The Semantics of Grammatical Cases: A Case Study of the Japanese Accusative

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0. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to show that the accusative (-wo) case in Japanese has a unique meaning, thereby its polysemic semantic roles are networked in a systematic fashion. Section 1 proposes an image-schema for characterizing the Japanese accusative case in semantic terms, and Section 2 is devoted to showing that the polysemic semantic roles can be networked in the schema. Section 3 explains the semantic differences between the accusative case and the ablative case in marking the [SOURCE]-phrase.

1. SEMANTICS OF ACCUSATIVE CASE

It is generally accepted that the accusative (-wo) case has five kinds of semantic roles, as is illustrated in (1).

(a) Taro-ga kabin-wo watta.
   Taro-NOM vase-ACC break(PERF)
   “Taro broke a vase.”

(b) Taro-wa nanjikanmo mori-wo samayotta.
   Taro-TOP hours woods-ACC wander(PERF)
   “Taro wandered the woods for hours.”

(c) Taro-wa asu nihon-wo shuppatsu-suru.
   Taro-TOP tomorrow Japan-ACC departure-do
   “Taro will leave Japan tomorrow.”

(d) Taro-wa kanada-de san-shuukan-wo sugoshita.
   Taro-TOP Canada-INST three-week-ACC spend(PERF)
   “Taro spent three weeks in Canada.”

(e) Ame-no-naka-wo Taro-wa ie-made hashitta.
   rain-GEN-inside-ACC Taro-TOP home-TERM run(PERF)
   “In the rain, Taro ran home.”
The _wo_-marked phrases in (1)(a), (b), (c), (d) and (e) represent [OBJECT], [PATH], [SOURCE], [TIME], and [CIRCUMSTANCE], respectively. As these examples show, the accusative (-wo) case has such a wide variety of meanings that it seems extremely difficult or almost impossible to give a unified account of its characterization in semantic terms. In fact, Kageyama(1980:40-41), Miyagawa(1989:34) and Miyake(1996:147) definitely state that the accusative (-wo) case does not have any semantic content. From the cognitive perspective, however, this paper tries to show that even the accusative case is meaningful, as Wierzbicka(1981:58) maintains correctly.

Now, how can the accusative case be semantically analyzed? Considering that the meaning of a form is relatively stipulated in the system to which the form belongs, we can characterize the accusative case for [OBJECT] as being located between the ablative (-kara) phrase and the dative (-ni) phrase, in opposition to the nominative (-ga) phrase, as is illustrated in (2).

(2)(a) Taro-ga Osaka-kara Tokyo-ni jimusho-wo utsushita
Taro-NOM Osaka-ABL Tokyo-ALL office-ACC move(PERF)
"Taro moved the office from Osaka to Tokyo."

(b) Taro-ga Hanako-wo kacho-kara yakuin-ni batteki-shita.
Taro-NOM Hanako-ACC chief-ABL director-ALL promotion-do(PERF)
"Taro promoted Hanako from chief to director."

In (a) the accusative (-wo) phrase _jimusho_ 'office' is located in motion between the ablative phrase _Osaka_ and the dative phrase _Tokyo_, in opposition to the initiating nominative (-ga) phrase. Likewise in (b) the accusative _Hanako_ undergoes the abstract change between the ablative _kacho_ 'chief' and the dative _yakuin_ 'director' under the control of the nominative _Taro_.

In this vein, the accusative case for [PATH] focuses a spatial region which the nominative NP traces between the ablative (-kara) phrase and the dative (-ni) phrase as in (3) below.

(3)(a) Taro-ga Tokyo-kara ichi-gousen-wo Osaka-ni mukatta
Taro-NOM Tokyo-ABL one-route-ACC Osaka-ALL proceed(PERF)
"Taro made his way along Route 1 from Tokyo toward Osaka."

(b) Taro-ga eki-kara ie-made toori-wo aruita.
Taro-NOM station-ABL home-TERM street-ACC walk(PERF)
"Taro walked the streets from the station till his home."
In (3)(a) the accusative (-wo) phrase ichihousen ‘Route 1’ is the spatial region between the ablative Tokyo and the allative Osaka. Likewise, in (b) the accusative toori ‘streets’ is the spatial region which the nominative Taro traverses when he moves from eki ‘station’ to ie ‘home’ in the process of the event of walking.

