

# *Eel sentences in Japanese and English*

Hisao Tokizaki

Sapporo University

## 1. Introduction

There has been a long debate about the so-called “*eel* sentences” in Japanese. The sentences are claimed to be derived by predicate substitution (Okutsu 1978), by cleft formation (Kitahara 1981), and by predicate deletion (Sugiura 1991).

In this paper, I would like to discuss the acceptability of the *eel* sentences in Japanese and English. I will argue that *eel* sentences are not derived from full sentences by transformation or deletion. It will also be argued that the copular verb *be* shows correspondence between the subject and the complement.\*

## 2. The definition of *eel* sentences

First, let us review what are *eel* sentences. In the tradition of Japanese linguistics, sentences such as (1a) are called *eel* sentences.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. Boku-wa unagi-da.  
I-TOP eel-COP  
'I will have an eel bowl.'
- b. Wagahai-wa neko-dearu.  
I-TOP cat-COP  
'I am a cat.'

(1a) is likely to be uttered by a speaker who is going to order in a restaurant. (1b) is a monologue of a cat in a fiction. Let us call the interpretation of (1a) “*eel* reading” and the interpretation of (1b) “*cat* reading.” The speaker in (1a) does not have the property of being an eel, but the speaker in (1b) does have the property of being a cat. To put it simply, “I” is not equal to “an eel” in the *eel* reading, but “I” is equal to “a cat” in the *cat* reading.

Given the definition of *eel* reading stated above, we also include the

---

\* This is a revised version of the paper presented at the 124th conference of Linguistic Society of Japan held at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies on July 16, 2002. I would like to thank Shosuke Haraguchi for his continuing support and encouragement. This work was inspired by Nishiyama (2002). I would like to thank Yuji Nishiyama, Seizo Kasai, Shigeru Sakahara, Keiichiro Okutsu, and the participants of the conference for their valuable comments. Any remaining errors and inconsistencies are my own, however. The research is supported by the grant from Sapporo University 2001.

<sup>1</sup> I will use the following abbreviation to show grammatical words. TOP: topic marker; COP: copular; NOM: nominative; ACC: accusative. Note that the exact status of these items is not well understood.

following sentences into *eel* sentences.

- (2) A: Unagi-wa dochira-de?  
eel-TOP who-COP  
'Who is the eel (bowl)?'
- B: Boku-ga unagi-da.  
I-NOM eel-COP  
'I am the eel.'
- (3) A: Unagi-wa dochira-de? (=2A)  
B: Unagi-wa boku-da.  
eel-TOP I-COP  
'The eel (bowl) is me.'
- (4) Unagi-ga boku-da. Oyako-ga sochira-da.  
eel-NOM I-COP chicken and egg-NOM (s)he-COP  
'The eel (bowl) is me. The chicken and egg (bowl) is him/her.'

These sentences are not used as order in restaurants as (1a). However, we still regard the sentences in (2)-(4) as *eel* sentences because "I" is not equal to "the eel" in the expected reading of these sentences.

## 2. Previous analyses and problems

Let us review the previous analyses of *eel* sentences. Okutsu (1978) claims that *da* is a substitute form of the predicate *taberu* 'eat', and that (1a) is derived from (5a) through (5b) by deletion of the accusative case marker *o*.

- (5) a. Boku-wa unagi-o taberu  
I-TOP eel-ACC eat  
'I will eat an eel (bowl).'
- b. Boku-wa unagi-o da  
I-TOP eel-ACC COP

Sugiura (1991) claims that the predicate *o taberu* in (5a) is deleted to give (6).

- (6) Boku-wa unagi  
I-TOP eel

The *eel* sentence (1a) is claimed to derive from (6) by insertion of an assertive marker *da*.

Fauconnier (1985) argues that there is a metonymic mapping from "I" to

“my order” in *eel* sentences.<sup>2</sup>

- (7) Boku{--> -no chumon-ryori}-wa unagi-da.  
I{--> -POSS ordered dish}-TOP eel-COP

Sakahara (1990) also argues that *eel* sentences are identificational sentences in which the role is omitted.

- (8) a. Boku-no chumon-ryori-wa unagi-da.  
I-POSS ordered dish-TOP eel-COP  
'My ordered dish is an eel (bowl).'
- b. Boku-wa (chumon-ryori-wa) unagi-da.  
I-TOP (ordered dish-TOP) eel-COP  
'As for me, the ordered dish is an eel (bowl).'

Nakajima (1987) also claims that *eel* sentences are the expression where “I” is topicalized and contrasted with other possible subjects. Nishiyama (2002), on the other hand, argues that *eel* sentences are a type of predicational sentences, but he also postulates a similar construction to Sakahara’s (8b).

