

Designed ‘to be’ or ‘not to be’ complete?

The status of the *-te* form in Japanese syntax for conversation

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Abstract

According to the conversation analytic model of turn taking, the essential element for turn organization is the recognition of a turn at talk as being possibly complete – at possible completions speaker change becomes a relevant next action. This paper will examine a corpus of naturally occurring Japanese language conversations collected from 20 recordings of casual conversations between 50 native speakers of Japanese recorded in Tokyo in 2007. It will argue that the *-te* form is an incomplete turn construction unit (TCU), but that it is designed to be incomplete and that there are action motivations for such a design. The incompleteness of *-te* forms is therefore not a problem of turn construction but an interactionally relevant.

1. Introduction

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (henceforth SSJ) argue that speaker change legitimately occurs after points of possible completion. SSJ (1974) claim that interlocutors anticipate the end of a TCU and that this anticipated ending is the place where speaker change could occur, that is a transition-relevance place (henceforth TRP) (Liddicoat 2004). Because of syntactic, intonational, and pragmatic focus of a possible completion, SSJ (1974) imply that possible completion is a focus for the organisation or construction of a turn, but the TRP has more focus on the accountability for speaker change rather than formation of a turn. SSJ (1974: 706) argue that speaker changes can occur at a TRP, which is the ‘possible’ completion point of a turn construction unit (TCU), but such points may or may not be an actual completion (Sacks 1992: 144). SSJ identify three possible ways that a turn at talk may be complete: complete syntactic unit (word, phrase, sentence); complete intonation contour (rise, fall); a recognizable complete action. Schegloff (1995) argues that conversation is always a form of action and that analysis needs to consider what interactants achieve through the talk. SSJ (1974:703) argue that participants in a conversation orient to possible completion as being the interactionally relevant point for speaker change to occur (706) as the following extract shows:

(1) SSJ (1974: 721)¹

→a Penny: An’ the fact is I- is I jus’ thought it was so kind of stupid

→b [I didn’ even say anything [when I came ho:me.

→c Janet: [Y- [Eh-

(0.3)

Janet: Well the park cha:nged much,

As indicated in →a, Penny’s utterance is syntactically and pragmatically completed at the end of the utterance ‘kind of stupid’, which also works as a completed action, in this case a telling. This point is not however the actual syntactic completion of her talk, which continues

on to a further possible completion at →b. As seen in →c, Janet tries to initiate a speaker change at the location of a first and second possible completion. Janet's attempts at speaker change at a possible completion support SSJ's and Sacks' arguments that possible completion is a point in talk at which speaker change could be a relevant next activity.

The idea that speaker change occurs at a possible completion has posed a problem for analyzing Japanese interaction, especially where speaker change occurs after *-te* forms. In grammar, the *-te* form is a conjugation form at the end of verbs, adjectives, and adverbs which projects a continuation of a clause, phrase, or word after the form and functions as a conjunction. Since the main syntactic function of the *-te* form is to connect two words, phrases, or clauses, the *-te* form projects further talk, and the utterance ending with the *-te* form cannot be considered a TCU syntactically. However, speaker change is, in fact, common after *-te* forms. It creates a paradox in conversation that A's utterance is syntactically incomplete without a following clause or sentence, but a speaker change by B occurs. Moreover, these syntactically possibly incomplete utterances do not often create problems at speaker changes. For example, my data show speaker change commonly occurs after *-te* forms with minimal gap or overlap, and speaker change in this position is routinely not treated as problematic.

Some researchers (Hasegawa 1996, Himeno 1983, Oishi & Matsumoto 1998, Saegusa 2006, Satō N 1996, Watanabe 1990) have agreed that TCUs ending with the *-te* forms are a feature of speaker's turn design or intention: that turns ending in the *-te* form are designed not to be complete. However, the problem is that none of these researchers have provided the evidence to answer the question of how recipients know when such turns are designed to be incomplete and when the *-te* form projects further talk. Since these analysts adopt a context-independent approach without considering how context, especially sequential position, influences utterances with the *-te* form, a new methodology will be needed to fully analyze the phenomenon of a sentence ending in the *-te* form. In this paper, I will analyze whether a sentence ending in the *-te* form is designed to be or not to be complete, utilizing the methodology of conversation analysis.

