eScholarship
Japanese/Korean Linguistics

Title

A Semantic Specification of Expressive Small Clauses in Japanese

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0nj113m1

Journal

Japanese/Korean Linguistics, 32(1)

Author

Izumi, Yu

Publication Date

2026-07-31

DOI

10.5070/J7.66735

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

A Semantic Specification of Expressive Small Clauses in Japanese*

YU IZUMI
Nanzan University

1 Introduction

Potts and Roeper (2006) have proposed a conventional implicature (CI) analysis of what they call expressive small clauses (ESCs), a class of insulting phrases illustrated by (1) below.

(1) a. Oh, You fool!

b. You nincompoop/dumbass/screwball! (Potts and Roeper 2006: 183)

Examples such as (1) are typically used to express a negative attitude or a sense of superiority on the part of the speaker over the addressee, although it is also possible to use them as part of bantering to promote mutual bond and camaraderie.

In English and relatively similar languages, the series of a second person pronoun and a derogatory noun form an ESC, where there is some crosslinguistic variation especially with respect to the case. For example, Norwegian and in southern Dutch dialects require the genitive form of a second person pronoun, as in (2).

* This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 22K00020, 25H00459, and JPJS00122674991.

Japanese/Korean Linguistics 32.
Edited by Youngdong Cho, Young-Hoon Kim, and John Whitman.
Copyright © 2026, Yu Izumi.

(2) a. Din dust! (Norwegian; Julien 2016: 76)
your fool

b. Jouwen deugniet! (Dutch, Corver 2008: 51)
your rascal

Japanese also exhibits an ESC-like construction, but its morphosyntax and distribution differ significantly from what we see in English and the like. (3) schematically represents the possible arrangements of ESCs in Japanese, in which a genitive-marked nominal (N_1-*no*) modifying a derogatory noun (N_2), optionally followed by the particle *-me* as well as the nominative case particle *-ga*. (4) shows a typical example of Japanese ESCs, with a proximate demonstrative noun followed by *baka* (fool). The particles are purely optional, and either one of them can be used in (4); if both are used, however, they have to occur in this particular order, not the other way around (✓*-me-ga*, **-ga-me*).

(3) N_1-no N_2-(me)-(ga)

(4) Kono-no baka-(me)-(ga)!
this-GEN fool-(me)-(NOM)
'You fool!'

As discussed in Izumi and Hayashi (2018), various types of nouns are permissible in the place of N_1, whereas a second person pronoun would be judged significantly degraded, *contra* English, as shown by the following.

(5) a. Oneechan-no/Okaasan-no baka! (kinship terms)
sister-GEN/mother-GEN fool
'Sister/Mother, you fool!'

b. Izumi-no/Sensei-no baka! (proper names, titles)
Izumi-GEN/teacher-GEN fool
'Izumi/Mr Izumi, you fool!'

c. #Omae-no/Temee-no baka! (2p.pronoun)
you.SG-GEN/you.SG(RUDE)-GEN fool

(5c) shows that even a rude form of a second person pronoun is unacceptable—which on its own would constitute a perfectly permissible insulting vocative: *Oi temee!* (Hey you!).

The following examples indicate that Korean ESCs pattern with those in Japanese with respect to the presence of demonstrative nouns, although they are not thoroughly comparable. For example, the vocative particle seems to be obligatory in (6b), but not in (6a), and Japanese doesn't have a similar particle.

(6) a. I nom(-a)
this bastard(-VOC)
'You bastard!'

b. I saykki-ya
this idiot-VOC
'You idiot!' (Chang, 1996: 60)

Although I will focus on Japanese ESCs in this paper, it should be noted that more detailed comparison between Korean and Japanese ESCs will contribute to our understanding of ESCs and vocatives in general.

Despite the substantial differences between English and Japanese ESCs, Potts and Roeper's (2006) CI analysis of English ESCs can be extended to those in Japanese (Izumi and Hayashi 2018; Oda 2019). The previous research, however, has two problems that I would like to address in this paper. The first problem is empirical, and the second more theoretical.

