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Revisiting the Two Types of Mermaid Constructions in Japanese

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Journal

Japanese/Korean Linguistics, 32(1)

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Publication Date

2026-07-31

DOI

10.5070/J7.67908

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While Kawashima (2020) notes that syntactically there are two types of Japanese Mermaid Constructions² that should be distinguished regarding *sika* ‘only’ licensing, this paper argues for a non-unified analysis of Mermaid Constructions in Japanese by revisiting structures and syntactic properties of the two types of Japanese Mermaid Constructions.

Note that the construction introduced in (1) has been referred to as *Bunmatu meisi-bun* ‘Noun-Concluding Sentence’ (Shinya 1989; Sawada 2018; Kawashima 2020), *Taigenzime-bun* ‘Noun-Concluding Construction’ (Tsunoda 1996) and Mermaid Construction (Tsunoda 2020; He 2021; Sasaki 2024). This paper adopts the term ‘Mermaid Construction (MMC)’.

2 Overview of Mermaid Constructions in Japanese

Tsunoda (2020) proposes the following properties of the prototype of Mermaid Construction in Japanese, as in (3).

- (3) Properties of the prototype of Mermaid Construction in Japanese (Tsunoda 2020: 65)
- a. Superficial structure: Clause Noun Copula
 - b. The Noun is an independent noun.
 - c. The subject of the Clause and the Noun are not coreferential.
 - d. The Clause would hold as a sentence by itself.
 - e. The Clause would not function as the subject of Noun-Copula.

While over 100 nouns have been reported to be attested in the Noun (I refer to it as ‘MMC Noun’ in this paper) slot (Tsunoda 2020), Tsunoda (2020) argues that (i) Japanese Mermaid Constructions disallow modification of the Noun; (ii) Japanese Mermaid Constructions disallow Nominative/Genitive Conversion (NGC); (iii) Japanese Mermaid Constructions exhibit no island effect (Ross 1967). Therefore, Tsunoda (2020) argues that the predicate of the Clause and Noun-Copula would form a compound predicate in the case of Japanese Mermaid Constructions.

- (4) *

[Hanako-wa	Nagoya-ni	ik-u]	kyuuna	yotei-da.
Hanako-TOP	Nagoya-DAT/LOC	go-NPST	urgent	plan-COP.NPST

‘Hanako plans to go to Nagoya urgently.’ (adapted from Tsunoda 2020: 96)
- (5)

[Asita	Hanako-ga/*no	ik-u]	tumori-da.
tomorrow	Hanako-NOM/GEN	go-NPST	intention-COP.NPST

‘Hanako intends to go tomorrow.’ (adapted from Tsunoda 2020: 102)
- (6)

Nagoya-ni	ik-u	tumori-na-no-wa	Hanako-da.
Nagoya-DAT/LOC	go-NPST	intention-COP.NPST.ADN-NMLZ-TOP	Hanako-COP.NPST

‘It is Hanako who intends to go to Nagoya.’ (adapted from Tsunoda 2020: 104)

However, it has been noted that in the case of Japanese Mermaid Constructions³, NGC is not always impossible (Sawada 2018) and modification of MMC Noun is not always disallowed (He 2021).

² Kawashima (2020) adopts the term ‘*Bunmatu meisi-bun* (Noun-Concluding Sentences)’.

³ Sawada (2018) adopts the term ‘Noun-Concluding Sentences’.

- (7) Kare-wa zisin-ga/no aru yoosu-da.
 he-TOP confidence-NOM/GEN be look-COP
 ‘He seems to be confident.’ (adapted from Sawada 2018: 81)

- (8) Yayoi-san-wa zibun-no koto-o katara-nai utiki-na seikaku-da.
 Yayoi-HON-TOP self-GEN thing-ACC talk-NEG shy-COP.ADN nature-COP
 ‘Yayoi is shy and he/she does not like talking about himself/herself.’ (He 2021: 29)

Kawashima (2020) argues that Mermaid Constructions in Japanese should be syntactically classified into two types⁴ (as in (9)) regarding *sika* ‘only’ licensing (as in (10)).

