the term «*ra*-deletion» is used to refer exclusively to the morphological reduction observed in a class of verbs illustrated in (1) and the reduction in (2) is not identified as «*ra*-deletion» in the debate. These debates add very little to the description of the morphological change.

3. STRUCTURAL APPROACHES

3.1 *Contexts for Ra-Deletion*

A structural approach undertaken in the present paper naturally treats the input suffix *are* in (2) as an allomorph of *rare*, giving the underlying representation for (2) as in (3). Here, «*ra*-deletion» appears transparent.

(3) *yom-(r)are/kak-(r)are/hanas-(r)are* > *yom-(r)e/kak-(r)e/hanas-(r)e*

The parentheses indicate a phonologically null, covert sound. This is due to a general phonological property of Japanese that requires removal of an initial consonant of a suffix when attached to consonant-ending (c-final) verb stems (e.g. the case in (3)). When a suffix is attached to vowel-ending (v-final) verb stems, its initial consonant remains intact (e.g. the case in (1)). This difference is further illustrated in (4) by another suffixation of the causative morpheme *sase* and the present tense carrier *ru*.

(4)a. Retention of the initial consonant of a suffix following v-final verbs:
tabe-sase/mi-sase/sinzi-sase; *tabe-ru/mi-ru/sinzi-ru*
 b. Removal of the initial consonant of a suffix following c-final verbs:
yom-(s)ase/kak-(s)ase/hanas-(s)ase; *yom-(r)u/kak-(r)u/hanas-(r)u*

Retention or removal of the initial consonant is to maintain the Japanese surface mora structure formulated in (5), which excludes double consonants occurring in adjacent positions, except a geminate (5e).

(5) The surface mora structures in Japanese (cf. Katada 1989)

Each mora consists of either one of the following:

- a. a consonant (including a glide) + a vowel (CV)
- b. a consonant + a high glide + a vowel (CyV)
- c. a single vowel (V)
- d. a single (moraic) nasal (N)
- e. a (moraic) obstruent in a geminate construction
(C₁ followed by C₂V where C₁ = C₂)

The morphological contrasts in (4), including «v-final vs. c-final» verb stems and «retention vs. removal» of the initial consonant of a suffix, are not part of the conception adopted by the traditional Japanese grammatical framework or the prescriptive debate mentioned earlier. In the present analysis, however, these contrastive conceptions play a key role for the description of «*ra*-deletion.»

In short, the so-called «*ra*-deletion» is apparently a phenomenon which appeared in the c-final verb class before the v-final verb class. Thus, it should be correct to say that the currently ongoing morphological change in (1) is by analogy of the same change in (3) that has been almost completed.

Regardless of whether or not the «*ra*-deletion» is the best characterization of the change is an independent issue and will be examined in the next section.

3.2 *Ra*-Deletion or Re-extension?

Problems with *Ra*-Deletion Analysis

There are some noteworthy facts to be explained surrounding «*ra*-deletion» phenomena. Semantically, the underlying suffix *rare* is basically four ways ambiguous: potential (kanou), ingenerate (jihatsu), passive (ukemi), and honorific (sonkei). (The terms with parentheses around are the equivalents properly used by the Japanese grammarians.) In contrast, the reduced suffix *re* is clearly unambiguous having only the meaning «potential.» This semantic, as well as morphological, reduction illustrated in (6) leaves the «*ra*-deletion» analysis with some issues left unexplained.

(6) rare [potential, ingenerate, passive, honorific] > re [potential]

Questions that immediately arise from the reduction in (6) are:

(7)a. Why should ra be the one to be deleted?
b. Why should only «potential» be distinctively separated?

There have been no explicit answers given to these questions. In the course of the prescriptive debate mentioned earlier, the only speculation given concerning (7a) is phonetic: namely «in order to avoid the repetition of *r*-sound.» This speculation, however, does not explain the necessity of deleting *ra*, since in order to achieve the same purpose, the deletion of *re* is another alternative. More crucially, such a phonetic reason cannot be a motivation for «*ra*-deletion» because if it were, the pronunciation of *rare* with the other three meanings should have been equally affected. This is not the case in fact. *Rare* reducing to *re* is a meaning-dependent phenomenon and therefore it is unlikely to be a simple phonetic change, unless one can come up with a possible reason why *rare* tends to avoid *r*-repetition only when it denotes the meaning «potential.» Such a meaning-dependent phonetic reason is difficult to come by conceptually; it is also refuted empirically, given some counterexamples that are easy to obtain.