First, the optional particle *-me* poses a challenge to the extant accounts. As we will closely examine in Section 2, although *-me* is purely optional, seemingly contributing nothing to the meaning of an ESC, it can also occur in non-ESC constructions, where it is attached to a regular argument, and it *does* contribute some content. No extant accounts address this duality of the particle *-me*.

Second, the previous research leaves the content of an ESC more or less unspecified and fails to make a connection between ESCs and other addressee-oriented expressions such as sentence-final speech style particles. An ESC is essentially second-personal, being targeted at the addressee, and Korean speech style particles, such as *-supnita*, as well as Japanese sentence-final addressee honorifics, such as *-mas*, also manage the speaker-addressee relation (Miyagawa 2022). It is desirable to specify the meaning of ESCs in a framework that can also account for the meaning of the relevant sentence-final expressions.

Thus, the aim of this paper is twofold: (i) to account for the dual behavior of *-me*—meaningful in non-ESC clauses yet apparently redundant in ESCs, and (ii) to refine the analysis of Japanese ESCs by specifying their expressive content in more precise, structural terms employing a broader framework for discourse-oriented morphology, namely Portner et al.'s (2019) participant-structure semantics for Korean speech style particles.

The central proposal is that Japanese ESCs and the particle *-me* manipulate the hierarchical ranks of discourse participants, just as speech style particles do so. An ESC downgrades an individual substantially in a hierarchical ordering of discourse participants, i.e., to the bottom of the hierarchy, while *-me* is simply its weaker version, downgrading an individual to a lesser extent. Because placing a person at the bottom of the ranking entails placing the person lower in the ranking, the proposal explains why the particle *-me* becomes redundant within ESCs, but not in other environments.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the duality of the particle *-me* and discusses the problems it poses to the existing accounts. Section 3 presents the proposal in terms of participant-structure semantics that addresses the identified problems. Section 4 applies the same semantics to the Japanese honorific suffix *-sama*, and Section 5 concludes the paper by discussing further research questions.

2 The Dual Behavior of *-me* and Problems for Existing Accounts

This section presents some empirical facts about the particle *-me* and shows how they challenge current analyses of ESCs in Japanese. Although *-me* is optional and appears to contribute little to their overall meaning within ESCs, it is meaningful in non-ESC, clausal environments. Any adequate theory must reconcile these two properties.

2.1 *-me* in ESCs and in Clausal Environments

Let us begin with the ESC case (4), repeated in a slightly simplified form in (7), abstracting away from the optional nominative *-ga*.

(7) Kono-no baka-(me)!
this-GEN fool-(me)
'You fool!'

When *-me* appears in (7), it does not seem to introduce a distinctive element to the overall meaning of ESC, which still conveys a strongly negative attitude toward the addressee. One might note that the version with *-me* has an archaic or old-fashioned tone, but aside from this stylistic association, its contribution appears limited. In particular, it does not intensify the degree of derogation (unlike expletive intensifiers such as *fucking*), nor does it introduce a distinct insult type (unlike different derogatory nouns such as *bastard*).

The behavior of *-me* used with arguments of sentences is quite different, however. In these clausal contexts, attaching *-me* to a noun yields a CI concerning the relative social status of the referent. Consider (8).

(8) *-me* with argumental NPs (Subjects)

a. Watashi-me-ga yatta.
I-me-NOM did
'I did it.' (Speaker adopting a humble or self-lowering stance)

b. Taro-/Koitsu-me-ga yatta.
Taro-/this.person-me-NOM did
'Taro/This guy did it.' (Disapprobation for Taro/the salient person)

In (8a), *-me* gives rise to a humble interpretation: the speaker presents herself as socially lower than another individual, typically but not necessarily the addressee. In (8b), by contrast, *-me* expresses the speaker's disapproval or disdain toward the third-person referent. These interpretations also persist in accusative and dative object positions, as shown in (9a) and (9b), respectively.