2. The *-te* form projecting further talk

In conversational interaction, the main syntactic function of the *-te* form is to connect two words, phrases, or clauses. In such cases as discussed above, the *-te* form indicates that more talk is projected, as in Extract 2:

(2) Three Females I

1 P: ufufufu
laughter

→2 R: demo, fukisokuna noni, hosokute, zurui yo ne
but irregular despite slim-TE unfair SFP² SFP
But, ((you are)) slim and unfair despite ((eating)) irregularly

3 Q: un
O.K.

R conjugates *hosoi* (slim) as *hosoku te*, the *-te* form, to connect two adjectives, *hosoi* (slim) and *zurui* (unfair) as seen in Line 2. In interaction, from a purely sentence grammar perspective, the *-te* form seems to have a function of English ‘and’ to indicate that further talk is coming. R completes her talk without a break and proceeds through to the end of a sentential TCU before speaker change occurs. In Extract 2, the sentence grammar analysis of the *-te* form provides an adequate account of the usage of *-te* form in Japanese conversation.

The function of the *-te* form projecting further talk, provides a resource for participants to conduct collaborative completion (Lerner 1991, 1996) as follows:

(3) Three Males

- 1 M: ore wa sanju: ni nat [tara] hageten da yo
 I TOP 30 become when lose.hair DAT SFP
 I will lose my hair when I turn 30 ((years old))
- 2 N: [un]
 yeah
- 3 N: ja, chau, jibun o kiwame naito, iron na,
 well no self ACC educate must various
 Well, but ((we)) should educate ourselves have
- 4 iron na keiken o site:?=
 various experiences ACC have-TE
 have a lot of experiences, and...
- 5 O: =jibun migaki
 self polishing
 Polish [ourselves]
- 6 N: so:, so: jibun o, i, iba, iron na keiken o
 yes yes self ACC wel... various experience ACC
 Yes, yes, ourselves, many, lots of, have a lot of
- 7 shitete:? sore, sore o
 Have-TE them them ACC
 experiences, [with] them [the experiences]

Extract 3 is an example of three-part list completion (Jefferson 1990 and Schiffrin 1994). In Line 5, O’s latched turn adds an additional item to the list of reasons provided. N’s two-item list is constructed as an incomplete list for which further items are projected by the *-te* form at the end of the second item in Line 4. This projection of additional items provides a resource for O to supply an additional item, which is accepted by N as a valid inclusion in his previous incomplete list. O’s latching shows an orientation to the relevance of an additional list item within N’s turn so far – the latching is an early entry into speaker change designed to begin talk before N has begun his third list item. Extract 6 below provides further evidence to indicate that the *-te* form projects further talk and that conversation participants orient to the projected further talk as a relevant next action.

- 6 Q: he:: Asa gohan mo shikkari tabete te,
I see morning food also completely eat-TE CONT
I see. [So, you] have a complete breakfast
- 7 P: asa tabe nai
morning eat NEG
[I] do not eat in the morning
- 8 R: hehehehe
laughter
- 9 Q: asa wa
morning TOP
In the morning

This is a sequence in which Q and R are asking about P's life in a dormitory. After a discussion from Lines 1 to 5 about whether food is included in the dormitory plan, Q formulates an understanding of the upshot of P's talk in Line 6. At Line 7, P rejects Q's version of her story by explaining that she does not eat breakfast and instead produces a disagreement with the previous utterance. Some previous studies argue that Line 6 with the *-te* form is designed not to be complete. Saegusa (2006) argues that such turns are similar to the 'trail off' in Extract 4, or that it is an example of ellipsis, which she terms *iisashi* (speaker's intention to stop). However, unlike TCUs without endings, illustrated in Extract 4, there is no pause or overlap between Lines 6 and 7 in Extract 5, and there is no repair work treating the speaker change as problematic. Therefore, Extract 5 appears to be unproblematic in terms of turn-taking and speaker change even though it would seem to be incomplete in terms of syntax. It is unproblematic because the turn is treated as being over or actually complete in the ensuing talk even though it is not 'possibly complete' in terms of its syntax. Moreover, the response in Line 7 indicates that the previous utterance is being treated as being complete enough to warrant a response. Here, Q's utterance in Line 6 is constructed with the *-te* form and indicates further possible talk to come; however, P treats Q's utterance to be complete enough to be evaluated as an utterance and produces an assessment to achieve this – that is the action is complete enough to be assessed (Liddicoat 2007). P's talk at this point proposes that the utterance is complete after *tabete te* (is eating).

