

Setting the Scene: A Comparative Study of the ‘-te aru’ Construction and the ‘Attributive Passive’ in Japanese¹

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1. Introduction

Broadly speaking, the ‘-te aru’ construction and the ‘attributive passive’ construction in Japanese are both de-transitivized, stative constructions that serve to set the scene for the ongoing discourse. In many cases, the constructions can be substituted for one another, and native speakers often find it difficult to identify a clear difference in meaning between the two. Previous research on these constructions, however, has ignored their functional similarities, and has attempted to explain their uses quite separately.

In this paper we identify and account for the basic functions of these two constructions, as well as their similarities and their differences. We start by considering them in the context of a far more widely discussed, and more frequently used, derived stative construction in Japanese, a construction that involves an intransitive rather than a transitive verb root. We go on to consider examples of these two de-transitivized stative constructions, starting with cases in which they seem to be virtually interchangeable, and then refining our understanding of their functions by considering cases in which they cannot be substituted for one another.

Our basic findings relate to the degree of semantic transitivity of the two constructions. Although the *-te aru* construction has previously been characterized as describing perfect aspect, and as not allowing an overt Actor (Martin 1975, Miyagawa 1988 and Hasegawa 1996), when we compare it with the ‘attributive passive’, we find that it is comparatively the more transitive, and thus more agentive of the two. The ‘attributive passive’, on the other hand, is highly objective and stative. Nevertheless, the fact that the verb root in this construction, as in the *-te aru* construction, is transitive rather than intransitive means that the relevance of an Actor to the state described can still be detected.

2. From ‘becoming’ to ‘being’: Spontaneous intransitives in stative form

A number of Japanese linguists, most notably Ikegami (1981) and Teramura (1984), have characterized Japanese as what they call a ‘becoming’ language rather than a ‘doing’ language. By this characterization they are referring to the fact that the Japanese lexicon is particularly rich in intransitive change of state verbs – what Jacobsen (1992) calls ‘spontaneous’ intransitives – and that these intransitives are often used in a situation in

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which an English speaker might choose a transitive verb instead.

‘Becoming’ verbs are important in expressing not only situations describing a change in an Undergoer in Japanese, but also those describing the state of an Undergoer. Kageyama (1996) and Kindaichi (1988) have noted that, compared with English, Japanese has a paucity of some types of adjectives, particularly those that describe a state that has come about as the result of a change (e.g. *open, dry, fat, dirty, dead*). Where English would use an adjective to describe such a situation, Japanese uses a ‘spontaneous’ intransitive – a ‘becoming’ verb – in a stative form, the *-te iru* form.

- (3) *Ano heya no mado wa itsumo aite iru.*
 that room GEN window TOP always become.open-GER be-PRES
 ‘The window in that room **is** always **open**.’

In this Japanese example, a ‘spontaneous’ intransitive verb, *aku* ‘to become open’, is used in the stative *-te iru* form, *aite iru* (‘has become open’). Notice in the English translation, however, an adjective ‘(be) open’ would be the preferred choice.

3. From ‘doing’ to ‘being’: The *-te aru* construction and the attributive passive

While scholars have focused strongly on the use of ‘becoming’ verbs in situations describing the state of an Undergoer, exemplified in (3) above, less attention has been paid to the use of ‘doing’ verbs in describing such situations. The state of an Undergoer can be conveyed not only by the stative form of a ‘becoming’ verb, but also by the de-transitivized, stative form of a ‘doing’ verb, using either the *-te aru* construction or the attributive passive.

By virtue of the use of a transitive verb root², these constructions make reference to the relevance of an Actor in the situation described. Example (4) illustrates a *-te aru* construction and (5), an attributive passive.

- (4) *Ano heya no mado wa itsumo akete aru.*
 that room GEN window TOP always open-TEARU
 ‘The window in that room **is** always **open**.’
- (5) *Ano heya no mado wa itsumo akerarete iru.*
 that room GEN window TOP always open-PASS-GER be-PRES
 ‘The window in that room **is** always **open**.’

Notice that the verb root *akeru* ‘to open’ that appears in both these examples is the transitive equivalent of the intransitive ‘becoming’ verb *aku* ‘to become open’ that appears in example (3). All three sentences can be translated in the same way in English.