(9) *-me* with argumental NPs (Objects)

a. Anata-ga watashi-me-o tasuketa.
you-NOM i-me-ACC help.PST
'You helped me.' (Speaker adopting a humble or self-lowering stance)

b. Itsudemo watashi-me-ni o.denwa.kudasai.
anytime i-me-DAT HON.call.do
'Please call me anytime.' (Speaker adopting a humble or self-lowering stance)

The contribution of *-me* in sentences like (8) and (9) displays well-known properties of CIs. It is not easily cancelled and cannot be directly denied. For example, after an utterance such as (8a/10a), a denial targeting the implicature alone is infelicitous.

(10) a. Watashi-me-ga yatta.
'I did it.'

b. Sore-wa tadashiku nai!/Iya, chigau!
that-TOP correct NEG/no, wrong
'That's not correct!/No, that's wrong!'

c. #Anata-ga yatta ga, kenkyo denai.
you-NOM do.PST but humble be.NEG
'You did it, but you are not humble.'

While (10b) alone can coherently target the at-issue proposition, denying that the speaker performed the salient act, the follow-up (10c) would render the response infelicitous. The content introduced by *-me* cannot be directly denied. Thus, in clausal environments, *-me* seems to satisfy the diagnostic qualities of CI (Potts 2005).

2.2 Interval-based Approaches and the Duality Problem

The observations above create a descriptive puzzle. In ESCs such as (7), *-me* is optional, and does not obviously change the expressive profile of the construction. In clausal environments, as in (8) and (9), however, *-me* has a status-related CI meaning. The existing literature does not explain why *-me* behaves meaningfully in one environment but appears redundant in the other.

One might try to extend an interval-based approach, which has been employed for Japanese honorifics and related expressive items (Potts and Kawahara 2004; McCready 2019). In this approach, the speaker's (S) stance toward an individual (X) is represented as an interval $R\langle S, X\rangle$ on a scale, typically a subinterval of $[-1, 1]$. Expressive items then restrict or shift these intervals.

This apparatus can be applied to ESCs and to some uses of *-me* in a straightforward way. For instance, one can treat both ESC and *-me* as setting $R\langle S, \textit{Addressee}\rangle$ to a negative interval (say, $[-1, -0.5]$). So having *-me* in an ESC does not shift the interval in the negative direction any further, making *-me* vacuous. The same semantics naturally extends to third-person disapproving uses of *-me*, such as (8b). Here *-me* sets $R\langle S, \textit{Taro}\rangle$ to a negative interval, which captures the negative attitude that the speaker holds toward the salient individual.

The difficulty arises with the self-lowering uses, such as (8a) and (9a, b), where *-me* attaches to a first person pronoun. Intuitively, (8a) presents the speaker as lower than someone else, usually but not necessarily, the addressee. In an interval-based semantics, however, the relevant attitude is represented by $R\langle S, S\rangle$, an interval encoding the speaker's stance toward herself. Shifting $R\langle S, S\rangle$ in the negative direction yields a more negative attitude of the speaker toward herself, but it does not encode any comparison between the speaker and another relevant individual such as the addressee.

Rather than further considering the possible modifications we might be able to make for the interval approach, I will show in the following section that Portner et al.'s (2019) participant-structure semantics for Korean speech style particles can be adapted to account for the duality of *-me*. Because ESCs, *-me*, and other addressee-oriented expressions all manage hierarchical relations among discourse participants, a unified account of their effects would be theoretically desirable.

3 Proposal: ESCs and *-me* in Participant-Structure Semantics

In this section, I will first introduce a brief summary of Portner et al.'s (2019) participant-structure semantics. Then I will specify the meanings of the ESC construction and *-me*, and show how their interaction yields redundancy of *-me* in ESCs but not elsewhere.

3.1 Participant Structures (Portner et al. 2019)

Portner et al. (2019) treat the context c as a pair $\langle P, cs\rangle$, where cs is the context set (the propositional component) and P is the participant structure. The participant structure P is a triple $\langle J, O, h\rangle$ as in (11).