In order to schematize the meanings [OBJECT] and [PATH] in a systematic way, Sugai(1998) introduces the following image-schema in (4), in which [OBJECT] and [PATH] are characterized as realizations of ⟨PROCESS⟩ in the physical and the spatial dimensions, respectively.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{SOURCE} \\
kara
\end{array} \rightarrow \begin{array}{c}
\text{PROCESS} \\
wo
\end{array} \rightarrow \begin{array}{c}
\text{GOAL} \\
ni
\end{array}
\]

The schema in (4) is partly different from the well-known ⟨SOURCE-PATH-GOAL⟩ schema, which was proposed by Johnson (1987: 113-117), in that the middle term ⟨PATH⟩ is replaced by ⟨PROCESS⟩. Syntactically, ⟨SOURCE⟩, ⟨PROCESS⟩ and ⟨GOAL⟩ are instantiated with the ablative (−kara), the accusative (−wo) and the dative (−ni) case, respectively.[2] Invoking this schema, the meanings of the accusative case are regarded as profiling ⟨PROCESS⟩ at the different dimensions.[3]

Finally, it should be noted that the schema in (4) does not designate all the accusative (−wo) complements for the same reason. In fact, some verbs like tsukuru ‘make’ and korosu ‘kill’ mark the primary complement with the accusative case for the positive reason as follows. That is, whatever undergoes changes is treated as ⟨PROCESS⟩, and in principle it must be marked with the accusative case. On the other hand, verbs like miru ‘look at’ and matsu ‘wait for’ mark the primary complement with the accusative case for the negative reason that the complement cannot be marked with the ablative or the dative case. In either case, the schema in (4) has a good predictability as to what complement is marked with the accusative.

2. EXTENSION OF PROCESS-PROFILING

This section shows that the accusative extends metaphorically to [TIME] and [CIRCUMSTANCE] on the basis of profiling ⟨PROCESS⟩ in the event.

As was mentioned in Section 1, [PATH] is characterized as the spatial
realization of ⟨PROCESS⟩ in the event. It should be noted that the accusative case profiles ⟨PROCESS⟩ temporally in the progression of the event, while the ablative (-kara) case and the dative (-ni) case profile the beginning and the ending (resultative) phase, respectively. The following pair illustrates the interesting difference between the accusative-marking and the dative-marking.

(5)(a)  
\[ \text{Taro-wa 2000-meitoru-no-yama-wo nobotte, toreining-suru.} \]
Taro-TOP 2000-meter-GEN-mountain-ACC climb(CON) training-do
"Taro climbs a 2000-meter mountain to train himself."

(b)  
\[ \text{Taro-wa 2000-meitoru-no-yama-ni nobotte, toreining-suru.} \]
Taro-TOP 2000-meter-GEN-mountain-DAT climb(CON) training-do
"Taro climbs up a 2000-meter mountain to train himself."

(5)(a) is minimally distinct from (b) in that the phrase 2000-meitoru-no-yama ‘2000-meter mountain’ in the former is marked with the accusative (-wo), while that in the latter is marked with the dative (-ni) case. What is interesting is that (5)(a) and (b) are interpreted differently from each other as to what “training” is expected. In (a) Japanese native speakers would read Taro’s climbing itself as the content of his training, for example, some kind of preparatory practice for climbing much higher mountains. In this respect, we can say that the accusative case does not only realize the spatial part in the course of mountain climbing, but also it profiles the temporally middle aspect in the event of climbing. On the other hand, in (b) Taro would be expected to be engaged in a different kind of exercise (for instance, the high altitude training for athletes) after climbing up the mountain. In this case, the dative case does not only realize in the terminal point in space, but also it profiles temporally the resultative aspect in the event of climbing. In this way, the schema serves as the template that articulates an affair of state into inchoative, middle and resultative phases.

Likewise, the difference between the accusative (-wo) and the instrumental (-de) case can be shown below.

(6)(a)  
\[ \text{Hanako-ga kousaten-wo sasetsu-suru.} \]
Hanako-NOM intersection-ACC turns-left-do
"Hanako turns the intersection to the left."