For example, the forms in (8) have more *r*-sounds than any of the verbs in (1), yet for some reason undergoes neither *ra*-deletion nor *re*-deletion, as indicated by (*) denoting an impossible/ungrammatical form.

(8)a. *nogare-rare-ru* > **nogare-re-ru*/**nogare-ra-ru* ‘escape-PT-pres’
 b. *kakure-rare-ru* > **kakure-re-ru*/**kakure-ra-ru* ‘hide-PT-pres’

Concerning question (7b), some people claimed that, among the four meanings of *rare* (see (6)), the use for «potential» is most frequent, and this would be the motivation for separating the meaning by encoding it in a form distinct from *rare*, namely in the form *re* (Jyuu 1995 and others). However, this does not explain the necessity of *ra*-deletion, since here again *re*-deletion is another alternative. More importantly, the argument may proceed in just the reverse. The most frequently used semantic function «potential» should not be the one to be evacuated from *rare*. Instead if the separation is necessary, the other less frequently used functions should be the ones to be reempted or fade away from *rare*. It is rather strange if a form first loses its strongest identity, that is, the most frequently used semantic function.

In short, the «*ra*-deletion» approach does not provide a convincing description of the ongoing leveling of the verbal form under the present discussion. This claim should be especially true when more explanatory approaches are provided.

Re-Extension Analysis: More Explanatory Analogical Force

Instead of deriving *re* from *rare* via *ra*-deletion, my analysis claims the following:

(9)a. the suffix *re* exists with the meaning «potential» independently of *rare*,
 b. the suffix *re* has been adopted by the c-final verb class, and
 c. the suffix *re* is now in process of being analogically adopted by the v-final verb class.

In other words, the change is better accounted for in terms of «*re*-extension» rather than «*ra*-deletion.» «*Re*-extension» is a type of analogy forming a regular paradigm out of the verbal forms with the meaning «potential.»

Explicit evidence for claim (9a), which will be given below, forms a central part of my analysis. If (9a) is proven, then (9b and c) naturally follow from the facts discussed in section 2.

In support of the claim in (9a), I note the existence of another set, the third type, of verb stems with the suffix *e*, such as in (10), which evince a two-way ambiguity between «potential» and «ingenerate»—that is, volitional potentiality and nonvolitional potentiality.

(10) *or-e/war-e/tur-e/ur-e/yak-e/sak-e* [potential, ingenerate]
break/crack/?be-fished/sell/burn/split

These verbs with *e*, among other suffixes, have been treated as forming a well-established independent verb class and have never been referred to as having any relation to «*ra*-deletion.» In my analysis, however, the behavior of this set of verbs plays a crucial role, and we first need to define a natural class for the verbs distinguished from those in (3).

Defining the third type of verb class

The verb stems in (10) and those in (3) are both c-final and there is no formal morphological clue that would distinguish between the two. However, there are some semantic and syntactic features characteristic to the stems in (10). One such feature is that the stem form «V» in (10) is always transitive and the suffixation of *e* seems to transform the transitivity into intransitive;

that is, the verbs of the form «V-*e*» are always intransitive. Traditionally the forms «V-*e*» and «V» are viewed as forming *jidooshi* (intransitive)/*tadooshi* (transitive) verb pairs, and these pairs fall under one type of inchoative/causative verb pairs. Examples including those in (10) are given in (11).

(11)a. V-*e* [inchoative (intransitive)]

or-e/war-e/tur-e/ur-e/yak-e/sak-e/tok-e/nuk-e/tor-e/kir-e
 break/crack/?be-fished/sell/burn/split/be-solved/come-off/come-off/cut

b. V [causative (transitive)]

or/war/tur/ur/yak/sak/tok/nuk/tor/kir
 break/crack/fished/sell/burn/split/solve/pull-out/take/cut

There are five morphological strategies to express inchoative/causative verb alternations (cf. Haspelmath 1993), and among these five given in (12), the «V-*e*/V» pairs in (11) belong to case (12b), where the anticausative strategy is used, via suffixation of *e*.

