Japanese Causatives: Against a Third Way for Case Assignment

Contrary to the standard view (Kuroda 1965, Miyagawa 1999 *inter alia*) that there are two homophonous productive causative morphemes (*s*)ase in Japanese, we argue that Japanese has only one (*s*)ase, and that the duality of interpretations attached to it (‘*let*’ vs. ‘*make*’) is not the reflex of some lexical ambiguity, but arises from pragmatic reasons. We thus reject the existence of a specific (*s*)ase (i) dedicated to the *let* interpretation and (ii) responsible for the assignment of the Dative case to the Causee-DP. This idea is new in itself; and it has important theoretical consequences: it defeats a mixed view of case assignment (a middle ground between inherent and structural case) apparently supported by Japanese causatives, which holds that inherent case can be assigned in the absence of a thematic relationship between the assigner and the assignee (this is, in essence, the proposal made by Kuroda 1965 and Kuno 1973: the *let* (*s*)ase Dative-marks the external argument of the stem). We show that when it occurs, Dative-marking of the Causee-DP is only caused by the presence of a (potentially silent) object of the stem, and it doesn’t correlate with a particular interpretation of the causative morpheme: of the two traditionally acknowledged sources of the Dativization process, i.e. the *let* interpretation of (*s*)ase and the transitivity of the stem (1), we only retain the latter.

1. The facts. The morpheme (*s*)ase attaches to a verb stem to form a causative construction ((1)-(2)). It has been claimed that when the stem is intransitive (2), the two values that the case feature on the Causee-DP can take (Accusative and Dative) are mapped to two distinct interpretations (*make* and *let* causative, respectively). The difference in case assignment has lead previous researchers to postulate two distinct (*s*)ase. But we can show that there is no correlation between the *let* interpretation and the Dative with intransitive stems. (i) Not all intransitive stems allow for the case alternation: in fact, all unaccusative stems ((3)-(4)) are incompatible with a Dative-marked Causee. Given the ungrammaticality of the Dative in (3), Generalization (5) rightly invokes unaccusativity, rather than the volitional character of the entity denoted by the Causee-DP (volition is therefore not a sufficient condition for the licensing of the Dative with intransitives, *pace* Shibatani 1990). Importantly, the two interpretations are available in (3), depending on the context of utterance: the contexts described in (6) and (7) impose one interpretation to sentence (3) (a ‘*make*’ and a ‘*let*’ interpretation, respectively). (ii) With unergatives, the Dative case is in fact only possible when the context of utterance makes salient a possible object for the seemingly unergative stem, making the predicate a direct transitive one in disguise ((8) with the Dative case is ill-formed when uttered out of the blue, but becomes well-formed in the contexts given in (9) and (10), with a ‘*make*’ and a ‘*let*’ interpretation respectively), which primes a syntactic representation given in (11). When no object can be supplied as in (12) (keeping the meaning of *waraw* constant), ungrammaticality ensues. As for Accusative marking in (8), the availability of the two interpretations is a matter of contextual knowledge, as with unaccusatives: the ambiguity found with the Accusative case deprives the traditional double-(*s*)ase view of its semantic basis. These two facts, i.e. the unavailability of the Dative with unaccusatives ((3)-(4)) and with unergatives which resist transitivization (12), point to a novel generalization: Dative-marking of the Causee-DP is only possible when the stem has a (possibly silent) object. Importantly, Dativization depends on the object, not on the case thereof, which forces a revision of the Double-o Constraint (13), traditionally invoked to account for the Dative with transitive stems (witness (14), an example of a shift to Dative with the stem *kisu* (*kiss*), which assigns Dative to its object).

2. Consequences. Interestingly, our generalization allows a direct comparison between Japanese (*s*)ase and French *faire à*: in French too, the Causee-DP in a *faire à* construction is Dative-marked if and only if the embedded infinitive is transitive ((15)-(16)); analyses of French causatives invoke a single dativization process. It is standardly thought that the Dative marking of the Causee-DP is done by the causative predicate or by the unit it forms (for case purposes) with the embedded infinitive (Reed 1991 is a good example of this line of thought, as well as Rouveret & Vergnaud 1980 among others). In light of this crosslinguistic comparison, we propose that in both languages, the causative predicate is responsible for both the theta-marking and the case-marking (inherent case) of the Causee-DP.
Ken caused Naomi to read a book. (Judgments reported in the literature: ‘Ken {let/made} Naomi read a book.’)

Ken caused Naomi to dance. (Literature: ‘Ken {let/made} Naomi dance.’)

Ken caused Naomi to die. (Literature: make causative)

Naomi caused the flower to bloom. (Literature: make causative)

Generalization: If the verb stem is unaccusative, the Causee-DP cannot receive the Dative case.

Context: Ken took Naomi to the mountain, and found a poisonous mushroom which he gave her. She choked and Ken tried to rescue her by all means possible but failed.

Context: Ken’s wife Naomi was dying of an incurable illness. She had left a will saying she did not want to be kept alive artificially. However, at first Ken ignored her will and asked the doctor to do his best to keep her alive; but after 10 days, he decided to let her die.

Ken made (or let) Naomi dance. (Out of the blue.)

Context: Naomi didn’t want to dance a waltz but Ken forced her, so...

Context: Naomi wanted to dance a waltz, but Ken forbade her. Ken finally gave in, so...

Double-o Constraint: Two occurrences of the accusative o in the same simplex clause are prohibited (Harada 1973).

Jean made Marie dance. (French)

Jean made Marie dance a waltz. (French)

Selected References
Kuno, S. (1973), The Structure of the Japanese Language, Cambridge, MIT.
Shibatani, M. (1990), The Languages of Japan, Cambridge University Press.