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This paper deals with a Japanese transitive construction, as in (1):

(1) John-wa ie-o tate-ta.
John-TOP house-ACC build-PAST

‘John built his house.’

(1) is ambiguous, with two possible readings. The first interpretation is that the subject referent “John” is the agent who built his house by himself. The second interpretation is that the subject referent “John” is the causer (e.g. client) who had his house built by someone else (e.g. carpenter). In the latter interpretation, the causative action is encoded as a single event in spite of the understood existence of an intermediary agent. I use the term Intermediary Transitive Construction (ITC) to refer to the latter type of the transitive construction.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the constructional properties of the ITC in Japanese from the viewpoint of Construction Grammar and to propose the following hypothesis concerning the ITC:

(2) In ITC, the intermediary agent and his or her action must be cognitively backgrounded. This hypothesis shows that the event of ITC consists of the result state of the object referent brought about by cognitively “backgrounding” (or conceptually neglecting) the intermediary agent and his or her action. The hypothesis is supported by the following pieces of evidence.

First, accomplishment verbs, but not activity verbs, can occur in an ITC:

(3) Watashi-wa kuruma-o [syuurishi/*untenshi]-ta. (ITC)
I-TOP car-ACC {repair/ drive}-PAST

‘I {repaired/ drove} my car.’

Second, “resultative adverbs”, but not “manner adverbs”, can occur in an ITC:

(4) *Watashi-wa kami-o {mijikaku/*teinei} ki-ta. (ITC)
I-TOP hair-ACC {short/ carefully} cut-PAST

‘I cut my hair {short/ carefully}.

Last, let us compare ITCs in Japanese and English. Goldberg (1995) points out that the following sentences are well-formed as ITCs:

(5) a. Chris cut her hair at the salon on University Avenue.
b. She painted her house. (When in fact the painters did the painting) (Goldberg 1995: 169)

However, the judgment on (5) varies among English native speakers, and Have/Get constructions (cf. Chris had/got her hair cut.) are preferred in these situations (see, also Ziegeler and Lee (2006)). Moreover, the following sentences in Japanese can be naturally interpreted as ITCs, whereas the corresponding sentences in English cannot:

(6) a. Watashi-wa shikain-de ha-o nui-ta. (ITC)
I-TOP dental office-at tooth-ACC extract-PAST

b. *I extracted my tooth at the dental office. (ITC)

The examples in (6) suggest that the ITC in English is not as productive as that in Japanese and constructional schema of the ITC in English has not been established yet.

The semantic and syntactic properties associated with ITC are not predictable from an entirely lexically-based approach and they give strong support for a Construction Grammar approach.

Selected References