These two constructions involving transitive verb roots, like the ‘spontaneous’ intransitive in the *-te iru* form, involve both a process component and a state component in their

² The *-te aru* construction occurs very occasionally with verbs that are not strictly transitive, such as *yakusoku suru* ‘to promise’ and *iu* ‘to say’. Notice, however, that the intransitive verbs that can occur involve an Actor as subject (unergative), rather than an Undergoer (unaccusative, as with ‘spontaneous’ intransitives).

meaning. The *-te aru* construction is composed of a transitive action verb in the participial *-te* form followed by a stative morpheme, the stative auxiliary *aru* ‘be’. The attributive passive involves the transitive action verb in the passive *-(r)are* form, and it too always occurs in a stative form. When it is used sentence finally, as in (5), this involves the *-te iru* stative form. When it is used in a modifying role pre-nominally, as it very commonly is, this involves either the *-te iru* form or the *-ta* form, which has a stative interpretation in this environment. We discuss these two components – action and state – in more detail in 4.1.

4. Similarities and differences: The attributive passive and the *-te aru* construction

In many instances, these two de-transitivized, stative constructions seem to be interchangeable, with little obvious difference in meaning, as seen in examples (4) and (5) above, and again in (6) and (7) below.

(6) *Hangetsutoo wa oogon de tsukutte atta.*
 semicircular.sword TOP gold of make-TEARU-PAST
 ‘The semicircular sword **was made** of gold.’

(7) *Hangetsutoo wa oogon de tsukurarete ita.*
 semicircular.sword TOP gold of make-PASS-GER be-PAST
 ‘The semicircular sword **was made** of gold.’

In spite of their similarity in meaning, demonstrated by the fact that they can be substituted for one another and translated in the same way in English, our investigation of the use of each construction in authentic contexts has revealed some subtle and interesting differences. These differences can be related to various features of the degree of semantic transitivity of the clauses involved. The transitivity features that we found to be particularly relevant to the use of the two constructions, and the distinction between them, are related to four main factors, noted in (8):

- (8)
- The degree of focus on the action (as opposed to the state);
 - The extent to which the action is located in real time (as opposed to one that is not associated with any particular time reference);
 - The extent of the sense of action in preparation;
 - The degree of interest in the Actor (as opposed to the Undergoer).

To facilitate our investigation of the ways in which these two constructions are used, we examined their occurrence in context in contemporary Japanese novels. Using the CD-Rom collection of Japanese novels, *Shinchô Bunko no Hyakusatsu* (One hundred *Shinchô* Paperbacks), we selected the five most recent novels in the collection. We searched the middle 100 pages of each novel. However, note that this CD-Rom version of the novels contains 320 characters on one page, half of that in a normal Japanese paperback. The written corpus was thus equivalent in length to approximately 250 pages of a hard copy Japanese paperback.

From this corpus we collected 13 examples of the *-te aru* construction and 40 of the attributive passive. These figures show that neither of these constructions has a very high frequency: roughly one example in every 19 pages for the *-te aru* construction, and one in

every 6 pages for the attributive passive. This compares with a rate of just over one example per page for spontaneous intransitive verbs in the stative *-te iru* form.

4.1 Degree of focus on action

The first thing that stood out in the data we examined was the high percentage of factitive verbs used in both constructions. A factitive verb describes an event in which an Actor brings about a specific change in an Undergoer, for example a change of state (affective or effective), a change of ownership, or a change of location (Song 1993: 7). Examples (9) and (10) illustrate this very common type.