- (9) Boku-wa, [ $\phi$ -wa unagi-da]  
I-TOP  $\phi$ -TOP eel-COP

According to Shank and Abelson (1977)’s notion of *script*, Kunihiro (1986) suggests that *eel* sentences are used to fill in the slots of guests and their orders in the context of a restaurant.<sup>3</sup> Sugiura (1993) also argues that *eel* sentences are base generated sentences, which show a many-to-one correspondence between two sets.<sup>4</sup> For example, the sentence in (10a) is illustrated by (10b).

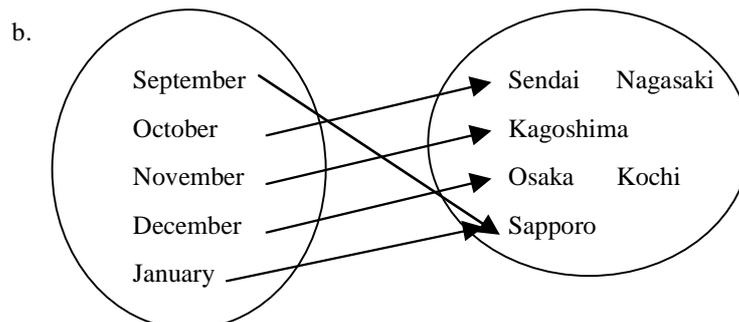
- (10) a. Raigetsu-wa boku-wa Osaka-da.  
next month-TOP I-TOP Osaka-COP  
'I am going to Osaka next month.'

---

<sup>2</sup> For criticism of the metonymic analyses including Sakahara’s (1990), see Nishiyama (2002).

<sup>3</sup> The proposal to be made here is basically similar to Kunihiro’s (1986), but is different from his in claiming that *eel* sentences are acceptable when a contrastive sentence invokes a table, not when a place sets the context.

<sup>4</sup> Sugiura (1993) criticizes Kunihiro’s (1986) analysis and argues that his analysis cannot show the difference between “A is B” and “B is A”. The proposal to be made below can attribute the difference to the order of the items to be read in a table.



We cannot discuss all these analyses in detail for reasons of space, but I point out some problems of them in terms of case and agreement. Let us look at the following Russian sentences:

- (11) a. Q vodu  
 I water(ACC)  
 'I'll have water.'
- b. % Q voda  
 I water(NOM)  
 'I am water.'

Two in three informants judged (11b) as acceptable. It seems that (11b) cannot be derived in the predicate substitution analysis and the predicate deletion analysis because the noun in the predicate is case marked as nominative. These analysis only expect accusative complements as in (11a).

The cleft analysis, the metonymy analysis, and the role deletion analysis seem to have some problem in explaining the ungrammaticality of (12b) below.

- (12) a. What I ordered is the hamsandwich.  
 b. \* I is the hamsandwich.

Likewise, these analyses need to explain why the verb *be* does not become the plural form *are* in (13b).

- (13) a. What I ordered are the ham sandwich and the lemonade.  
 b. \* I are the ham sandwich and the lemonade.

The ungrammaticality of (12b) and (13b) shows us that *I* is not equal to *what I ordered*.

#### 4. Definiteness restriction

Now let us turn to *eel* sentences in English. Bolinger (1968) shows the

following as an expression at the cashier of a restaurant:

- (14) You've got us confused: you're charging me for the noon special; the man in front of me was the noon special; I'm the soup.

Hoffer (1972) also shows a dialogue between a waitress and a patron:

- (15) Waitress: Now, who is the veal parmesan and who is the spaghetti?  
Patron: I'm the veal; he's the spaghetti.

In the following dialogue, which Nakano (1982) cites from a comic, a soldier is handing coffee around to his seniors:

- (16) A: Let's see, sir. You're the black coffee with sugar?  
B: Right.  
C: I'm the coffee with cream and sugar, Beetle.  
A: Okay. (To D) Then you must be the cream and sugar with no coffee, sir.  
D: I don't like your tone of voice!

Fauconnier (1985) shows an inverted *eel* sentence. In the second clause of (17), the subject is order and the complement is a customer.

- (17) I'm the ham sandwich: the quiche is my friend.

Notice that in (14) to (17), the complement of the verb *be* is a definite noun phrase. Generally, indefinite nouns are not acceptable in *eel* sentences.<sup>5</sup>

- (18) \* I'm a ham sandwich.

A natural question to ask is why there is such a restriction on *eel* sentences in English.

Halliday (1967:66) argues that there are three functions of the verb *be*: predicative (or intensive), equative (or extensive), and existential. (19a) and (19b) illustrate the predicative and equative *be*, respectively.

---

<sup>5</sup> Kuno(1978:92) points out that sentences such as in (i) can be heard when you deal a variety of hamburgers to your friends. I will return to this point below.

- (i) I am a cheese hamburger.