(11) The context c is a pair $\langle P, cs\rangle$, where:

a. the participant structure P is a triple $\langle J, O, h\rangle$, where

i. J is an n-tuple of individuals ($n \geq 1$), the participants,

ii. O is an ordered set $\langle N, \prec\rangle$ with n members,

iii. h is a function from J to subsets of N.

b. cs is the context set (propositional meaning). (adapted from Portner et al. 2019: 16)

In this framework, a use of a speech style particle in Korean updates the participant structure of a conversational context. As an illustration, Portner et al.'s semantics for Korean *-supnita* can be stated as follows.

(12) *supnita* [status: $S \leq A$] = h : $h(S) = \{N_1\}$, $h(A) = \{N_1, N_2\}$
(S: speaker, A: addressee)

In (12), the particle constrains the participant-structure component by fixing how ranks are assigned to the speaker and addressee: the speaker is assigned $\{N_1\}$, while the addressee is assigned $\{N_1, N_2\}$. That is, the number for the speaker is equal to or lower than the numbers for the addressee, indicating their social status "$S \leq A$". Figure 1 below is a schematic illustration of the update, in which the speaker is assigned $\{0\}$, while the addressee is assigned $\{0, 1\}$.

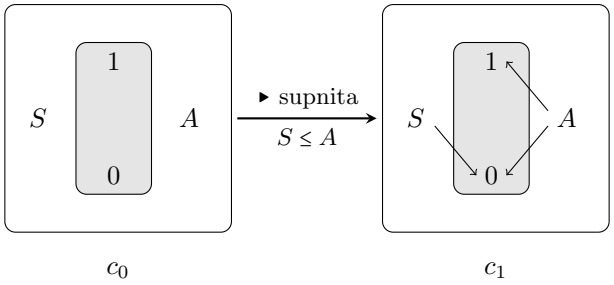


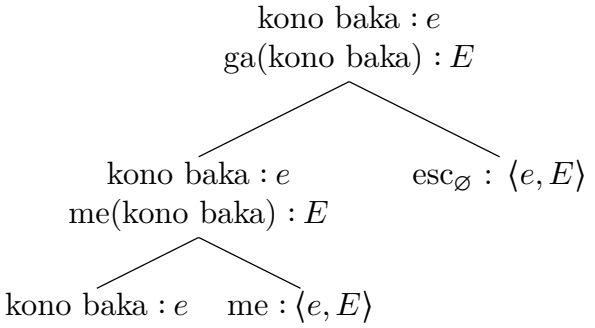
Figure 1: *-supnita* imposes $S \leq A$, updating c_0 to c_1

Since ESCs also manage the social relation between the speaker and addressee, I apply this general idea to Japanese ESCs. Instead of viewing ESCs and *-me* as merely expressing "negative attitude," I treat them as operators on participant structures, specifying how an individual is positioned in a hierarchy relative to others.

3.2 Compositional Implementation for Japanese ESCs

First, I will present the structural and compositional assumptions for my proposal. Following Izumi and Hayashi (2018) and Oda (2019), I assume that Japanese ESCs contain a silent head *esc*, which is responsible for the ESC's expressive meaning. For an ESC like *Kono baka me!*, as illustrated in (13), the particle *-me* is first combined with a nominal phrase, and *esc* constitutes the ESC phrase.

(13)



(13) also shows that Potts-style multidimensional semantics is easily applicable to this structure. Suppose there is a Pottsian multidimensional composition rule by which a function of type $\langle a, E\rangle$ applies to an argument of type a to yield expressive content of type E, while leaving the at-issue value of the argument intact (Potts 2005). Since both *esc* and *-me* have $\langle e, E\rangle$ type meaning, *-me* doesn't have to be present for *esc* to combine with a nominal phrase.

Let me now turn to the key part of the proposal concerning the CI meanings of *esc* and *-me*. Both are analyzed as imposing conditions on the participant-structure mapping *h* with respect to the referent *R* of the nominal phrase of type *e*.

(14) CI meanings of *esc* and *-me*

a. *esc* [status: $R \Downarrow$] = $h : h(R) = \{\min(N)\}$
That is, *R* occupies the lowest rank.

b. *me* [status: $R \downarrow$] = $h : \exists X \neq R\ \forall n_R \in h(R)\ \exists n_X \in h(X)\ [n_R \prec n_X]$
That is, someone has an assigned number that is higher than any number assigned to *R*.