- (9) *Sugu waki ni kaidan ga atte, kami ga*
 immediately side LOC staircase NOM be-GER paper NOM
hatte ari, *heya no zumen to juunin no na*
 stick.up_{tr}-TEARU-CONT room GEN layout and resident GEN name
ga kaite aru.
 NOM write-TEARU
 ‘Immediately to the side there is a staircase, and a paper **stuck up**, and the layout of the rooms and the names of the residents **are written** (on it).’
Cheers to the Chairwoman!, p. 838

- (10) *Obi ni sashita hangetsutoo wa me mo mabayui*
 belt LOC wear-PAST semicircular.sword TOP eye even dazzling
bakari no oogon de tsukurarete ita.
 as.much.as GEN gold of make-PASS-GER be-PAST
 ‘The semicircular sword that he wore at his side **was made** of dazzling gold.’
The Fall of Constantinople, p. 414

Other examples of the many factitive verbs that we found in the data include: *oku* ‘to put’, *horu* ‘to tattoo’, *nuitori suru* ‘to embroider’, *naraberu* ‘to line up’, and *ueru* ‘to plant’.

In nearly all of the examples with factitive verbs, one construction could be substituted for the other with little apparent change in meaning. This has already been illustrated in examples (6) and (7) above, which were simplified from the authentic example given in (10). The primary function of both constructions in these instances seems to be to give an objective description of the state of the Undergoer in order to set the scene in some way for the ongoing action.

Even though these constructions are virtually interchangeable when they occur with factitive verbs, and do, initially, seem very close in meaning, a subtle semantic difference can be detected. This difference lies in the degree of focus on the action component of the construction, and the extent to which that action is thought of as occurring in real time. The examples of the *-te aru* construction with factitive verbs function as resultatives, describing a specific change that has come about in the state of the Undergoer as a result of an action that occurs in real time. The examples of the attributive passive construction, on the other hand, give less attention to the action component, lacking the sense that it has occurred in real time at all. The basic function of the attributive passive is to describe some defining attribute of an entity rather than to portray a result.

4.2 Time reference and the two constructions

The timeless feature of the attributive passive construction is even more evident in the other example-type we found in the data: those in which the transitive verb root is non-factitive rather than factitive. All examples of this type involved verbs of extremely low transitivity, primarily describing either perception (e.g. *miru* ‘see’, *shiru* ‘know’) or classification (e.g. *fukumu* ‘include’ *matomeru* ‘to group together’). This type is illustrated in Example (11):

- (11) *Morikawa wa shain-tachi kara sono kaisha no kanbu*
 Morikawa TOP employee-PLR from that company GEN executive
kooho no toppu to mirarete ita.
 candidate GEN top QUOT regard-PASS-GER be-PAST
 ‘Morikawa **had been regarded** as the top candidate for the Company Executive by the employees.’ *Shinbashi Station, Karasumori Exit – In My Young Days*, p. 262

In Example (11), there is no sense in which the action of *miru* ‘to see / to regard’ is thought of as occurring at any particular point in time. Consequently, it is not possible to substitute the *-te aru* construction in cases like this, bound as the *-te aru* construction is to a real-time action. In these examples, verbs of perception or classification are used; the defining attribute of the entity described is ‘attributable’ to the way in which it is thought of or dealt with by people – the way it is seen, regarded, spoken of, named, used, etc.

Further support can be found for our claim that the *-te aru* construction differs from the attributive passive in that the action component is thought of as occurring in real time. Look at example (12):

- (12) *Aitsu ni wa kinoo no jugyoo no tokini adana ga*
 that.guy DAT TOPyesterday GEN class GEN when nickname NOM
tsukete aru.
 name-TEARU
 ‘(I) have given a nickname, in yesterday’s class, to that guy.’

In this example, the action *adana o tsukeru* ‘to give a nickname’ is explicitly located in time – at the time of yesterday’s class. (Although the combination of the perfect and reference to a point in time is awkward in English, this sentence is perfectly natural in Japanese.) Because of this reference to a particular time, the attributive passive could not possibly occur³.

This example of the *-te aru* construction differs somewhat from others exemplified so far in that it has a strong sense that the action described was performed in preparation for something. This sense of preparation comes through to a certain extent in all examples of this construction, but is strongest when the construction functions as a perfect (rather than a resultative) and places focus on the action component, as discussed in the section below.

4.3 4.3 Perfect use of *-te aru*: ‘action in preparation’ and interest in the Actor

³ The *-te aru* construction in this example can be replaced with the so-called ‘Ni-yotte’ passive, another kind of non-sentient passive in Japanese, that can depict the occurrence or existence of an event at a specific time and place (Iwashita 2004: 92-96).