- (19) a. (What is Mary's husband?)  
 Mary's husband is a teacher. / \*A teacher is Mary's husband.
- b. (Who is Mary's husband?)  
 Mary's husband is John. / John is Mary's husband.

Note that the complement of the verb is indefinite in (19a) and definite in (19b). Then we can attribute unacceptability of (18) to the fact that *a ham sandwich* is an indefinite noun phrase. The hearer is likely to interpret (18) as predicational, and get the wrong meaning “the speaker is not a human being but an eel.” On the other hand, in (14)-(17) the complement of the verb *be* is a definite noun phrase. The hearer easily interprets it as a different entity from the speaker and gets the intended *eel* interpretation. In this sense, we should call the use of *be* in *eel* sentences “correspondence” rather than “equative”.

Japanese, unlike English, has no articles to show (in)definiteness. However, nouns in *eel* sentences seem to be semantically indefinite because things to be ordered and made cannot be definite. If this is the case, why indefinite noun phrases can be used in *eel* sentences in Japanese? There seem to be at least two reasons. One is that Japanese *da* is not a true copula verb as English *be*. Its grammatical status is not clear and can be just a particle. Suppose we replace *da* with *de-aruu* “is” in (1a) as in *Boku-wa unagi-de-aruu*, the *eel* interpretation is somewhat suppressed and the sentence can more easily be interpreted as a *cat* sentence as (1b). Another reason is that “subjects” marked with *-ga* or *-wa* may not have the status of grammatical subject. For example, “subjects” in Japanese do not show agreement with verbs unlike subjects in English.

### 5. Making of a table and its interpretation

Let us consider how *eel* sentences show correspondence between the subject and the complement. Each example in (14)-(17) contains a pair of sentences contrasted with each other. Note that the *eel* sentence in (14) is not acceptable when it is uttered by a customer with no company.

- (20) ??I'm the soup. Do you accept VISA?

This is also the case with Japanese (1a), which cannot be produced by a customer with no company. The functions of *eel* sentences are to make contrastive themes correspondent to some other entities, to make a table in mind, and to read out the items in a row.

(21)

customer	order	expression
my friend	noodle	A: "Kake-soba kudasai" (I'll have a noodle.)
I	eel	B: "Boku-wa unagi-da" (I'm an eel.)

Then we can say that the second clause in (17) is made by reading out the items in a row from right to left:

(22)

customer	order	expression
I	the ham sandwich	I'm the ham sandwich:
my friend	the quiche	the quiche is my friend.

If we are right in claiming that *eel* sentences are based on a table in mind, we expect that the relation between the subject and the complement must be uniform.

- (23) A: Watashi-wa, kono-mise hajimete-da.  
 I-TOP this-shop first time-COP  
 'This is my first time coming to this restaurant.'
- B: # Boku-wa unagi-da.  
 I-TOP eel-COP  
 'I will have an eel bowl.'

In (23) the speaker A is making a table of customers and the number of times they have come to the restaurant while the speaker B is trying to make a table of customers and their orders. (23B) is odd because the relation between the subject and the complement is not parallel to that in (23A). Moreover, if we analyze *eel* sentences as reading out of items in a table in mind, we also expect that more than two items (or columns) can be related in a sentence. In fact it is possible to make *eel* sentences consisting of three noun phrases.

- (24) Waiter: Gohan oomori-mo dekimasu.  
 rice large serving-too can  
 'We can serve large rice, too.'
- A: Iya, oyako-don, hutsuu-de.  
 no chicken and egg-bowl regular  
 'No, thanks, chicken and egg-bowl, regular amount of rice (for me).'
- B: Ja, boku-wa unagi-de oomori-da.  
 then I-TOP eel-COP large serving-COP  
 'Then I'll have an eel (bowl) in large amount.'

(24B) is an *eel* sentence, which is made by reading out three items in a table:

customers, their orders, and their amount.

An advantage of this analysis is that we can explain why *eel* sentences imply that the entity in the complement “is the best” in the category of the subject, especially in advertisement (cf. Sugiura 1993: 314):

- (25) a. Haru-wa akebono  
spring-TOP dawn  
‘The best time in spring is Dawn.’  
b. Biiru-wa Sapporo  
beer-TOP Sapporo  
‘As for beer, Sapporo is the best.’

The item to be listed in a table should be the thing which first comes to the speaker’s mind, and should be the best in the category. The context of advertisement also seems to give the sentence the “best” implication. The following sentence is not an advertisement and does not have the implication.

- (26) Jimin-wa Suzuki Muneo, Shamin-wa Tsujimoto Kiyomi-da.  
LDP-TOP Suzuki Muneo SDP-TOP Tsujimoto Kiyomi-COP  
‘In LDP is Suzuki Muneo, and in SDP is Tsujimoto Kiyomi.’