(b)  
\[ \text{Hanako-ga kousaten-de sasetsu-suru.} \]
Hanako-NOM intersection-INST turn-left-do
"Hanako turns to the left at the intersection"
In this pair, both (a) and (b) are well-formed because \textit{kousaten} ‘intersection’ is a suitable place for turning to the left. In the following pair where \textit{kousaten} ‘intersection’ is replaced by a somewhat special place, \textit{sabaku-no-mannaka} ‘the middle of the desert,’ the NP must not be marked with the accusative (\textit{-wo}) case as in (7)(a) below, but the instrumental (\textit{-de}) case as in (b).

(7)(a) \textit{Hanako-ga sabaku-no-mannaka-wo sasetsu-suru.}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
Hanako & NOM \tab \tab \textit{sabaku-no-mannaka-wo} & GEN \tab \tab \textit{sasetsu-suru.} \tab \tab \textit{turn=left-do} \\
\end{tabular}

"Hanako turns the middle of the desert to the left."

(b) \textit{Hanako-ga sabaku-no-mannaka-de sasetsu-suru.}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
Hanako & NON \tab \tab \textit{sabaku-no-mannaka-de} & GEN \tab \tab \textit{sasetsu-suru.} \tab \tab \textit{turn=left-do} \\
\end{tabular}

"Hanako turns to the left in the middle of the desert."

In this pair, (a) is unacceptable because encyclopaedical knowledge tells us that \textit{sabaku-no-mannaka} ‘the middle of the desert’ does not have a suitable internal structure to profile \{PROCESS\} in the event of turning to the left, while (b) is quite acceptable because there is no restriction upon any \textit{-de}-marked place as long as the nominative \textit{Hanako} can be properly located there when she turns to the left.

Furthermore, as the metaphorical hierarchy proposed by Claudi and Heine (1986:301) and Heine \textit{et al.} (1991:157) correctly predict, \{PATH\} is metaphorically extended to \{TIME\} and \{CIRCUMSTANCE\} below.

(8)(a) \textit{Taro-wa 40-nen-wo inaka-de sugoshita.}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
Taro & TOP \tab \tab \textit{40-nen-wo} & ACC \tab \tab \textit{inaka-de} \tab \tab \textit{sugoshita.} \tab \tab \textit{spend(PERF)} \\
\end{tabular}

"Taro spent 40 years in the countryside."

(b) \textit{Isogashii-tokoro-wo, Taro-ga eki-made kite-kureta.}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
busy-place & ACC, \tab \tab \textit{Taro-ga} & NOM \tab \tab \textit{eki-made} \tab \tab \textit{kite-kureta,} \tab \tab \textit{come(CON)-give(PERF)} \\
\end{tabular}

"As busy he was, Taro kindly came to the station."

In (8)(a), the \textit{-wo}-marked noun phrase \textit{40-nen} ‘40 years’ profiles \{PROCESS\} in that the time is the temporal region during which \textit{Taro} stayed in the countryside. In (b) the \textit{-wo}-marked phrase is interpreted as \{CIRCUMSTANCE\} because it circumstantially profiles \{PROCESS\} during which the event of \textit{Taro}’s visit occurs. It should be noted here that the head noun within the \textit{-wo}-marked phrase has to be a formal (or expletive) noun for a space such as \textit{tokoro} ‘place’ in (8)(b). In the extension to \{CIRCUMSTANCE\}, therefore, its direct
source should be considered as [PATH] rather than [TIME].

Thus we add [TIME] and [CIRCUMSTANCE] to Figure (4) to form the extended schema as follows.

\[ (9) \begin{array}{c}
\text{SOURCE} \\
\text{kara}
\end{array} \rightarrow \begin{array}{c}
\text{PROCESS} \\
\text{wo}
\end{array} \rightarrow \begin{array}{c}
\text{GOAL} \\
\text{ni}
\end{array} \]

In this figure, the arrow \( \Downarrow \) is absent between [TIME] and [CIRCUMSTANCE] because [CIRCUMSTANCE] is better analyzed as coming from [PATH] than [TIME], as was mentioned in the preceding paragraph.