(12) Inchoative/Causative verb alternations:

- a. causative: causatives are derived from inchoatives
 (e.g. *susum/susum-e* ‘advance/advance’; *nak/nak-as* ‘cry/cry’),
- b. anticausative: inchoatives are derived from causatives
 (e.g. *or-e/or* ‘break/break’ (see (11)); *sas-ar/sas* ‘stick/stick’),
- c. equipollent: both are derived from the same root by means of different suffixes (e.g. *ok-i/ok-os* ‘wake/wake’; *tom-ar/tom-e* ‘stop/stop’; *sam-e/sam-as* ‘cool/cool’),
- d. suppletive: different verb roots are used (e.g. *sin/koros* ‘die/kill’),
- e. labile: the same verb is used for both (e.g. *hirak/hirak* ‘open/open’).

The inchoative counterparts all convey the subtle meaning of «ingenerate,» but among them it is only the ones of the form «V-*e*» formed by using the anticausative strategy (12b) which simultaneously convey the meaning «potential» (for details, see Katada in preparation). This is coincidental but significant evidence on which the present analysis will rely.

Another characteristic of the verb stems in (10), though subsidiary in nature, is that the suffixation of *rare*, exemplified in (13), displays only a two-way ambiguity between «passive» and «honorific.» This is contrastive with a basic four-way ambiguity of *rare* (cf. (6)) observed in (1) and (3).

(13) *or-(r)are/war-(r)are/tur-(r)are/ur-(r)are/yak-(r)are/sak-(r)are* [passive, honorific]

It seems that the semantic functions shared by *e* and *rare* in this class are non-overlapping, complementary, as summarized in (14).

(14) *e* [potential/ingenerate/*passive/*honorific]
rare [*potential/*ingenerate/passive/honorific]

The above mentioned characteristics are not shared with the verbs in (3) and should be sufficient to identify the verbs falling under the list in (10).

Analysis

As mentioned earlier, in the traditional grammatical framework of Japanese, the form «V-*e*» in (10/11) is taken as a coherent unit forming a well-established independent verb class. Thus, it is not surprising that the internal morphological structure of «V-*e*» has never been referred to as derivational having any relation to «*ra*-deletion» and that the complementarily shared semantic

functions of *e* and *rare* (cf. (14)) have never been of linguists' significant interest. This fact is sufficient to reasonably assume that in the contemporary state of Japanese grammar, *e* exists as a suffix independent of *rare*, and this assumption is preliminary for further analysis.

I claim that the underlying representation for (10) is either as in (15a), with *re* conveying the meaning «potential,» or alternatively, as in (15b), with *e* conveying the meaning «ingenerate,» each being an independent suffix.

(15)a. *re* [potential]

or-(r)e/war-(r)e/tur-(r)e/ur-(r)e/yak-(r)e/sak-(r)e

b. *e* [ingenerate]

or-e/war-e/tur-e/ur-e/yak-e/sak-e

The suffixes *re* and *e* should be underlyingly distinct from each other in both form and function but they appear to be identical in a superficial form as in (10). This is due to the general process in the language (4b), deleting the initial consonant *r* of *re* in (15a) since the stem is c-final. This process does not apply to (15b) since the suffixation of the vowel *e* to the c-final stem does not require any operation to satisfy one of the surface mora structures given in (5).

Evidence for the analysis in (15) should be drawn from the v-final verb class since as explained in (4a), the initial consonant of a suffix is not deleted and thus the suffixes *re* and *e* should appear overtly distinct. This expectation is in fact born out. As exemplified in (16), there are such forms as *mi-re* and *mi-e*, each conveying a distinctive meaning, «potential (PT)» and «ingenerate (IG),» respectively—that is, volitional potentiality vs. nonvolitional potentiality.

(16)a. Fujisan-ga mi-re-ta.

Mt.Fuji-nom see-PT-past

'I was able to see Mt. Fuji.'

b. Fujisan-ga mi-e-ta.

Mt.Fuji-nom see-IG-past

'Mt. Fuji appeared in my sight.'

The verb *mi-re* is in the «*ra*-deleted» form, whereas *mi-e* is an established form. The fact that the *mi-re/mi-e* pair patterns in meaning with the «V-(r)e/V-e» pair in (15) is suggestive to the origin of the «*ra*-deleted» form in that it is identical to the established suffix *re* identified in (15a). It is also worth noting that *mi-rare*, though basically four ways ambiguous (cf. (6)), seems to have lost the meaning «ingenerate,» which was taken over totally by the established form *mi-e*. This is consistent with a general reemptying phenomenon of language which will be referred to in section 4.