These meanings straightforwardly derive the patterns presented in the previous section. In an ESC like *Kono baka!*, *esc* yields "$A \Downarrow$," assigning the addressee the lowest number, typically making the speaker higher relative to the addressee (Figure 2).

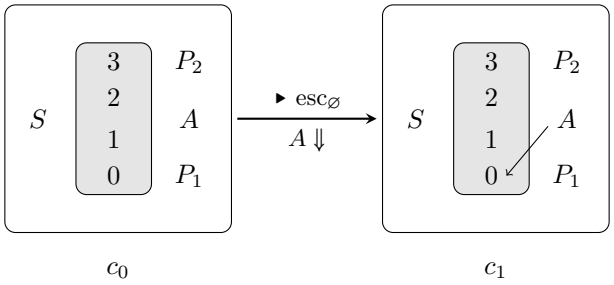


Figure 2: *esc* imposes $A \Downarrow$, updating c_0 to c_1

In self-lowering cases such as *watashi-me*, *-me* yields "S $\downarrow$," implying that someone is ranked above the speaker, which produces the humility implication that the interval approach has difficulty in explaining (Figure 3).

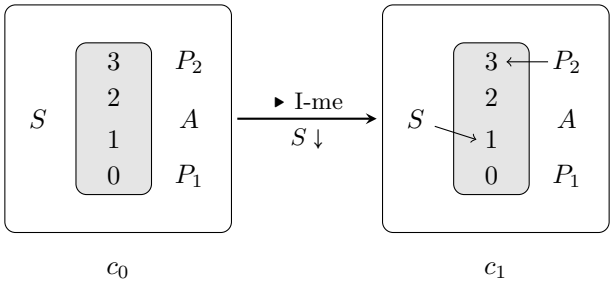


Figure 3: *-me* imposes $S \downarrow$, updating c_0 to c_1

Finally, the redundancy of *-me* straightforwardly follows from the fact that $\downarrow$ is a weaker form of $\Downarrow$: in *me*-ESCs, *esc* imposes "$A \Downarrow$," so having *-me*—which imposes "$A \downarrow$"—contributes nothing more, while *-me* remains meaningful in other constructions where $\Downarrow$ is not imposed. See Figure 4 as an illustration.

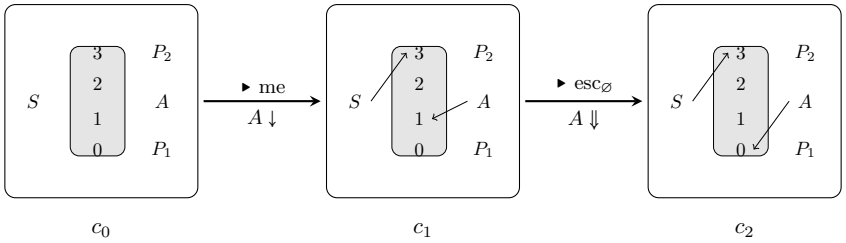


Figure 4: Redundancy of *-me* in ESCs

Thus, the presented analysis of *esc* and *-me* unifies contempt and humility uses of *-me* and also explains why *-me* is redundant in ESCs. That is, it can account for the duality of *-me* presented in the previous section.

4 Application: The Honorific Suffix *-sama*

Given the hierarchical participant-structure framework, it is at least logically conceivable that there are upward operators parallel to the downward ones discussed above. Japanese indeed has the nominal suffix *-sama*, associated with superlative politeness as well as a self-aggrandizing implication when used with a first person pronoun. These uses can be accounted for assuming simply *-sama* has the inverted meaning of ⇓, as in (15).

(15) *sama* [status: $R \Uparrow$] = $h : h(R) = \{\max(N)\}$
That is, *R* occupies the highest rank.

The suffix requires that *R* be assigned the maximum rank in the participant structure. Now consider a few examples of *-sama*.