Another example of speaker change with no gaps after the *-te* form is as follows:

(6) Cafeteria

- 1 S: ginko:, ike ba i:noni
bank go why don't you
Why don't you go [to] a bank?
- 2 U: ginko: i(0.2) iku jikan ga, arimasen
bank go time TOP have-NEG
[I] do not have, have a time to go to a bank
- 3 S: a:=
O.K.

- 4 U: =ko, kore ni furikondette iwarete?
 this here to transfer money-TE say-TE
[I] was, was asked to transfer money to this [account]
- 5 S: a:, chotto wakan [nai]
 Well a bit know-NEG
Well, [I] do not know [how to do]
- 6 U: [waka]n nai yo ne:
 know-NEG SFP SFP
You don't know, right?
- 7 U: hayaku yaranaito ne:
 hurry must do SFP
[I] should hurry up and do [the transfer]

This is a sequence in which U is given advice about how to transfer money in response to repeated questions on U's part. U produces a further statement about what she needs to do at Line 4 which is constructed with a *-te* form. Again, unlike the TCUs without endings discussed in Extract 4, there is no pause between Lines 4 and 5. Therefore, in Extract 6 speaker change is also unproblematic as in Extract 5. Speaker change happens unproblematically, and there is no gap. In Extract 6, as in Extract 5, the speaker change happens at the point where the talk has become a recognized action in context, in this case a request for information or advice. In Line 5, the speaker produces a disclaimer that the next speaker can give the requested information, and this is produced at the first possible recognition point. U's next turn is treated as a relevant contribution to the talk, and it shows that S's contribution has achieved an ending to the sequence launched by U, even though it did not produce the information that U requested. On completion of a request for advice or information, supplying the advice or information is the relevant next action, and S's talk in Line 5 treats U's previous talk as a complete enough action to allow for the relevant next turn to be produced. This is another example of a main tellable developed step by step, but the complete action of topic talk allows for speaker change and allows the speaker of the topic talk to confirm the end of the sequence.

Extracts 5 and 6 illustrate instances of speaker change immediately following a *-te* form. Such speaker change would appear to be instances of early speaker change before a possible completion. However the examples are not treated as instances of problematic speaker change. That is, they are not repaired, as mistimed or misplaced speaker changes would be. In each case, speaker change occurs after the turn-so-far has become a recognizable conversational action and the next speaker's talk orients to the preceding talk as being complete in those terms. This analysis has shown that the *-te* form is treated by conversational participants as projecting further talk and, as such, these units of talk do not constitute possibly complete syntactic units. It has also shown that speaker change occurs after units ending with a *-te* form and that such speaker change is treated as unproblematic.

At the level of syntax alone this creates a paradox. However, by considering such turns in their sequential context, it can be seen that speakers orient not only to the grammatical form

of the talk but also to the conversational action currently under way. This means that conversational action provides a resource for organizing speaker change, and that Japanese interactants orient to action (that is, pragmatic possible completion) as a salient dimension of their turn-taking system, even where action and syntax do not align. This indicates that turns ending with a *-te* form are not so much designed to be incomplete as that the incompleteness of such turns is collaboratively achieved by participants. It is about conversational collaboration which orients to conversation action to be complete or not to be complete.

4. The pre-possible completion

The argument that speaker change after *-te* forms is achieved collaboratively is also supported by cases in which speaker change after the *-te* form occurs with overlapping talk.

(7) [Lounge]

- 1 x: a:, demo, omoshiroi no, nanka, uchira no
 well but funny well our
Well, but funny, well, [it] is written [that]
- 2 ke:tai shōsetsu kenasunda tara, omaera no
 mobile phone novel disgrace COP if your
if [you] disgrace our novel [written by] mobile phone,
- 3 ramome mo kenasu yo toka janru ga
 random story also disgrace P something genre NOM
[we will] make fun of your stories [on the Net] in a rather
- 4 borokusoni kaite [atte]
 harshly written-TE is-TE
harsh manner.
- 5 w: [aa], daijōbu, ramome mo kenashiteru kara
 well no worries random story also disgrace
[I] also make fun of their stories [on the Web]
- 6 x: [ahahahahahahahahahaha]
 laughter
- 7 w: [hahahahahahahahahahaha]
 laughter
- 8 x: sugoi ikigatteru kogyaru ga itaitashi:
 very harsh high school girls NOM painfully
But, [I] think [rather] painfully [pity for] high school
- 9 toka omounda kedo
 something think but
 girls, [who wrote the] very harsh [comment]

