Toward a Contrastive Study of Inchoative/Causative Alternation in English and Japanese

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(1) and (2) below are examples of inchoative/causative alternation:

(1) a. Janet broke the cup.
b. The cup broke. (Levin 1993: 29)

(2) a. Janet ga koppu o kowashi-ta.
      Janet NOM cup ACC break_{tr}-PST

          b. Koppu ga koware-ta.
              cup NOM break_{intr}-PST

Lexical causative sentences such as (1a) and (2a) have two arguments, one in the subject and one in the object position, while inchoative sentences as in (1b) and (2b) have just one argument in the subject position, which corresponds to the object in a lexical causative variation with identical theta roles. Many verbs which alternate like this have been categorized as ‘change-of-state verbs,’ since the internal arguments undergo some changes to their states.

This study argues that, in Japanese, an intransitive form of an alternating verb is available if and only if its telic role (i.e., built-in function) of the internal argument is neutralized, as in (3a).

(3) a. Roopu / nekkuresu / sutorappu ga kire-ta.
      rope / necklace / strap NOM cut_{intr}-PST

          b. *{Moyasi / seroteepu / kaminoke} ga kire-ta.
              bean sprout / cellophane tape / hair NOM cut_{intr}-PST

On one hand, the telic roles of the objects in (3a) are neutralized by the action of cutting (e.g., We cannot wear a necklace if it is cut). On the other hand, those in (3b) are NOT (e.g., We can still eat bean sprouts even after cutting them). Thus, ‘kire-{tr|ru}|kir-thu’ in Japanese is sensitive to the telic roles of its internal argument. In contrast, the corresponding verb in English, ‘cut,’ is inherently transitive whatever the state of the telic role is, as in (4)&(5).

(4) a. Taro cut the necklace.
b. *The necklace cut.

(5) a. Hanako cut the bean sprouts.
b. *The bean sprouts cut.

On the other hand, when the internal argument is an abstract noun, the alternating verbs both in English and Japanese behave similarly, as below.

(6) a. He broke {his promise / the contract / the world record}.
b. *{His promise / the contract / the world record} broke.

(Levin & Rappaport 1995)
(7) a.  Kare ga {yakusoku / keiyaku / sekai kiroku} o yabur-ta.
    he NOM promise / contract / world record ACC break_{intr}-PST

b.  *{Yakusoku / keiyaku / sekai kiroku} ga yabure-ta.
    promise / contract / world record break_{intr}-PST

Kageyama (1995) successfully accounts for (6)&(7) with ‘internal controllability,’ but this account fails for (3) as objects like ‘necklace’ and ‘bean sprout’ alternate despite not being able to control themselves. Here, we suggest that telic role can account for all three examples, rendering ‘internal controllability’ unnecessary.

References