3. ACCUSATIVE-MARKING OF SOURCE

As is well-known, when the verb implies departure, the [SOURCE]-phrase can be marked with the ablative (-kara) case as in (10)(a), as well as the accusative (-wo) case as in (b).

(a) \( Taro-ga \ kawagishi- \ kara \ hanareta. \)
Taro-NOM riverside-ABL leave (PERF)
"Taro went away from the riverside."

(b) \( Taro-ga \ kawagishi- \ wo \ hanareta. \)
Taro-NOM riverside-ACC leave(PERF)
"Taro left the riverside."

The analysis of this paper serves to reveal the semantic difference between (10)(a) and (b). That is, the ablative-marking implies that the nominative NP is away from the [SOURCE] phrase, while the accusative-marking profiles \( \langle \text{PROCESS} \rangle \) of leaving.

This analysis is crucially important in order to give a comprehensive explanation of the restriction which is imposed upon the wo-marking of [SOURCE]-phrase. To put it in a specific way, as Miyake (1996:145–146) points out, when the nominative noun phrase is volitional, the [SOURCE]-phrase can
be marked either with the ablative or the accusative case, whereas if the nominative NP is nonvolitional, the [SOURCE]-phrase can be marked only with the ablative, but not with the accusative case, as is illustrated below.

\[(1)(a)\]  
*Maruta-ga kawagishi-kara hanareta.*  
log-NOM riverside-ABL leave(PERF)  
"A log went away from the riverside."

\[(1)(b)\]  
*M? Maruta-ga kawagishi-wo hanareta.*  
log-NOM riverside-ACC leave(PERF)  
"A log left the riverside."

In (11), since the nominative *maruta* 'log' is nonvolitional, the [SOURCE]-phrase *kawagishi* 'riverside' must be marked with the ablative, but not the accusative case. As far as this pair is concerned, it may be true that the nonvolitionality of the subject prevents the [SOURCE]-phrase from being marked with the accusative case.

From the standpoint of ⟨PROCESS⟩-profiling, however, we should reconsider the reason for which the [SOURCE]-phrase cannot be marked with the accusative case when the nominative NP is nonvolitional. Now we can plausibly suppose that it is difficult to profile ⟨PROCESS⟩ in which the nonvolitional nominative NP is leaving somewhere of itself, because the NP does not have intrinsic locomobilities. As a matter of fact, even though the nominative NP is nonvolitional, if a certain extrinsic locomobility is given explicitly from the context, it is easier to profile ⟨PROCESS⟩ of leaving, so that the accusative-marking is also acceptable, as in (11)(c) below.

\[(11)(c)\]  
*Ame-de nagare-ga hayamari, maruta-ga kawagishi-wo hanareta*  
rain-INST stream-NON speed-up, log-NOM riverside-ACC leave(PERF)  
"As the flow of water sped up with rain, the log left the riverside."

This example shows that it does not depend upon the nominative NP's volitionality, but upon the profilability of ⟨PROCESS⟩ of leaving, whether the [SOURCE]-phrase can be marked with the accusative case or not.\[6\]

Finally, it should be noticed that the accusative realizes either [PATH] or [SOURCE] in the complementary way. In other words, the accusative case marks the [SOURCE]-phrase only when [PATH] cannot be realized within the same verb phrase. Conversely, therefore, the accusative case cannot mark the [SOURCE]-phrase when it realizes the [PATH]-phrase, as in the following examples.
(12a) *Taro-wa tokyo-kara ichi-gousen-wo kaetta.
   Taro-TOP Tokyo-ABL one-Route-ACC return (PERF)
   “Taro came back from Tokyo along R 1.”

(b) Taro-wa tokyo-kara / * tokyo-wo kaetta.
   Taro-TOP Tokyo-ABL Tokyo-ACC return(PERF)
   “Taro came back from Tokyo.”

Since the Japanese verb kaeru ‘return’ allows the accusative to realize the [PATH]-phrase ichigousen ‘R 1’ as in (a), the [SOURCE]-phrase Tokyo must be marked with the ablative (-kara) case, not with the accusative (-wo) case, as in (b). The complementary distribution of the accusative-marking of [PATH] with that of [SOURCE] can be confirmed by the fact that the accusative cannot mark both the [PATH]-phrase and the [SOURCE]-phrase within the same verb phrase, as in the following sentence.

