How to Eat Your Cake and Have it Too in Japanese: Causal Pluralism and the Role of Agentivity

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It is widely acknowledged in the Japanese literature (Ikegami 1980-1981, 1985; Miyajima 1985; Kageyama 1996, 2002; Tsujimura 2003) that causative accomplishment verbs in Japanese do not necessarily entail the resulting change of state, as shown by the acceptability of examples such as (1).

(1) Megumi-ga kinoo doa-o sime-ta-kedo, zenzen simara-naka-tta-nda-yo-ne.

Megumi-NOM yesterday door-NOM close-PAST-but all close-PAST-NEG-PAST-COP-SFP-SFP

‘Megumi closed the door yesterday, but it didn’t get closed.’

As first noted by Tsujimura (2003), one of the most intriguing puzzles about this result cancellation phenomenon in Japanese arises with regard to agentivity. When the agent subject in (1) is replaced with a non-volitional causer, the result entailment cannot be cancelled, as shown by the semantic anomaly of (2).

(2) #Kyuuna tuyoi kaze-ga kinoo doa-o sime-ta-kedo, simara-naka-tta-nda-yo-ne.

sudden strong wind-NOM yesterday door-ACC close-PAST-but close-PAST-NEG-PAST-COP-SFP-SFP

‘A sudden window closed the door yesterday, but it didn’t get closed.’

Tsujimura (p. 398) concludes her paper by stating that “... a remaining challenge is determining whether or how such intentionality should be represented in the lexical representation of verbs”, an issue which remains unexplored in any subsequent literature. This paper addresses this challenge and outlines a plausible solution to the above empirical puzzle. Following Martin’s (2015, 2019) recent theory of causation, I propose that causation types are fundamentally different depending on the agentivity of the subject argument. This hypothesis – the Causal Pluralism Hypothesis – forms a basis for a principled account for Tsujimura’s puzzle.

According to this hypothesis, at the lexical semantics-conceptual system interface, the agentive causation type is tokenized/identified by the agent’s action as well as the theme’s change-of-state (CoS), as shown in (3a), while the non-agentive causation type is tokenized/identified by the theme’s CoS alone, as shown in (3b).

(3) The Causal Pluralism Hypothesis

a. Agentive causation ➔ 2 sub-event tokens  
   | Agent’s Action | Theme’s CoS |

b. Non-agentive causation ➔ 1 sub-event token
   | Theme’s CoS |

Let us consider how the proposed analysis accounts for the correlation between the agent vs. non-agentive causation types and the possibility of result entailment cancellation, using Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agentive Causation Type</th>
<th>Non-Agentive Causation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sub-event tokens?</td>
<td>Agent’s action, Theme’s CoS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target of negation?</td>
<td>Theme’s CoS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-culminating, zero CoS reading?</td>
<td>YES</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1: Causal Pluralism at the Lexical Semantics-Conceptual Interface

The agentive causation type instantiates both agent’s action and theme’s CoS. I suggest that the negation in the second clause of (1a) negates the theme’s CoS token alone. It follows that the non-culminating, zero CoS construal is possible in (1a) since the result state is denied while retaining the agent’s action. This characterization indeed aligns with native speakers’ intuitions about (1a) that Megumi did some door-closing action, but just that the expected result didn’t obtain (Ikegami 1980-1981, 1985; Miyajima 1985). The non-agentive causation type, on the other hand, involves only theme’s CoS. Consequently, the negation in the second clause in (1b) can only take this token as the target of negation, resulting in semantic contradiction, in the same way that an intransitive statement in (4) yields semantic anomaly.

(4) # Kinoo kono doa-ga sima-tta-nda-kedo, simara-naka-tta-nda-yo-ne.

yesterday this door-NOM close-PAST-COP-but close-PAST-NEG-PAST-COP-SFP-SFP

‘Yesterday, this door closed, but it didn’t close.’
The rest of the paper presents various independent arguments for the Causal Pluralism Hypothesis. For reasons of space, I can only present two of them here based on the different interpretations of agentic vs. non-agentic causative VPs in time-frame adverbials as well as under syntactic complementation of aspectual verbs. Firstly, time-frame adverbials such as *itizikan-de* ‘in one hour’ are known to measure the time span between the onset and the telos/result state of a complete eventuality denoted by a verb. Keeping this observation in mind, consider the contrast between (5a) and (5b).