(26) is a statement about the politicians who increased the nation's distrust in politics. Sakahara (1990:63) himself argues that in deletion analysis it is difficult to specify what is deleted in sentences such as (25).

In section 2, we observed a definiteness restriction on the complement noun phrase in *eel* sentences. However, even when the complement is not a definite noun phrase, the verb *be* can be interpreted not as predication but as correspondence in some context. Then you can make a table in mind and the sentence can be acceptable as an *eel* sentence. In the following example, the complement is a noun phrase with no article, which represents a type of coffee.<sup>6</sup>

- (27) I brought everyone coffee. Who takes it black and who's regular? Helen?

Here *eel* interpretation is possible because the first clause in the second sentence *who takes it black* helps the hearer to make a table of people and varieties of coffee. The hearer can interpret *regular* not as an attribute of the subject but as an independent entity that corresponds to the subject of the clause.

---

<sup>6</sup> (27) is taken from a dialogue in NHK radio English conversation program (October 22, 2002),

Notice that making a table in mind is also involved in other expressions than *eel* sentences. For example, consider gapping in English as shown in (28).

- (28) a. John *ate* fish and Bill a steak.  
b. Henry *played* the oboe and George \*(played) Hamlet.  
c. David *asked* Diana *to join the party* and Fred Ann.

As we can see from (28b), the two clauses must be semantically parallel in gapping constructions. We have seen the same parallelism condition on *eel* sentences in (23). Note also that discontinuous constituents can be “deleted” as shown in (28c). Then we may well conclude that gapping construction is made not by deletion, but by reading out the items in a table.<sup>7</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

I have argued that *eel* sentences in English are acceptable if the complement of the verb *be* is a definite noun phrase. Indefinite noun phrases in the complement are likely to make the hearer interpret the sentence as a predication about the subject, not as a correspondence relation between the subject and the entity in the complement. I have also argued that *eel* sentences can be acceptable if the hearer can make a table of entities in the subject and the complement. The claim made here is supported by the fact that inverted *eel* sentences (2c) and (17) and *eel* sentences with more than two items as (24B) are acceptable. It is also supported by the fact that non-contrastive *eel* sentences as (20) and *eel* sentences with irregular correspondence as (23) are unacceptable. I have also pointed out that indefinite noun phrase can occur in English *eel* sentences if the hearer can make a table of correspondence between the subject and the complement in some context as (27).

## References

- Bolinger, D. 1968. Judgments of grammaticality. *Lingua* 21, 34-40.  
Fauconnier, G. 1985. *Mental spaces*. MIT Press. (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994<sup>2</sup>)  
Halliday, M.A.K. 1967. Notes on transitivity and theme in English, part 1. *Journal of Linguistics* 3, 37-81.  
Hoffer, B. 1972. Contrastive analysis of basic sentence patterns in Japanese and English. Miyauchi Hideo kyoju kanreki kinen ronbunshu henshu-iinkai ed. *Nichi-ei-no kotoba-to bunka*. Sanseido, 213-222.  
Kitahara, Yasuo. 1981. *Nihongo-no bunpo*. Chuokoronsha.  
Kunihiro, Tetsuya. 1986. Gogi-kenkyu-no mondaiten—Tagi-go-o chushin-to shite.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kuno and Takami (1993) also point out that the possibility of making a list decides the acceptability of multiple questions in English.

*Nihongogaku* 5, September, 4-12.

Kuno, Susumu. 1978. *Danwa-no bunpo*. Taishukan.

Kuno, Susumu and Ken-ichi Takami. 1993. *Grammar and discourse principles: Functional syntax and GB theory*. The University of Chicago Press.

Nakajima Fumio. 1987. *Nihongo-no koozoo*. Iwanami Shoten.

Nakano, Michio. 1982. Hasso-to hyogen-no hikaku. Tetsuya Kunihiro ed. *Hasso-to hyogen*. Taishukan, 33-65.

Nishiyama, Yuji. 2002. Unagi-bun-to sotei-bun. *Keiogijuku-daigaku gengo-bunka-kenkyujo kiyoo*. 33.

Okutsu, Keiichiro. 1978. “*Boku-wa unagi-da*”-no bunpoo. Kuroshio Shuppan.

Sakahara, Shigeru. 1990. Yakuwari, ga/wa, unagi-bun. *Ninchi-kagaku-no hatten*. Kodansha, 29-66.

Shank, R. and R. Abelson. 1977. *Scripts, plans, goals and understanding*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Sugiura, Shigeko. 1991. “Da”-no imi—“unagi-bun-o megutte. *Tokyo Daigaku Gengogaku-ronshu* 12, 81-95.

Sugiura, Shigeko. 1993. “Boku-wa unagi”-to “Boku-wa unagi-o” *Tokyo Daigaku Gengogaku-ronshu* 13, 291-315.