Exploring felicitous environments for the Japanese evidential rashii
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Defining an evidential as a grammatical category whose primary meaning is the information source of the proposition asserted (Aikhenvald, 2004), much of the current literature on the Japanese word rashii categorizes it as an inferential evidential (Aoki, 1986; Asano-Cavanagh, 2010, Masuoka & Takubo, 1992) where the speaker indicates that she has made an inference based on some evidence. However, other authors maintain that rashii can also be used as a hearsay marker (Makino & Michio, 1989; McCready & Ogata, 2007), indicating that the information has been acquired through the verbal report of someone else. This study explores whether rashii is one or both of the evidentials previously claimed based on experimental evidence. We also compare the behavior of rashii to several other representative Japanese evidentials, namely, inferential-yooha, inferential-sooda, and hearsay-sooda, which have never been tested in an experimental paradigm.

We first identified two factors which can be manipulated to describe suitable environments for the chosen evidentials: (i) what the speaker is doing – ‘report’ vs. ‘inference’; and (ii) how evidence or information is acquired by the speaker – ‘firsthand’ vs. ‘non-firsthand.’ We hypothesized that based on the existing literature, certain evidentials would be more compatible in a given context than others. For example, hearsay-sooda is predicted to be more compatible with ‘report-nonfirsthand’ when compared with inferential-yooha because there is no inference involved by the speaker in the former case. Within this framework, we explore to what degree rashii is compatible both with ‘inference-nonfirsthand’ and ‘report-nonfirsthand’ environments.

Seventy-two native speakers of Japanese were recruited to complete an online experiment which involved reading a context passage which fit one of four discourse environments rendered by the 2x2 factorial design described above: ‘report-firsthand,’ ‘inference-firsthand,’ ‘report-nonfirsthand,’ and ‘inference-nonfirsthand.’ Each passage was then followed by one of six sentences: (1) a proposition with hearsay-sooda; (2) the same proposition instead with inferential-sooda; (3) the proposition with inferential-yooha; (4) the proposition with rashii; (5) the bare proposition (baseline); and (6) the proposition with explicit hearsay (another baseline). For example, a participant would be presented with a passage which describes a situation where Mr. Sato notices that someone has suddenly slipped and fallen on the sidewalk. Then, the participant would be presented with one out of six possible follow-up propositions which are to be uttered by Mr. Sato: (1) hodoo-ga kootte-iru-sooda (the sidewalk is icy + hearsay-sooda); (2) hodoo-ga kootte-i-sooda (the sidewalk is icy + inferential-sooda); (3) hodoo-ga kootte-iru-yooha (the sidewalk is icy + inferential-yooha); and so on. Thus, there were 4x6 = 24 different conditions.

Participants were to rate as quickly as possible on a 6-point Likert scale how natural the follow-up proposition was given the context of the preceding passage. Likert scores and reaction times were analyzed in order to determine which utterance environments are compatible with each proposition type. Crucially, rashii was examined in comparison with the other evidentials, especially with respect to ‘inference-nonfirsthand’ and ‘report-nonfirsthand’ contexts in order to shed light on the Japanese evidential system and its analysis.
References: