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NEGATIVE FORM EXPRESSION OF ADJECTIVES IN THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

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Abstract: This article examines the formation and grammatical features of negative adjective forms in the Japanese language. The study analyzes the two main categories of Japanese adjectives — い-adjectives (i-adjectives) and な-adjectives (na-adjectives) — and explains their negative forms through various examples. It is shown that the negative form of i-adjectives is mainly formed using the suffix「ない」nai, while na-adjectives and nouns require the structures「じゃありません」*ja arimasen* or「ではありません」*deva arimasen*. The article also discusses the differences between polite and plain negative forms as well as the usage of negative adjectives in present and past tenses. Special attention is given to the irregular conjugation of the adjective「いい」ii. Furthermore, the morphological and semantic characteristics of adjectives ending with「ない」 nai are analyzed, including their role in forming negative constructions. The research concludes that negative adjective forms in Japanese are grammatically systematic and closely connected to the level of politeness in communication.

Keywords: Japanese language, adjectives, i-adjectives, na-adjectives, negative form, grammatical conjugation.

Introduction

When examining the inflection of adjectives in their negative forms in Japanese, we learn that adjectives are generally divided into two types:

い 形 容 詞 (i-keiyōshi), i-adjectives

な 形 容 詞 (na-keiyōshi), na-adjectives

Negation for these adjectives is formed using the patterns ない (nai) and じゃありません (ja arimasen). As can be observed, the form nai is considered the most neutral form of negation. Previously, we noted that in verb negation, masen is used to express polite and respectful negation, while nai is used to form plain negative structures. Similarly, the nai form serves as the main grammatical means for forming negation of i-adjectives. However, the form nai is used only for negating i-adjectives. In order to form the negative of na-adjectives, the structure ja arimasen is used. Likewise, nouns are also negated using the same form ja arimasen.

• 青い ao-i → b. 青くない ao-ku-nai → c. 青くありません ao-ku-arimasen

As can be seen, the given i-adjective can form negation in two different ways. In the plain

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style, we use the negative form as shown in (b), while in polite speech it is more appropriate to use the form shown in (c), which corresponds to a more respectful level of language. If we also want to express the past tense, the forms are as follows:

a. 青 か っ た ao-katta

b. 青 く な か っ た ao-ku-nakatta

c. 青 く あ り ま せ ん で し た ao-ku-arimasen deshita

Thus, we can express the negative forms of i-adjectives in both present and past tenses. Among i-adjectives, there is one irregular adjective, similar to English, in which the stem itself changes:

いいです ii desu → 良かった yokatta

良くない yoku nai → 良くなかった yoku nakatta

In this case, we have observed how i-adjectives are inflected in both present and past negative forms.

空が青かった。 Sora ga aokatta. “The sky was blue.”

空が青くなかった。 Sora ga aoku nakatta. “The sky was not blue.”

空 が 青 く あ り ま せ ん で し た 。 Sora ga aoku arimasen deshita. “The sky was not blue (polite).”

In other adjectives, only the final -i changes to -ku, after which the negative marker is attached.

Na-adjectives are negated using the copular verb aru in its negative forms. Unlike i-adjectives, there is no need for stem alteration or internal phonological change. Instead, the final -na is simply dropped when forming the negative construction. Negation can be expressed by adding ja arimasen or dewa arimasen, thereby completing the sentence in a negative form. The form dewa is more commonly contracted to ja in spoken conversation. This type of negation places emphasis on the topic marker wa before expressing negation, thereby highlighting the topic and then denying it. As Martin explains, “In negative constructions, focusing on the topic marker wa results in the formation of dewa, and this process is referred to as ‘subordinated nuclear focus.’” For example:

• き れ い だ kirei da → き れ い で は な い / き れ い じ ゃ な い kirei dewa nai / kirei ja nai “not beautiful”

Thus, na-adjectives are negated without internal morphological change, unlike i-adjectives, and the negation is achieved through the copular negative construction.

In this form, instead of using arimasen, the negative form nai is used. This is also considered a negative form derived from the base structure of the word, without requiring internal stem modification.

