The development of Japanese no:
Grammaticalization, degrammaticalization, or neither?

This paper discusses the development of the multi-functional particle no from premodern Japanese (PMJ) to modern Japanese (ModJ). After reviewing two previous proposals, which can be characterized as grammaticalization and degrammaticalization, I argue that the alleged grammaticalization did not happen, and that alleged degrammaticalization is better characterized as renewal.

No in ModJ has three functions:
(1) a. Taro-no hon (Genitive)  b. akai no (Pronoun)
   T.-NO book              red NO
   ‘Taro’s book’           ‘red one’
   c. Taro-ga kooto-o kita no-wa samui kara da (Complementizer)
   T.-ga coat-Acc put.on NO-Top cold because Copula
   ‘It is because it is cold that Taro put on a coat.’

(1a-c) illustrate the usage of no as genitive, pronoun, and complementizer, respectively. Genitive no existed in PMJ, while complementizer no emerged in ModJ, and the existence of pronominal no in PMJ is controversial, as I show below.

So far there has been two major proposals concerning the development of no:
(2) Pronoun > Complementizer (Yanagida 1993, grammaticalization)
(3) Ø > no (Horie 1993, degrammaticalization)
I argue that the (2) did not happen, and that (3) is better characterized as renewal, where a morpheme undergoes phonological reduction to zero and is then replaced by another morpheme.

Pronoun > Complementizer ?
(4) is the oft-cited alleged evidence for the pronominal no in PMJ:
(4) ima-no nusi-no saki-no-mo te torikahasite
   now-Gen master-also previous.time-NO-also hand holding
   ‘the current master and the previous one are holding hands together,’ (Tosanikki, 10C)
Yanagida (1993) assumes that the second no (after saki) is a pronoun and is the source of complementizer no, basing his proposal in (2). However, it is better analyzed as involving N’ deletion (cf. Saito, Murasugi, and Lin 2008), illustrated below for ModJ:
(5) Taro-no kuruma-wa takai-ga Jiro-no Ø-wa yasui
   T.-Gen car-Yop expensive-but J.-Gen Ø-Top cheap
   ‘Taro’s car is expensive, but Jiro’s Ø is cheap.’
Thus, (4) does not constitute evidence for (2). I concur with Nishi (2006) that the complementizer no developed independently of the genitive no.

In more theoretically oriented research, Pronoun > Complementizer is formalized as D > C (Simpson 2003), but this is also dubious. The categorically ambiguous status of ModJ no is illustrated by (1c) above and (6) below:
(6) Taro-wa [ringo-ga sara-no ue-ni at-ta no]-wo tot-te
   T.-TOP apple-NOM plate-GEN surface-on be-PAST NO-ACC take-and
   ‘Taro picked up an apple which was on a plate and…’ (Kuroda 1992)
(1c) is a cleft, and no corresponds to the rationale clause in the focus, and therefore it cannot
be D (with a nominal feature) but C. (6) is an example of a head-internal relative clause, and since *no* is the complement of ‘take’, it is D.

Now, exactly the same categorial ambiguity of *no* (between D and C) in ModJ is observed in its PMJ equivalents. PMJ has designated inflection forms (the so-called *rentai* forms) used in particular embedded contexts:

(7) a. musaboru-koto-no *yama-zar-u-ha* inoti-o ohu-ru daizi
devour-thing-NOM stop-not-RU-TOP life-ACC finish-RU
importance
ima koko-ni kitare-ri to tasikani *sira-zar-eba* nari
now here-at come-PERF C certainly know-not-because COP

‘It is because he certainly does not know that it is time to finish his life that he does not stop being greedy.’ (Turezuregusa 134, 14C)

b. [awoki *kame-no* ohoki-nar-u]-wo suwe-te
blue vase-GEN large-be-RU-ACC set-up-and (Kuroda 1992)

‘(They) set up a celadon vase which was large and…’ (Makura-no Sōsi, 10C)

(7a) and (7b) are a cleft and a head-internal relative clause, respectively, in PMJ, and like their ModJ equivalents in (1c) and (6), the conjugated (*rentai*) forms (headed by RU) are either D (7a) or C (7c). Thus, the categorial ambiguity of *no* simply reflects the categorial ambiguity of its ancestor *rentai* forms, and thus it in itself cannot have undergone the change of D > C.

Ø > no? Comparing the ModJ cleft and head-internal relative clause in (1c) and (6) and their PNJ equivalents in (7a, b), one can see that *no* is missing in (7). This led Horie (1993) (among others) to assume that PMJ has a zero noun Ø, which is replaced by *no* in ModJ. This proposal itself is degrammaticalization and requires strong motivations, but the proposal stems from the failure to recognize the proper morphological structure of *rentai* forms. As in (7a, b), once RU is identified as the head of *rentai* forms, we can connect RU and *no*. But there is a time gap between the loss of RU and the emergence of *no*. So the real change is ru > Ø > no. The zero morpheme appeared only in a transitional stage. Crucially, to the extent that the ultimate source of *no* is not zero, the whole change ru > Ø > no is not a case of degrammaticalization. More specifically, it is a case of renewal (cf. Gelderen 2011), a kind of cycle, where a morpheme undergoes phonological reduction to zero and is then replaced by another morpheme.