- (9) a. X-TOP [... Noun]-Copula (Type I; Kawashima 2020: 61)
 b. [X-TOP ...] Noun-Copula (Type II; Kawashima 2020: 61)
- (10) a. *Taro-sika [kodomo-tati-no mendoo-o mi-nai tatiba]-da.
 Taro-only child-PL-GEN care-ACC see-NEG position-COP
 ‘Only Taro is in the position to take care of the children.’ (Kawashima 2020: 39)
 b. [Taro-sika kaisya-o yame-nai] mikomi-da.
 Taro-only company-ACC resign-NEG expectation-COP
 ‘It is expected that only Taro will resign from the company.’ (Kawashima 2020: 39)

On the basis of Tsunoda (2020) and Kawashima (2020), Sasaki (2024) suggests that only Type I (Kawashima 2020) exhibits Complex NP Constraint (CNPC) regarding (i) topicalization⁵ of the object NP/DP (of the Clause) and (ii) non-casemarked cleft.

- (11) a. [_i [_i Ken’i-o sinyoo si-nai] seikaku]-na-no-wa/ga ano
 authority-ACC trust do-NEG nature-COP-NMLZ/C-TOP/NOM that
 hito_i-da.
 person-COP
 ‘It is that person who does not trust authority figures.’ (adapted from Sasaki 2024)
 b. *Ano hito_i-ga [[_i _j sinyoo si-nai] seikaku]-na-no-wa/ga
 that person-NOM trust do-NEG nature-COP-NMLZ/C-TOP/NOM

⁴ Oshima (2025) also suggests that there are two types of Japanese Mermaid Constructions by assuming Associative nominal predicate construction (NPC) and Complement-clause/head-noun construction, arguing that the sentence-final nominal predicate could be predicated over the subject only in the case of the former and [[Clause-Noun] Copula] is an avalent nominal predicate in the case of the latter. Note that (i) while Associative NPC and Complement-clause/head-noun construction in the sense of Oshima (2025) respectively correspond to Type I and Type II in the sense of Kawashima (2020), the structural differences regarding the locus of the subject proposed by Oshima (2025) can also be accounted for by Kawashima’s (2020) analysis, which is based on *sika* licensing test; (ii) though Kawashima (2020) considers Noun-Copula in Type II an auxiliary verb while Oshima (2025) assumes it to be an avalent nominal predicate, the exact categorial status of the MMC Noun has not been examined by Kawashima (2020) or Oshima (2025).

⁵ Note that regarding *-wa* marked NP/DPs in Japanese, Sasaki (2024) distinguishes between topic (*syudai*) and contrast (*taihi*). See also the poster of Sasaki (2024) that has been made publicly available by Kan Sasaki: https://researchmap.jp/multidatabases/multidatabase_contents/detail/293318/6ec9ec1f553af166f7fd6995ed71aa32?frame_id=623165 (Last access: November 05, 2025).

- ken'i_j-da.
authority-COP
'It is authority figures that that person does not trust.' (adapted from Sasaki 2024)
- c. *Ken'i_i-wa ano hito_j-ga [[e_j e_i sinyoo si-nai] seikaku]-da.
authority-TOP that person-NOM trust do-NEG nature-COP
'As for authority figures, that person does not trust (them).' (Sasaki 2024)
- (12) a. [e_i Hokkaido daigaku-o zyukēn su-ru] yotei-na-no-wa/ga
Hokkaido university-ACC take.exams do-NPST plan-COP-NMLZ/C-TOP/NOM
ano hito_i-da.
that person-COP
'It is that person who will take entrance exams for Hokkaido University.' (Sasaki 2024)
- b. [Ano hito-ga e_i zyukēn su-ru] yotei-na-no-wa/ga
that person-NOM take.exams do-NPST plan-COP-NMLZ/C-TOP/NOM
Hokkaido daigaku_i-da.
Hokkaido university-COP
'It is Hokkaido University that that person will take entrance exams for.' (Sasaki 2024)
- c. Hokkaido daigaku_i-wa [ano hito-ga e_i zyukēn su-ru]
Hokkaido university-TOP that person-NOM take.exams do-NPST
yotei-da.
plan-COP
'As for Hokkaido University, that person will take entrance exams.' (Sasaki 2024)