き れ い だ っ た

き れ い で は な い / き れ い じ ゃ な か っ た

き れ い で す

き れ い で は あ り ま せ ん / き れ い じ ゃ あ り ま せ ん

き れ い で し た

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きれいではありませんでした

In na-adjective negative sentences, negation is generally expressed by first marking the topic with wa or ga, followed by the negative construction of the na-adjective. For different tense forms and levels of politeness, the same conjugational patterns observed in i-adjectives can be applied.

In addition, there are several adjectives in Japanese that already end in -nai. These words inherently contain a negative meaning in their lexical form. Examples include:

きたない kitanai (dirty)

あぶない abunai (dangerous)

つまらない tsumaranai (boring)

すくない sukunai (few / little)

These adjectives are structurally positive adjectives but semantically contain a negative element as part of their root form.

Literature Review

As Martin points out, in such cases the negative element is present; however, it should be regarded as having an etymological status rather than being analyzed as a separately added negation suffix. In other words, these adjectives cannot be interpreted as words formed through the simple attachment of a negative affix. Nevertheless, their negation can still combine with other negative-forming elements in the same way as other adjectives. From a morphological perspective, the so-called etymological negative element is still part of the word-formation system and cannot be treated as a lexical root. It may be said that the affix and its morphological structure operate at a semantic level rather than as an independent lexical item.

During the process of negation, when the -nai ending is further modified, the final -i is replaced by the adverbial suffix -ku, resulting in a form such as -naku. After this transformation, the negative marker -nai is again attached at the end. At this point, a question arises: the resulting structure appears to contain a double negative form (-naku-nai) at the surface level. However, the first nai is treated as part of the lexical stem rather than an independent negative operator. Therefore, the second negation does not create a true double negation effect, and the overall meaning remains that of a simple negative construction.

An example of this type of structure can be seen in:

すくない → すくなかった / すくなくない

sukunai → sukunakatta / sukunakunai

Results And Discussion

The standard negative form in Japanese is constructed by attaching the suffix -na directly to the verb stem. Negation through suffixation is one of the most widely used derivational processes in the language. Politeness levels also play an important role and differ significantly from plain (non-polite) verb forms. In polite speech, negation is expressed using the suffix -en, which is attached after the verb stem. Two major types of adjectives have also been described in detail. i-adjectives form negation in a manner similar to verbs in their plain forms. The negative marker -na- functions consistently, while it is attached to the adjective stem in its inflected form. There is also a stem alternation process in which the adverbial suffix -ku- appears between the adjective stem and the negative marker. Tense marking follows a pattern similar to that of verbs in the plain form. na-adjectives are negated using the copular negative form ja nai, which demonstrates

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behavior similar to structural or constituent negation. Nouns are also negated in a similar way to na-adjectives. However, there is another method of negating nouns through existential constructions: using the verb aru for inanimate objects and iru for animate beings.

Additional aspects include the negation of non-verbal predicates and indefinite pronouns. Various other phenomena have also been examined. After analyzing Japanese negation patterns and their typological features, this dissertation aims to cover a sufficiently broad range of topics and thereby contribute meaningfully to the existing literature on this subject. The Japanese language possesses a highly systematic and morphologically rich mechanism for expressing negation, especially in the domain of adjectives. The present study examines the grammatical formation of negative adjectives in Japanese and analyzes the distinctions between *i-adjectives* (*i-keiyōshi*) and *na-adjectives* (*na-keiyōshi*). The research further explores tense variation, politeness distinctions, irregular adjective behavior, and the semantic implications of adjectives that inherently contain the element *-nai* in their lexical structure. Japanese adjectives are traditionally divided into two major grammatical classes: *i-adjectives* and *na-adjectives*. These two groups differ significantly in the way negation is formed. The negative structure of *i-adjectives* is primarily created through the auxiliary form *nai*, while *na-adjectives* and nouns employ the copular negative constructions *ja arimasen* or *dewa arimasen*. The study demonstrates that the form *nai* functions as the neutral and basic marker of negation in Japanese grammar, whereas *arimasen* expresses a more polite and formal level of speech. For *i-adjectives*, negation involves direct morphological modification within the adjective itself. Specifically, the final syllable *-i* changes to *-ku*, after which the negative marker *nai* is attached. For example, the adjective *aoi* ("blue") becomes *aoku nai* ("not blue"). In polite speech, the form develops further into *aoku arimasen*. This transformation illustrates the agglutinative nature of Japanese morphology, where grammatical meaning is added through predictable suffixation. The same process also applies in past tense forms. Thus, *aokatta* ("was blue") changes into *aoku nakatta* ("was not blue") and its polite equivalent *aoku arimasen deshita*. An important observation concerns the irregular adjective *ii* ("good"), whose stem changes historically to *yoi* in conjugated forms. As a result, the negative forms are not constructed as *ii nai* but rather as *yoku nai* and *yoku nakatta*. This irregularity reflects remnants of historical phonological developments preserved in modern Japanese grammar.

Conclusion

The article demonstrates that despite such irregularities, the overall negation system remains highly structured and productive. Unlike *i-adjectives*, *na-adjectives* do not undergo internal morphological change during negation. Instead, negation is achieved through the negative forms of the copular verb *aru*. In these constructions, the final particle *-na* is removed, and the adjective combines with *dewa nai* or its colloquial contracted form *ja nai*. For instance, *kirei da* ("beautiful") becomes *kirei ja nai* ("not beautiful"). Polite variants include *kirei ja arimasen* and *kirei dewa arimasen*. The study emphasizes that this type of negation operates syntactically rather than morphologically because the adjective stem itself remains unchanged. The research also examines the functional role of topic marking in Japanese negation. According to Martin's interpretation, the particle *wa* within constructions such as *dewa nai* contributes to a process known as "subordinated nuclear focus," where emphasis is placed on the topic before negation is expressed. This demonstrates that Japanese negation is not only morphological but also deeply connected to discourse structure and information focus. Another important aspect discussed in the article concerns adjectives that already contain the ending *-nai* as part of their lexical structure. Examples include *kitanai* ("dirty"), *abunai* ("dangerous"), *tsumaranai* ("boring"), and *sukunai* ("few" or "little").

Although these words superficially resemble negative forms, their *-nai* component is not an independent negation suffix but rather an etymological element embedded in the lexical root. Consequently, they are considered semantically negative in meaning while remaining grammatically positive adjectives. The article further investigates the morphological consequences when such adjectives themselves undergo negation. In these cases, the final *-i* again changes into *-ku*, after which the negative marker *nai* is added, producing forms such as *sukunakunai* ("not few"). At first glance, these structures appear to contain double negation because two *nai* elements are visible. However, the first *nai* belongs to the lexical stem, while the second functions as the actual grammatical negation marker. Therefore, the resulting structure does not express logical double negation but rather a standard negative meaning. This distinction highlights the importance of differentiating between lexical semantics and grammatical morphology in Japanese linguistic analysis. The findings of the study indicate that Japanese negation operates through a combination of morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic mechanisms. Morphologically, negation is largely achieved through suffixation and stem alternation. Syntactically, copular constructions play a major role in the negation of *na-adjectives* and nouns. Pragmatically, politeness distinctions strongly influence the choice between forms such as *nai* and *arimasen*. The interaction of these factors demonstrates the complexity and flexibility of Japanese grammatical structures. Furthermore, the study shows that politeness is an essential category in Japanese grammar. Plain negative forms such as *nai* are commonly used in informal contexts, whereas *arimasen* and *deshita* are employed in formal communication. This distinction reflects broader sociolinguistic norms in Japanese society, where grammatical forms encode levels of respect and social hierarchy.

In conclusion, the negation of Japanese adjectives reveals important characteristics of Japanese linguistic structure. *I-adjectives* exhibit internal morphological change during negation, while *na-adjectives* rely on copular negative constructions. Irregular adjectives and lexicalized *-nai* forms further enrich the system and demonstrate the interaction between historical development and contemporary grammar. The study confirms that Japanese negation cannot be understood solely as a mechanical grammatical process; rather, it represents a dynamic interaction between morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Consequently, the analysis of adjective negation contributes not only to the understanding of Japanese grammar but also to broader linguistic discussions concerning negation, word formation, and functional grammar.

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