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Clash of viewpoints; Analysis of disagreement on a new use of past tense in Japanese.

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The aim of this presentation is to describe a recent innovation in the use of past tense (henceforth *Innovative Past*) in Japanese by younger speakers, and one of which older speakers do not approve. First I will give an overview of the variety of past use in Japanese. Second, I will argue using mental spaces theory (Fauconnier, 1985; Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005) that these two generations have distinct interpretations of the innovative past. Young speakers use the past tense as a marker of social deixis; by contrast older speakers give it a non-temporal past tense interpretation.

The Innovative Past is often used in interactions between customers (C), typically in the older age group, and sales people; that is, waiters and waitress, shopkeepers, salesmen and shop assistants, typically in the younger age group (S). Cs complain that Innovative Past in example like (1) instead of the present tense (2) sounds “wrong” or “rude” or “unintelligent”.

1) *Koohii de yoroshikatta desu ka?*
Coffee with good-PST COP Q?
Was a coffee right?

2) *Koohii hitotsu de yoroshii desu ka?*
Coffee with good-NONPST COP Q?
Is a coffee right?

This use has gained the public attention through the media, in newspaper article (Asahi News Paper, 24th, June, 2002, the Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 24th May, 2003) and in the public internet community.

The past tense marker of Japanese, *-ta*, has two main functions. One (temporal use) is refer to a situation temporally prior to the speech point and the other is to refer to information which contrasts with that in the speakers’ past epistemic space. For example, speaker can use the past tense to identify an object in that speaker’s presence, a gift for example, only if the speaker has made a guess about the identity of gift before it was revealed (e.g. *chokoreeto datta*. Chocolate COP-PST. It was chocolate.) I argue that the negative impression Cs receive from the Innovative Past has its source in the information structure of the non-temporal use of the past tense. Cs conclude that Ss regard the information Cs provide as if it had been discussed and anticipated before Cs spoke; For Cs, Ss are claiming to have got into C’s mind.

By contrast, Ss choose the past tense to keep some social distance from Cs as a politeness marker. The past tense allows Ss to avoid confronting Cs, by referring to Ss' order as past information which is not at the current speech point where they are. So even though Ss may be aware that Cs find the Innovative Past inappropriate, it is difficult for Ss to use the present tense in these situations. Thus, S's and C's strategies for interpreting the Innovative Past will inevitably collide.

References:

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- FAUCONNIER, GILLES. 1985. Mental spaces: aspects of meaning construction in natural language. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.