

## Process, Telicity, and Event Cancellability in Japanese: A Questionnaire Study

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It is known that the telic events in Japanese transitive verbs can often be cancelled, as in an example like *moyasi-ta-kedo moe-nakat-ta* ‘I burnt it but it didn’t burn.’ (Ikegami, 1985; Kageyama, 1996; Tsujimura, 2003; etc.). By examining such a phenomenon, Tsujimura (2003) argues that the result states of Japanese transitive verbs, especially the ones that alternates with intransitive inchoative counterparts, are not lexically encoded, but rather conversationally implicated.

Questions, however, remain. First, Tsujimura (2003) points out that “speakers’ judgments may vary”; then one can ask if the “cancellability” phenomenon pointed out in the literature is real.

Second, the cancellability judgments seem to vary with the choice of the object NP of the transitive verb (cf. Ikegami, 1985). For example, (1b) below seems to be degraded compared to (1a), even though both sentences contain the same pair of transitive and intransitive verbs.

- (1) a. *riidaa-ga minna-no iken-o matome-ta ga, saisyuuteki-ni matomara-nakat-ta.*  
leader-Nom everybody-Gen opinion-Acc **put\_together-Past** although,  
*in\_the\_end hold\_together-Neg-Past*  
‘The leader harmonized opinions, but failed in the end.’
- b. *Tanaka-san-ga sono syoodan-o matome-ta ga, kekkyoku matomara-nakat-ta.*  
Tanaka-Mr.-Nom that business\_deal-Acc **put\_together-Past** although,  
*in\_the\_end hold\_together-Neg-Past*  
‘Mr. Tanaka finalized the business deal, but failed in the end.’

The apparent contrast here seems to stem from the strength of the process component: (1a) is more or less compatible with a durative temporal adverb like *1-jikan-ni watat-te* ‘for 1 hour’, while (1b) is not. This shows that the transitive predicate in (1a) denotes an accomplishment, while the one in (1b) denotes an achievement (Vendler, 1967). If this is the case, the existence of the process component is actually a crucial factor in the acceptability of cancellation (cf. Ikegami, 1985).

Finally, Tsujimura (1993) states that the cancellability phenomenon is “particularly common with transitive and intransitive verb pairs that enter into the causative alternation.” However, no empirical evidence is provided by her or by other researchers as far as we know.

We address these issues through a questionnaire study, where participants were asked to judge the acceptability of cancellation. To deal with the first question, we included most of the representative examples in Tsujimura (2003). Concerning the

second question, we designed the questionnaire so that most verbs in the materials could be divided into either an accomplishment or an achievement verb. If the process component is crucial, then there would be a main effect of this factor. We also included 6 sets of sentences like *rensyuumondai-o toi-ta* ‘solved the exercise’ vs. *gokai-o toi-ta* ‘resolved misunderstanding’ and the one in (1), in order to test the influence of the direct objects. To address the third question, we included items with non-alternating transitive verbs.

## Methods

Seventy native speakers of Japanese participated. All the test sentences consisted of the first conjunct containing a transitive verb and the second one containing a predicate cancelling the event in the first half. There were 41 sentences in total. The stimuli were pseudo-randomized. The participants were asked to judge the naturalness of the sequence in each item on a 5-level scale, where 5 in the scale corresponds to “the most natural” and 1 to “the most unnatural”.

## Results and Discussions

In the analysis, the 1-to-5 scale was converted to the 0-to-10 scale. Regarding Tsujimura’s examples, it turned out that these examples were not rated particularly high (*hiyasi-ta* ‘cooled’: 6.93; *ire-ta* ‘put’: 6.89; *kawakasi-ta* ‘dried’: 5.39; *tokasi-ta* ‘melted’: 5.00; *ake-ta* ‘opened’: 3.64; *ugokasi-ta* ‘moved’: 3.53), compared to perfectly acceptable control items such as *okut-ta* ‘sent’: 9.57. It should be noted that the worse examples do not fit well with durative temporal adverbs. Across all the items, there was a main effect of the achievement vs. accomplishment factor (3.95 vs. 6.70;  $F(1,69)=290.0, p<.001$ ;  $F(1,26)=22.4, p<.001$ ). Additionally, we found that the objects of transitive verbs could affect the acceptability in all of the sets like (1). Regarding the non-alternating verbs, the results greatly varied: some were cancellable (*syuurisi-ta* ‘repaired’: 8.00; *dassyokusi-ta* ‘bleached’: 7.89), while others were not (*mitasi-ta* ‘fill’: 1.96).

## Conclusion

Overall, our results show that the process component is crucial in determining the acceptability of cancellation: (i) the cancellability of alternating transitive verbs varies according to the strength of the process component; (ii) the main effect of the achievement vs. accomplishment factor and the attested influences from direct objects also point to the same conclusion; (iii) the distinction between alternating verbs and non-alternating ones does not seem important, whereas the existence of the process component does.

## References

- Ikegami, Y. 1985. “‘Activity’ – ‘accomplishment’ – ‘achievement’: A Language that Can’t Say ‘I burned it, but it didn't burn’ and one that can’.” in A. Makkai & A. K. Melby (eds.) *Linguistics and Philosophy*. / Kageyama, T. 1996. *Dooshi Imiron*. / Tsujimura, N. 2003. ‘Event Cancellation and Telicity.’ In *Japanese/Korean Linguistics* 12. / Vendler, Z. 1967. *Linguistics in Philosophy*.