(12c) *Taro-wa tokyo-wo ichi-gousen-wo kita.
   Taro-TOP Tokyo-ACC one-Route-ACC come(PERF)
   “Taro came along R 1 from Tokyo.”

In (12)(a) above, both the [PATH]-phrase and the [SOURCE]-phrase co-occur within the same verb phrase because the [SOURCE]-phrase Tokyo is marked with the ablative (-kara) case, whereas in (12)(c) the two phrases cannot co-occur since both the [PATH]-phrase and the [SOURCE]-phrase are marked with the accusative (-wo) case within the same verb phrase.

These two pairs confirm our analysis that the [SOURCE]-phrase and the [PATH]-phrase are complementarily marked with the accusative (-wo) case, thereby we can extend (9) in Section 2 to the following figure, in which all of the five kinds of semantic roles listed in (1) are systematically networked.

\[(\text{SOURCE}) \rightarrow (\text{PROCESS}) \rightarrow (\text{GOAL})
\]
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kara} & \quad \text{wo} & \quad \text{ni} \\
\downarrow & & \downarrow \\
\text{[OBJECT]} & & \text{[TIME]}
\end{align*}
\]
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{[SOURCE]} & \iff \text{[PATH]} \\
\downarrow & \\
\text{[CIRCUMSTANCE]}
\end{align*}
\]
In this figure the horizontal arrow $\iff$ represents that the accusative case in the spatial dimension marks either [PATH] or [SOURCE] in the complementary way.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The effects discussed in the text are summarized as follows:

(i) The accusative case in Japanese is semantically characterized as profiling $\langle \text{PROCESS} \rangle$ in the $\langle \text{SOURCE} \rightarrow \text{PROCESS} \rightarrow \text{GOAL} \rangle$ schema.

(ii) The semantic roles $[\text{OBJECT}]$ $[\text{PATH}]$ $[\text{SOURCE}]$ $[\text{TIME}]$ and $[\text{CIRCUMSTANCE}]$ are metaphorically networked on the basis of the $\langle \text{PROCESS} \rangle$-profiling.

(iii) The accusative-marked $[\text{SOURCE}]$-phrase is distinctive from the ablative-marked phrase in that the accusative case profiles $\langle \text{PROCESS} \rangle$ of leaving while the ablative-marked phrase is construed as being away from the nominative NP.

The most important is that the accusative case in Japanese has its unique meaning, which is essential for explaining its polysemy and related syntactic phenomena in semantic terms.

ABBREVIATIONS

NOM = nominative case marker, ACC = accusative, DAT = dative, ABL = ablative, COM = comitative, INST = instrumental, GEN = genitive, TERM = terminative, TOP = topic postposition, PERF = perfective form, CON = connective form, DUR = durative form, PASS = passive morpheme, ADN = adnominal suffix, PURP = purpose, MOD = modality, POLITE = polite form

NOTES

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[1] Concerning the Japanese proper names used in the examples throughout this paper, Taro and Hanako are first names for a male and a female, respectively.

[2] For the reason why $\langle \text{PATH} \rangle$ has to be replaced by $\langle \text{PROCESS} \rangle$, see Sugai (1998). The semantic role $\langle \text{GOAL} \rangle$ is sometimes realized with the terminative $(-\text{made})$ case rather than the dative $(-ni)$ case, as in (3)(b). In addition, the dative NP can serve as not only the goal of the nominative NP, but also that of the accusative NP in the transitive structure. For details, see Sugai (2000).
[3] The "profile" is a technical term in cognitive grammar, meaning to designate a substructure or elevate it to a special level of prominence within the structure. See Langacker (1987:183-189) for details.

[4] See (1)(e), where the wo-marked phrase includes the formal noun for space *naka* 'inside.'

[5] The analysis in this paper is more extensive than that of Kageyama (1980:44-47), who states that the accusative-marking implies the abstract motion while the ablative-marking implies the physical motion. See Sugai (1999) for the detailed.

[6] The accusative-marking in (12)(b) is unacceptable as far as *Tokyo* is read as [SOURCE]. If *Tokyo* is interpreted as [PATH], the accusative-marking is quite acceptable.

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