

## The semantics of Japanese passives: When and why do they have adversative meanings?

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Japanese has two primary means of specifying the agent in its passive construction, which is accordingly subdivided into the *ni*-passive and the *niyotte*-passive, each named after the form attached to the agent noun phrase. Kuno (1983) invokes the notion “involvement” in an attempt to explain the adversative interpretation associated with some *ni*-passives. Despite its appeal, his analysis leaves two crucial questions unanswered: (1) exactly what it means for the *ni*-passive subject to be “involved” in the action denoted by the base verb and (2) why the degree of “involvement” associated with the verb correlates with the likelihood of the adversative interpretation in the way that it does. Kuno’s (1986) further attempt to account for the difference between the *ni*-passive and the *niyotte*-passive by means of his empathy hierarchy is also not insightful enough, not least because it fails to explain exactly how the two passives differ in how they construe the (sometimes identical) events described. Drawing on the action chain model proposed by Langacker (1990, 2008), this paper is intended to demonstrate that Kuno’s involvement corresponds to the part of the chain (hereafter A) where the agent acts on the patient, rather than the part (hereafter B) where the patient changes as a result or the entire chain (hereafter C), thereby explaining why the *ni*-passive gets associated with the adversative interpretation when it does. Building on these findings, we also show how differently the *ni*-passive and the *niyotte*-passive construe the events described.

When the semantics of the base verb clearly involves A, the *ni*-passive does not evoke the adversative interpretation, whether or not B is also involved; otherwise (i.e. when A is either not salient or absent altogether), it is interpreted adversatively. This can be explained as follows. Passive sentences in general serve to highlight B without driving A entirely out of focus. Consequently, in order to construct a well-formed *ni*-passive with a base verb that does not imply B, B has to be brought in by some other means. Since the salience of A and the presence of B are strongly correlated in the world as we view it (i.e. in our cognitive model of the world), B can readily be read into the *ni*-passive when the base verb has a salient A component. It is when A is either not salient or absent that the adverse effect produced by the agent on the referent of the subject fills the role of B.

*Ni*-passives can thus be formed from verbs lacking both A and B. By contrast, the vast majority of *niyotte*-passives are formed from verbs that involve C (i.e. both A and B). This makes the correlation between the salience of A and the likelihood of the adversative interpretation irrelevant to the *niyotte*-passive. Retained-object passives clearly show the difference between these two types of passives. (1a) is a *ni*-passive sentence. Therefore, when the object is Taro’s hair, namely A and B exist, it can be interpreted as a neutral passive. When the object is Hanako’s hair, namely neither A nor B exists, it is obligatorily interpreted as an adversative passive. Being a *niyotte*-passive sentence, (1b) requires its verb to involve both A and B, making Taro’s hair the only candidate for the object, which means that the sentence is obligatorily interpreted as a neutral passive.

- (1) a Taro-ha hanako-ni kami-wo ki-rare-ta  
Taro-TOP Hanako-DAT hair-ACC cut-PASS-PST  
(Lit.) “Taro was cut his / her hair by Hanako” “Taro’s / Hanako’s hair was cut by her.”
- b Taro-ha hanako-niyotte kami-wo ki-rare-ta  
Taro-TOP Hanako-NIYOTTE hair-ACC cut-PASS-PST  
(Lit.) “Taro was cut his / \*her hair by Hanako” “Taro’s hair was cut by Hanako.”

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