Given that analysis (15) is correct, it is reasonable to claim (9a); that is, the «potential» suffix *re*, as well as the «ingenerate» suffix *e*, exists as a lexical entry independent of *rare* in contemporary Japanese. It is consistent with this claim that *rare* conveys non-redundant semantic functions complementary to those of *re* and *e* (cf. (14/15)). Claims (9b and c) follow from (9a) in that the suffix *re* has been extended first to another c-final verb class given in (3) and this analogical force is extended to the v-final verb class given in (1).

One might naturally wonder if we may go further back in history to the point in which the suffix *rare* conveyed all four meanings as well for the third type of verbs given in (10/11) and *re* and *e* were gradually introduced. This possibility is conceivable, but even if such a historical state is discovered, it does not argue for the «*ra*-deletion» analysis, since it raises the same sort of questions raised in (7).

In short, the present analysis has argued that the suffix *re* does not derive from *rare* via *ra*-deletion. The apparent «*ra*-deletion» phenomenon should now be characterized in more explanatory terms of «*re*-extension,» which has eventually accounted for some issues raised from the morphological change.

4. SUMMARY AND PREDICTION

As evidenced by three different verb classes, three distinct, though perhaps continuing, stages of «*re*-extension» need to be identified. I refer to the three verb classes as V1, V2 and V3, introduced in the reverse order of this paper, (10), (3) and (1), respectively. The panorama of the suffixal system conveying the meaning «potential» in contemporary Japanese is schematized in Table 1.

Table 1
Suffixes conveying the meaning «potential»

<i>re</i>	<i>rare</i>	examples
V1(c-final)	yes (estbl.)	no tur-(r)e/*tur-(r)are
V2(c-final)	yes	yes (rare) yom-(r)e/?*yom-(r)are
V3(v-final)	yes (in progress)	yes ??tabe-re/tabe-rare

First, there exists a well-established form of the suffix *re* in V1. In this class *rare* never carries the same semantic function «potential,» denoted by (*) imposed on the example. Second, *re* has been analogically adopted by V2 and it is now fairly well-established. As mentioned earlier in section 2, *rare* in this class still carries the meaning «potential» but far more rarely than the one in V3, as denoted by (?) on the example. It seems that as *re* has obtained its stable status in grammar, *rare* with the same semantic function has become inertia. This is a reemptying phenomenon which conforms to a general tendency of language change. Finally, *re* is currently in the process of being analogically extended to V3. Since the adoption of *re* by this class is rather new, the «*ra*-deleted» forms may sound agrammatical, as denoted by (?), and the conservative form *rare* continues to be perceived as the correct form for the meaning «potential.» However, since it is very likely to conform to the inner dynamism of the systematic restructuring in the language, the prediction is that the change will continue and *rare* gradually lose its meaning «potential,» at some future time as is the case with V2.

The analysis utilizing «analogy» as a creative force in language offers further prediction. The paradigm to be predicted is given in Table 2, which shows that the suffix *re* takes over a functional role of *rare* entirely, as far as the meaning «potential» is concerned.

Table 2
Predicted paradigm for suffixes with the meaning «potential»

<i>re</i>	<i>rare</i>	examples
V1(c-final)	yes	no tur-(r)e/*tur-(r)are
V2(c-final)	yes	no yom-(r)e/*yom-(r)are
V3(v-final)	yes	no tabe-re/*tabe-rare

5. CONCLUSION

The «*re-extension*» analysis argued for in this paper is based on synchronically available evidence. «*Re-extension*» is an instance of analogical force which is part of how language works, hence a part of synchronic linguistics. Analogy, however, gives the results that must be studied as part of diachronic linguistics (cf. Gordon 1996, Saussure 1986). Specifically, the predicted paradigm in Table 2 is the result we obtained from the synchronic analysis. Whether this paradigm is correct and how long it would take to reach this state are empirical and diachronic issues in nature that must be examined as time proceeds. These issues are thus necessarily left open to some future generations. One remaining question is the order of the verb classes to which «*re-extension*» has proceeded: Why should the v-final verb class be the most conservative one to adopt *re*? I also leave this issue open for future research, hoping that it possibly offers some insight in the nature of agglutination.

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