Here, x produces an extended turn telling about a harsh comment made on the Web. Lines 1 to 3 contain what the comment is about, which is the main tellable of the story. In Line 5, w produces a response to the story by giving a reaction to the comment. The main story element

of x's extended telling is constructed with the *-te* form *kaite* (write) which indicates further talk to come, and it is not designed to be complete because *atte* (is) follows. *Atte* here is an auxiliary verb showing resultative aspect and is also a *-te* form. However, the speaker change occurs immediately after *kaite*. It appears that verbs with a *-te* form may be treated as cases of speaker change at the point which Schegloff describes as pre-possible completion—that is at a point where a possible completion appears imminent. SSJ (1974: 706) argue that because of the participants' orientation to 'first starter gets the turn', speaker change does not always occur exactly at TRPs, but around TRPs as follows:

(8) SSJ (1974, p. 704)

Roger: They're wonder [ful.
 → Louise: [Hm-Now they're not even sure.

In English, a pitch peak often indicates the approaching end of a grammatical unit. Roger's pitch peak at 'won' potentially allows Louise to project an approaching possible completion and to initiate an utterance before the possible completion point, the word 'wonderful'. Schegloff (1996: 87) argues that this point, where a recipient can project an approaching possible completion, is called 'pre-possible completion', and a current speaker's technique such as 'the pitch peak' seen in Extract 8 is one resource which allows a recipient to initiate a speaker change at pre-possible completion without causing a problematic overlap of turns (Schegloff 1996). Early entry into a next turn has an action motivation—that is it displays aspects of how the previous turn is understood and accepted by the next speaker. Pre-possible completion is therefore a structural point around which early entry into the transition-space can be enacted. It could be argued that because the *-te* form is often used with no more than an auxiliary verb, as seen in *kaite atte* (is written) in Extract 7, that the *-te* form functions like an English pitch peak to project an imminent possible completion. This would be a valid conclusion if *-te* forms were treated as projecting only an auxiliary verb, and the turn would be possibly complete once that verb had been produced. Thus, talk at this point would be an early entry into speaker change, but not a problematically early entry. The problem with interpreting speaker change after the *-te* form as a pre-possible completion is that the auxiliary is only one possible projected next element, and it is not always possible to determine whether the *-te* form will lead to an auxiliary or not.

5. Conclusion

While some analyses have argued that turns with *-te* forms are designed to be incomplete, this analysis is difficult to sustain because there is no evidence for problems of turn-taking following *-te* forms. Speaker change after *-te* forms seems to be a form of early entry into speaker change, where the next speaker begins at a point where the talk-so-far becomes a recognizable action. This means that the incompleteness is not a matter of design by the speaker, but rather is achieved interactionally by the participants in the conversation. Such an analysis deals with the problem that turns constructed with a *-te* form may proceed beyond the *-te* form or may end after the *-te* form. As there is no grammatical or even interactional difference in the ways in which these turns appear to be constructed, participants have no resources to draw on to determine if a turn is designed to end at the *-te* form or not. Any account of speaker change after the *-te* form based only on the syntax of the turn-so-far

would not explicate how speakers were able to produce a well-timed speaker change at this point. Instead, the syntax needs to be seen within its interactional context, in which case, speaker change at this point appears to be a collaborative, locally managed activity, not simply the result of the intention of one of the speakers. When the speaker change occurs, it orients to the action in the previous talk being complete enough for speaker change to occur.

¹ See Appendix I for Transcription Conventions

² See Appendix II for Transcription Abbreviations

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Appendix I: Transcription conventions

(Based on Tanaka 1999)

<u>underline</u>	highlights parts produced in a louder or more emphatic tone than surrounding talk
[]	overlapped speech in contiguous lines
[two or more speakers begin simultaneously or a speaker overlays the talk of another speaker
]	overlapped speech ends
[.....]	overlap speech begins and ends
[]	one speaker stops and another starts up contiguously
(2.0)	the number indicates the length of a pause or silence measured in seconds
(.)	unmeasured micro-pause
()	transcriptionist doubt of what was said
(())	commentary by transcriptionist
↑	sharp increase in pitch
↓	sharp decrease in pitch
→	points out a phenomenon under scrutiny
=	latching or contiguous talk
:::	sound stretch cut-off
,	continuing intonation
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation

Appendix II: Abbreviations in transcripts

(Based on Tanaka 1999)

ACC	accusative particle	NEG	negative
NOM	nominative particle	P	particle
COP	copula	DAT	dative particle
SFP	sentence final particle	TOP	topic particle