However, it should be noted that (i) though Kawashima (2020) suggests that there is a complex NP formed in the case of Type I while [Noun-Copula] in Type II functions more like an auxiliary verb, no evidence suggesting whether there is a complex NP formed has been given by Kawashima (2020); (ii) NP/DP topicalization in Japanese exhibits island-insensitivity (Kuno 1973; Saito 1985) and NP/DP topicalization in Japanese might be realized via base-generation (Saito 1985), therefore island-insensitivity exhibited by NP/DP topicalization in Japanese could be accounted for by assuming an NP/DP topic base-generated sentence-initially while binding an empty pronominal or a resumptive pronoun (Kuno 1973; Saito 1985) (following Kuno 1973 and Saito 1985, an example is given in (13)); (iii) Non-casemarked cleft (Pseudo-Cleft in the sense of Hiraiwa & Ishihara 2002) in Japanese might not involve overt movement (Hoji 1990) and exhibits no island-sensitivity (Hiraiwa & Ishihara 2002). Therefore, analyses given by Tsunoda (2020) and Sasaki (2024) are problematic and whether Japanese Mermaid Constructions exhibit CNPC remains unclear.

- (13) Keeki_i-wa Hanako-ga sore_i-o/e_i tabe-tei-ru hito-o mi-ta.
cake-TOP Hanako-NOM it-ACC/e eat-PROG-NPST person-ACC see-PST
'Speaking of cake, Hanako saw someone eating (it).'
- (14) [John-ga [[e_i e_j kaita] hito_i]-o hihansita no]-wa kono ronbun-Ø_j da.
John-NOM wrote person-ACC criticized C-TOP this paper-Ø COP
'It is this paper_j that John criticized the person who wrote e_j.'
(Pseudo-Cleft; adapted from Hiraiwa & Ishihara 2002: 37)

3 A Minor Modification to the Two Types Given by Kawashima (2020)

Regarding the locus of the nominative subject in Japanese Mermaid Constructions, I make a slight modification to the structures of the two types of Japanese Mermaid Constructions proposed by Kawashima (2020), by assuming the following structures in (15).

- (15) a. X-NOM [... Noun]-Copula [Type I]
 b. [X-NOM ...] Noun-Copula [Type II]

As noted by Kawashima (2020), one piece of evidence comes from *sika* licensing (see (10)). Another piece of evidence comes from the reading of the sentence-initial nominative subject. While Kawashima (2020) suggests that Type I and Type II could be distinguished by whether the nominative subject could receive a focus reading, it should be noted that the sentence-initial nominative subject in Type I obligatorily receives a focus reading (and therefore receives phonological prominence) (see Kuno 1973 and Heycock 1994 for first position effect in Japanese) while the sentence-initial nominative subject in Type II does not obligatorily receive a focus reading. This is illustrated in (16).

- (16) a. Taro-ga uso-o i-u seikaku-da.
 Taro-NOM lie-ACC say-NPST nature-COP
 ‘It is Taro who likes lying.’ [Type I; focus reading✓]
 *‘Taro likes lying.’ [Type I; neutral reading✗]
 b. Taro-ga biiru-o ka-u moyoo-da.
 Taro-NOM beer-ACC buy-NPST appearance-COP
 ‘It seems that it is Taro who will buy some beer.’ [Type II; focus reading✓]
 ‘It seems that Taro will buy some beer.’ [Type II; neutral reading✓]

As the first position effect in Japanese is a matrix phenomenon (Heycock 1994), it is thus plausible to assume the structures of the two types of Mermaid Constructions in Japanese in (15).

4 Do Mermaid Constructions in Japanese Exhibit Island Effects?

Given that (i) long-distance scrambling in Japanese involves overt movement and is not clause-bound (Saito 1985); (ii) while an NP/DP topic in Japanese might be base-generated, PP topicalization in Japanese must involve overt movement (Saito 1985), it is plausible to adopt long-distance scrambling and PP topicalization to examine the absence/presence of CNPC.

In this section, I re-examine whether Japanese Mermaid Constructions exhibit CNPC by applying long-distance scrambling and PP topicalization, as in (19) and (20) (following Kawashima 2020, I apply *sika* licensing to distinguish between Type I and Type II, as in (17) and (18)).

