The Semantics and Syntax of Japanese Adnominal Demonstratives

Makoto Kaneko

This paper proposes some new ideas about the semantics and syntax of the Japanese adnominal demonstratives a-no, ko-no and so-no. Semantically it is claimed that, while conveying familiarity by means of the demonstrative prefixes a-, ko- and so-, they lack uniqueness or maximality, and that the whole demonstrative phrase is existentially quantified; -no either marks partitive (without excluding maximality) in the deictic and anaphoric uses, or—in bridging uses—serves to fill an argument slot (lexically encoded inside the following NP or created contextually). This analysis is supported by (i) the availability of sluicing, (ii) the distribution of numeral classifiers, and (iii) the similar behavior of French partitive constructions with respect to the “consistency test”. Syntactically, Japanese adnominal demonstratives are analyzed as NP-adjuncts, an assumption supported by three morpho-syntactic properties: (i) The demonstrative prefixes, ko-, so-, a- systematically display the same morphology as that of the WH-prefix do-; (ii) The Japanese demonstratives may be preceded by a restrictive modifier, like other adjunct modifiers; (iii) They behave with respect to the ellipsis of the following NP as other no-marked expressions clearly identified as adnominal adjuncts. These hypotheses further shed light on some data from L2 acquisition.

1 Introduction

This paper* aims at clarifying the semantics and syntax of the Japanese adnominal demonstratives a-no, ko-no and so-no, with respect to some recent research on demonstratives and definite determiners. Although demonstratives are a much-discussed topic in Japanese linguistics, very little is known about their

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* I would like to thank Patricia Cabredo Hofherr and Tania Ionin for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper. Special thanks are due to Anne Zribri-Hertz for her kind help to improve both the style and content. I am responsible for all the remaining problems. This research is partially supported by a grant from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences (No. 23520463). This paper is an attempt to extend the ideas previously advanced for so-no in Kaneko (2012) to the other two Japanese demonstratives, by partially modifying the previous analysis.
semantic and syntactic peculiarities, in comparison with demonstratives and definite determiners in other languages.

Recently, Bošković (2009) put forward the assumption that determiner-like expressions (possessives, demonstratives, etc.) in article-less languages, like Japanese, are not structurally located within the DP projection, but stand as modifiers adjoined to NP. As regards semantics, it is reported that demonstratives in Salish languages (cf. Matthewson 1999) and a determiner in Malagasy (cf. Paul 2009) lack at least one of the two features of definiteness (familiarity and uniqueness / maximality).

Inspired by these previous studies, I will claim i) that while Japanese adnominal demonstratives include familiarity in their semantics, they lack a uniqueness or maximality presupposition, hence allowing partitive interpretation, and ii) that their lack of uniqueness or maximality is syntactically captured if we analyze them as forming a demonstrative phrase (DemP) occurring in NP-adjoined position, whose specifier and head are respectively occupied by the demonstrative prefixes \textit{ko/so/a}, and by the stem \textit{-no}.

The discussion is organized as follows. Section 2 presents preliminary remarks about the system of Japanese adnominal demonstratives and points out their similarities with English definite articles and demonstratives. Section 3 describes their semantic peculiarities on the basis of Löbner (2011), and shows similar phenomena in Salish languages and in Malagasy. Section 4 introduces my own assumptions regarding the semantics and syntax of Japanese adnominal demonstratives, in the wake of some recent proposals on demonstratives, and assesses the validity of these assumptions with respect to some observations made in the field of L2 acquisition and from a cross-linguistic perspective. Section 6 summarizes the main results of the paper.

2 Preliminary Remarks

As regards the differences between the three adnominal demonstratives \textit{a-no}, \textit{ko-no} and \textit{so-no}, Hoji et al. (2003, 115) remark that “a \textit{ko}-NP is marked as [Proximal]; a \textit{a}-NP is marked as [Distal]”, while “a \textit{so}-NP is neither [Proximal] nor [Distal]”; as for \textit{so-no}, “a linguistic antecedent is necessary” (idem. 103), which is not the case for \textit{a-no} and \textit{ko-no}. \textit{So-no} may surely be deictically used, like \textit{a-no} and \textit{ko-no} in (1a,b), to refer to something close to the hearer, as in (1c).\footnote{In each example, \textit{a-no} and \textit{ko-no} are respectively translated by English \textit{that} and \textit{this}, and \textit{so-no}, by \textit{that} if this translation is appropriate. Otherwise, the most appropriate English expression}