

At the crossroads of language theory and practice: the case of argument structure in Japanese
Wesley M. Jacobsen
Kyoto University/Harvard University

Perhaps no linguistic phenomenon is as central to the interface of sentence structure (syntax) and meaning (semantics) as that of argument structure—the notion that a predicate form is associated with a set constellation of nouns that must be present in order for its meaning to be coherent. Yet exactly what constitutes argument structure is a question that is often taken for granted in the linguistic literature—or allowed to be determined by theory-internal considerations—and rarely put to an empirical test. This can have counterintuitive consequences such as the assumption commonly made in the GB literature that agent subjects do not form part of argument structure (Kale and Heyser 2002, but see the more recent work in the minimalist vein of Bowers 2010). In the case of a "pro-drop" language such as Japanese, where argument slots are not necessarily realized on the surface, argument structure plays a particularly crucial role as an "invisible" structure supporting discourse production and comprehension, and raises challenging questions as to how such invisible structures are acquired, either in first or second language acquisition.

This presentation will attempt to provide a more solid empirical foundation to the fundamental question of what constitutes argument structure in Japanese. After considering strengths and weaknesses of prior tests for argument structure proposed by Shibatani (1990) and Teramura (1994), an alternative test will be proposed that follows from the notion that arguments are entities that must be conceptualized by a speaker uttering a predicate in such a way that s/he be able to provide a linguistic expression of them if called upon to do so. Thus, a speaker uttering *Taroo ga tukutta rasii* "It appears Taro made (it)," upon being asked *Nani o?* "What?", could not answer *Siranai* "I don't know," although *Siranai* would be a possible response to being asked *Doko de?* "Where?", pointing to the argument status of NP-*o*, but not NP-*de* in this use of the predicate *tukuru* "make." A consistent application of this test—the so-called *shiranai* test—to a wide range of predicate types leads to some possibly surprising conclusions, one being that so-called third arguments have a very shaky status as arguments, possibly due to a conceptual preference for argument valency limited to two places. An empirically defensible conception of argument structure also makes possible a natural way of defining the role of subject in Japanese grammar, as the test points to at least one argument slot for every predicate, a slot that is normally realized with nominative case marking. Solutions will be proposed to apparent difficulties for this view presented by so-called zero valency predicates (*Samui desu ne* "it's cold, isn't it") and so-called multi-nominative constructions (*Zoo ga hana ga nagai (koto)* "Elephants have long noses"). Finally, some thoughts will be presented on the place of argument structure in the analysis and acquisition of predicate morphology in Japanese.