Functions of the *te*-form in Japanese conversation

Sally Jones  
The Australian National University

Proposed Program Stream: Communication, Language and Education

Abstract

This study discusses the functions of the *te*-form in Japanese, which is well known as a connective and may be used to further connect to another clause. It may also be used with various words to form grammatical phrases for a wide range of grammatical functions, such as the progressive (*te* + *iru*), trial (*te* + *miru*), speaker’s desire (*te* + *hoshii*), and so forth. Given the importance of its grammatical function, the *te*-form has mainly been researched in terms of grammar (e.g. Harasawa, 1994; Hasegawa, 1996; Ogihara, 1998; among others). It is agreed amongst Japanese grammarians that the *te*-form indicates ‘simultaneousness’ (two events connected by the form occur simultaneously), ‘sequential events’ (the preceding event marked by the form occurs before the occurrence of following event), ‘means’ (the preceding event is a means to do the following event) or ‘non-ordered events’ (simply listing two events).

However, in actual conversation, it seems that the *te*-form may be used for different purposes. For example, Maynard (1989) points out that the use of the form is related to the conversation organisation, i.e. turn-final *te*-form may indicate either the continuation or the discontinuation of the speaker’s turn, depending on the pitch and stress. The *te*-form in conversation has also been researched in terms of gender differences (Saegusa, 2006). Despite these studies, the detailed use of the *te*-form in two-way conversation is yet to be fully explored.

The aim of this study is to clarify the use of *te*-form in spoken conversation, highlighting its conversational functions. Based on a 180-minute-long corpus of 6 dyadic
naturally occurring conversations between Japanese speakers, the study will explore the role of *te*-form in organising conversation as well as its pragmatic effects.