(5)  a. Megumi-ga kinoo gohun-de yatto kono omoi doa-o nantoka
    Megumi-NOM yesterday five.minutes-in finally this heavy door-ACC somehow
    sime-ta-kedo, zissainiwa doa zitai-ya ippun-kurai-de sima-ta-yo.
    close,PAST-but actually door itself-TOP one.minute-about-in close,PAST-COP
    ‘Megumi took five minutes to manage to close this heavy door finally. Actually, however, the
door itself closed in about one minute.’

   b.# Kyuuna tuvoi kaze-ga kinoo gohun-de kono omoi doa-o
    sudden strong wind-NOM yesterday five.minutes-in this heavy door-ACC
    sime-ta-kedo, zissainiwa doa zitai-ya ippun-kurai-de sima-ta-yo.
    close,PAST-but actually door itself-TOP one.minute-about-in close,PAST-COP
    ‘A sudden strong wind took 10 minutes to manage to close this heavy door finally. Actually,
however, the door itself closed in about one minute.’

(5a), an example of the agentive causation type, is acceptable even though the event denoted by the verb pair *simeru-simaru* ‘close,PAST-close,PAST’ seemingly involves two temporally conflicting adverbials – *gohun-de* ‘in five minutes’ and *ippun-kurai-de* ‘in about one minute’. On the other hand, (5b), an example of the non-agentive causation type, is unacceptable under the same conditions. This contrast is exactly what we predict under the Causal Pluralism Hypothesis. The event in (5a) is tokenized by the agent’s action and the theme’s CoS. Consequently, the time span of the latter sub-event can be construed as shorter than the time span of the whole causing event which also contains the former sub-event. This construal is impossible with the event in (5b), however, which has the theme’s CoS as its sole sub-event token. Accordingly, the entire causing event would be interpreted as completed in both ten minutes and about one minute, a clear contradiction, obviously.

Secondly, the two causation types under investigation yield different interpretations when embedded as syntactic complements of aspectual verbs such as *hazimeru* ‘to begin’. Specifically, when a causative VP is embedded under this matrix verb, such a structure requires the CoS of the theme to start with a causer subject, but not necessarily with an agentive subject. This contrast is illustrated in (6a, b).

    Megumi-NOM door-ACC close-PAST-beg-COP wind-NOM door-ACC close-PAST-beg-COP
    ‘Megumi began closing the door.’
    ‘A wind began closing the door.’

For (6a) to be truthfully uttered, some preparatory action by Megumi must have started; for example, she decided to stand up, approached the door and put her intention to open the door into action by laying her right hand on the door knob. Crucially, however, no change developing toward the intended result has to happen on the part of the door; the door may remain exactly in the same state as it was before Megumi’s preparatory actions. This construal is impossible in (6b). Here, the door must have already begun undergoing some initial changes ultimately leading to the intended result; for example, the door started closing with hinge squeaking or with the air being pushed out as the door began to seal, and what-nots. Again, this contrast falls out from the Causal Pluralism Hypothesis; *hazimeru* may modify the onset of the agent’s action in (6a) whereas the same verb can only modify the onset of the theme’s CoS. I will present further support for the same hypothesis from the results of my questionnaires with 10 native Japanese speakers using YouTube video clips regarding their intuitions on what constitutes the possible onset of the causation types depending on agent vs. causer subjects.

The proposed analysis has two important implications, each worthy of further in-depth future investigations and verifications. Firstly, the data reported here suggest that Japanese behaves on a par with many other genetically unrelated languages, including Malagasy (Travis 2000, 2005), Tagalog (Dell 1983-1984), Salish (Bar-el et al. 2005; Jacobs 2011, Kiyota 2008), Chinese (Tai 1984), and Korean (Lee 2015), English (Oehrle 1976) and many other languages documented in Demirdache and Martin (2015) and Martin (2019), which are all reported to exhibit the non-culminating, zero CoS readings of causative verbs only when their subject is agentive. In other words, the results attained present new evidence from Japanese for the Agent Control Hypothesis (Demirdache and Martin 2015) that the relevant reading is possible with causative verbs when the subject is an agent, but not a causer. Secondly, as noted by other lexical semantic works including Tsujimura (2003), it has been the perennial issue in the literature whether the notion of agenticity is
linguistically represented. The results of this study show that the answer is resounding yes; agentivity has to be represented at some level of linguistic representation, either in the Lexical Conceptual Structure (Levin and Rappaport-Hovav 1995; Pustejovsky 1995) or in syntactic structures (Pylkkänen 2002; Harley 2013), because it has clear repercussions on the result entailment of causative accomplishment verbs.