- (17) a. *Taro-sika oya-ni adobaisu-o motome-nai seikaku-da.
 Taro-only parents-DAT advice-ACC ask.for-NEG nature-COP
 ‘Only Taro likes asking parents for advice.’ [Type I]
 b. *Taro-sika sekinin-kara nige-nai seikaku-da.
 Taro-only responsibility-from escape-NEG nature-COP

- ‘Only Taro likes being irresponsible.’ [Type I]
- (18) a. Taro-sika oya-ni adobaisu-o motome-nai moyoo-da.
 Taro-only parents-DAT advice-ACC ask.for-NEG appearance-COP
 ‘It seems that only Taro will ask parents for advice.’ [Type II]
 b. Taro-sika Osaka-kara modora-nai moyoo-da.
 Taro-only Osaka-from come.back-NEG appearance-COP
 ‘It seems that only Taro will come back from Osaka.’ [Type II]
- (19) Long-distance Scrambling
 a. *Adobaisu-o_i Hanako-ga Taro-ga oya-ni *t_i* motome-ru
 advice-ACC Hanako-NOM Taro-NOM parents-DAT ask.for-NPST
 seikaku-da to it-tei-ru.
 nature-COP C say-PROG-NPST
 ‘Hanako says that Taro likes asking parents for advice.’ [Type I; CNPC observed]
 b. Adobaisu-o_i Hanako-ga Taro-ga oya-ni *t_i* motome-ru
 advice-ACC Hanako-NOM Taro-NOM parents-DAT ask.for-NPST
 moyoo-da to it-tei-ru.
 appearance-COP C say-PROG-NPST
 ‘Hanako says that it seems that Taro will ask parents for advice.’
 [Type II; CNPC not observed]
- (20) PP Topicalization
 a. *Sekin-in-kara_i-wa Hanako-ga Taro-ga *t_i* nige-ru seikaku-da
 responsibility-from-TOP Hanako-NOM Taro-NOM escape-NPST nature-COP
 to it-tei-ru.
 C say-PROG-NPST
 ‘Hanako says that Taro likes being irresponsible.’ [Type I; CNPC observed]
 b. Osaka-kara_i-wa Hanako-ga Taro-ga *t_i* modor-u moyoo-da
 Osaka-from-TOP Hanako-NOM Taro-NOM come.back-NPST appearance-COP
 to it-tei-ru.
 C say-PROG-NPST
 ‘Hanako says that it seems that Taro will come back from Osaka.’
 [Type II; CNPC not observed]

As illustrated in (19) and (20), Type I is subject to CNPC and Type II does not exhibit CNPC. Given that Type I exhibits CNPC, now consider the following case of scrambling in the case of Type I, as in (21).

- (21) *Oya-ni_i Taro-ga *t_i* adobaisu-o motome-ru seikaku-da.
 parents-DAT Taro-NOM advice-ACC ask.for-NPST nature-COP
 ‘Taro likes asking parents for advice.’

If scrambling in (21) is clause-internal, then (21) should be grammatical. Therefore, the ungrammaticality of (21) suggests that scrambling in (21) is not clause-internal. This observation is also consistent with the structure of Type I illustrated in (15a).

Next, I re-examine the interaction with *-wa* marked NP/DPs. It has been noted that in Japanese, while a *-wa* marked thematic NP/DP topic might be base-generated, a contrastive *-wa* marked NP/DP initially licensed in-situ could be preposed via overt movement (Saito 1985; Hoji 1985). In the case of Mermaid Constructions in Japanese, it is plausible to suggest that (i) NP/DP topicalization in both Type I and Type II would be grammatical, with a *-wa* marked NP/DP topic base-generated in the sentence-initial position while binding a clause-internal empty pronominal or a clause-internal resumptive pronoun; (ii) as Type I exhibits CNPC and Type II does not, a contrastive *-wa* marked NP/DP could be preposed to the sentence-initial position only in the case of Type II. This is illustrated in (22) and (23) (I adopt *-WA* to mark contrastive *-wa*).