It must be noted that the perfect use of the *-te aru* construction can occur even with a factitive verb, provided it appears in a context that draws the focus to the ‘action in preparation’ rather than to the resultant state of the Undergoer.

- (13) *Sono tame ni, daidokoro no mado o wazawaza*
 that reason for kitchen GEN window ACC intentionally
akehanatte aru.
 throw.open-TEARU
 ‘For that reason, (she) **has** intentionally **thrown open** the kitchen window.’
Cheers to the Chairwoman!, p. 101

In this example, reference to the purpose of the action is made explicitly (*sono tame ni* ‘for that reason’), and an adverb appears that modifies this action component (*wazawaza* ‘intentionally’). The Actor (‘she’) has thrown open the kitchen window deliberately, so that neighbours can overhear her talking about the good news of her husband’s promotion. In fact, there is such a strong focus on the action rather than the resulting state component in examples of this type that the canonical transitive case-marking pattern is used, with the Undergoer marked by the accusative particle *o* (Jarkey 2003). In examples like this it is even possible for the Actor to appear as an overt participant in the sentence:

- (14) *Taniguchi ga rentakaa o karite chikaku.ni tomete aru*
 Taniguchi NOM rental.car ACC rent-GER nearby stop-TEARU no
da.
 NML COP
 ‘Taniguchi has rented a car and **has parked** it nearby.’
Cheers to the Chairwoman!, p. 375

The Undergoer (*rentakaa* ‘a rental car’) in example (14) is marked by the accusative particle *o*, and the Actor (*Taniguchi*) appears as subject.

In examples like this the attributive passive cannot possibly occur. One reason for this is that canonical transitive case-marking is used; the nature of the attributive passive, on the other hand, dictates that the Undergoer must be the subject. A second reason is that there is a strong focus on an action occurring in preparation for something, and in real time. Once again, this type of focus is completely at odds with the emphasis of the attributive passive on the timeless attributes of the Undergoer.

5. Conclusions

Acknowledging the importance of the abundance of ‘spontaneous’ intransitives in Japanese, and their important role in describing states, this paper has examined two de-transitivized, stative constructions that are also used to describe a situation involving an Undergoer: the ‘*-te aru*’ construction and the ‘attributive passive’ construction. The discussion has drawn attention to the fact that de-transitivized transitive verb roots followed by a stative morpheme are also used to describe states in Japanese. This paper has identified features relevant to the distinction between the ‘*-te aru*’ construction and the ‘attributive passive’ construction as summarized in (8) above and cited again below:

- (8)
- The degree of focus on the action (as opposed to the state);

- The extent to which the action is located in real time (as opposed to one that is not associated with any particular time reference);
- The extent of the sense of action in preparation;
- The degree of interest in the Actor (as opposed to the Undergoer).

Table 1 illustrates our findings on similarities and differences between the two constructions:

Table 1.

	Accusative (o) <i>-te aru</i>	Nominative (ga) <i>-te aru</i>	Attributive passive	Attributive passive
Verb type		factitive verb	factitive verb	perception/ classification
Action in real time	✓	✓	✗	✗
Sense of preparation	✓	✓/✗	✗	✗
Actor can appear as subject	✓	✗	✗	✗

Focus on Action ←————→ Focus on State

These findings are basically related to the degree of semantic transitivity of the two constructions. This paper has demonstrated that, although both of these constructions are used to describe states, the *-te aru* construction is comparatively the more transitive of the two. In contrast, the attributive passive is highly objective and stative.

However, both constructions differ from a state expressed by a ‘spontaneous’ intransitive verb, in that they imply the role of an Actor in that state. In the case of the *-te aru* construction, the Actor is responsible for bringing about the state, often in preparation for something in the future. In the case of the attributive passive, the basic function of which is to describe some defining attribute of an entity, no specific Actor can ever be identified. However, this defining attribute is described as ‘attributable’ somehow to the way in which it is changed, created, perceived or classified by human beings.

Data Source

CD-ROM-ban *Shinchô-bunko no 100-satsu* [CD-ROM version: 100 books from *Shinchô-Bunko*] 1995 Shinchô-sha Tokyo.

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