(16) a. *Tanaka-sama-ga Suzuki-sama-o oyobininatta.*
tanaka-sama-NOM suzuki-sama-ACC call.HON.PST
'Tanaka called Suzuki.'
(Speaker showing a high degree of deference to Tanaka and Suzuki, but not to the addressee)

b. *Ore-sama-ga yatta.*
I-sama-NOM do.PST
'I did it.'
(Speaker adopting an arrogant, superior stance)

In (16a), the subject and object both bear *-sama*, resulting in both being placed at the top of the ranking. The speaker thereby expresses a high degree of deference toward Tanaka and Suzuki, while leaving the addressee unraised. Indeed, (16a) suggests that Tanaka and Suzuki are equally highly regarded, but not that one is superior to the other. In (16b), the speaker applies *-sama* to herself, placing herself at the highest rank and thereby adopting an arrogant or self-aggrandizing stance. Both patterns follow immediately from (15): *-sama* always promotes its referent to the highest position, regardless of whether that referent is the speaker, the addressee, or a third person.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have set out to account for the dual behavior of *-me*—meaningful in clausal environments yet apparently redundant in ESCs—and to refine the analysis of Japanese ESCs by specifying their expressive content in structural terms, using Portner et al.'s (2019) participant-structure framework. I have proposed that ESCs and *-me* are operators on participant structures: *esc* imposes a strong downgrading condition (R ⇓), while *-me* imposes its weaker counterpart (R ↓). Since ↓ is weaker than ⇓, the redundancy of *-me* in ESCs follows directly, while *-me* remains meaningful elsewhere. Moreover, the analysis unifies contempt and humility uses of *-me*. As a further application, I have extended the same framework to the honorific suffix *-sama* by treating it as an upward operator that assigns its referent the highest rank (R ⇑). This captures both deference toward third persons and the self-aggrandizing use with a first person pronoun.

For future research, a detailed comparison between Japanese and Korean ESCs is needed, given their apparent similarities. We should also explore in more detail how this participant-structure approach compares empirically and conceptually with the interval-based approach, and how these approaches extend to other expressive phenomena, including other honorific expressions in Korean and Japanese.

References

Chang, S.-J. 1996. *Korean*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Corver, N. 2008. Uniformity and Diversity in the Syntax of Evaluative Vocatives. *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 11:43–93.

Izumi, Y. & S. Hayashi. 2018. Expressive Small Clauses in Japanese. In S. Arai, K. Kojima, K. Mineshima, D. Bekki, K. Satoh, and Y. Ohta (eds.), *New Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence: JSAI-isAI Workshops, JURISIN, SKL, AI-Biz, LENLS, AAA, SCIDOCA, kNeXI, Tsukuba, Tokyo, November 13–15, 2017, Revised Selected Papers 9*, 188–199. Cham: Springer.

Julien, M. 2016. Possessive Predicational Vocatives in Scandinavian. *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 19:75–108.

McCready, E. 2019. *The Semantics and Pragmatics of Honorification*. Oxford Studies in Semantics and Pragmatics 11. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miyagawa, S. 2022. *Syntax in the Treetops*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Oda, K. 2019. Towards the Non-predicate Modification Analysis of the Expressive Small Clause in Japanese. In *Proceedings of the 33rd Pacific Asia Conference on Language, Information and Computation*, 196–202.

Portner, P., M. Pak, & R. Zanuttini. 2019. The Speaker–addressee Relation at the Syntax–semantics Interface. *Language* 95(1):1–36.

Potts, C. 2005. *The Logic of Conventional Implicatures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Potts, C. & S. Kawahara. 2004. Japanese Honorifics as Emotive Definite Descriptions. In K. Watanabe and R. B. Young (eds.), *Proceedings of Semantics and Linguistic Theory 14*, 235–254. Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications.

Potts, C. & T. Roeper. 2006. The Narrowing Acquisition Path: From Declarative to Expressive Small Clauses. In L. Progovac, K. Paesani, E. Casielles-Suárez, and E. Barton (eds.), *The Syntax of Nonsententials: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives*, 183–201. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.