(22) Interaction with *-wa* marked thematic NP/DP topics

- a. Adobaisu-*wa*_i Hanako-*ga* Taro-*ga* oya-*ni* sore;_i-o/*e*_i motome-*ru*
 advice-TOP Hanako-NOM Taro-NOM parents-DAT it-ACC/*e* ask.for-NPST
 seikaku-*da* to it-tei-*ru*.
 nature-COP C say-PROG-NPST
 ‘As for advice, Hanako says that Taro likes asking parents for (it).’ [Type I]
- b. Adobaisu-*wa*_i Hanako-*ga* Taro-*ga* oya-*ni* sore;_i-o/*e*_i motome-*ru*
 advice-TOP Hanako-NOM Taro-NOM parents-DAT it-ACC/*e* ask.for-NPST
 moyoo-*da* to it-tei-*ru*.
 appearance-COP C say-PROG-NPST
 ‘As for advice, Hanako says that it seems that Taro will ask parents for (it).’ [Type II]

(23) Interaction with contrastive *-wa* marked NP/DPs

- a. ?? *Adobaisu-*WA*_i Hanako-*ga* Taro-*ga* oya-*ni* *t*_i motome-*ru*
 advice-*WA* Hanako-NOM Taro-NOM parents-DAT ask.for-NPST
 seikaku-*da* to it-tei-*ru*.
 nature-COP C say-PROG-NPST
 ‘Hanako says that Taro likes asking parents for advice (as opposed to other things).’ [Type I]
- b. Adobaisu-*WA*_i Hanako-*ga* Taro-*ga* oya-*ni* *t*_i motome-*ru*
 advice-*WA* Hanako-NOM Taro-NOM parents-DAT ask.for-NPST
 moyoo-*da* to it-tei-*ru*.
 appearance-COP C say-PROG-NPST
 ‘Hanako says that it seems that Taro will ask parents for advice (as opposed to other things).’ [Type II]

5 Revisiting the Clause in Mermaid Constructions in Japanese

I revisit the Clause in Mermaid Constructions in Japanese in this section. Note that only Type I allows gap-filler dependencies, as illustrated in (24).

- (24) a. Taro-*ga* minna-*ga* *e*_i kirat-tei-*ru* seikaku-*da*.
 Taro-NOM everyone-NOM dislike-PROG-NPST nature-COP
 ‘It is Taro that has the personality which everyone dislikes.’ [Type I]
- b. *Taro-*ga* minna-*ga* *e*_i kirat-tei-*ru* moyoo-*da*.
 Taro-NOM everyone-NOM dislike-PROG-NPST appearance-COP

Intended: ‘Taro has the look that everyone dislikes.’

[Type II]

Furthermore, on the basis of Tsunoda (2020) and He (2021), I argue that only Type I would be able to form multiple relative clauses (RCs). This is illustrated in (25).

- (25) a. Taro-ga minna-ga e_i kirat-tei-ru uso-o i-u
Taro-NOM everyone-NOM dislike-PROG-NPST lie-ACC say-NPST
seikaku_i-da.
nature-COP
‘It is Taro who has the personality, which everyone dislikes, that he likes lying.’
[Type I]
- b. *Taro-ga minna-ga e_i kirat-tei-ru uso-o i-u
Taro-NOM everyone-NOM dislike-PROG-NPST lie-ACC say-NPST
moyoo_i-da.
appearance-COP
Intended: ‘It seems that Taro will lie.’
[Type II]

Recall the structure of Type I in (15a). On the basis of the observations that (i) Type I exhibits CNPC; (ii) X-NOM *sika* and the negator are not clause-mates regarding *sika* licensing, in the case of (16a), it seems plausible to assume a clause-internal empty pronominal which is co-indexed with the nominative subject in the matrix clause, as in (26).

- (26) Taro_i-ga [_{island} e_i uso-o i-u seikaku]-da.
Taro-NOM lie-ACC say-NPST nature-COP
‘It is Taro who likes lying.’

6 Categorical Status of MMC Noun in Mermaid Constructions in Japanese

On the basis of the observations made in previous sections, I provide a summary of diagnostics of the two types of Mermaid Constructions in Japanese in Table 1.

	CNPC	Gap-Filler Dependencies	Multiple RCs
Type I	✓	✓	✓
Type II	✗	✗	✗

Table 1. Diagnostics of Mermaid Constructions in Japanese

I argue that the asymmetries illustrated in Table 1 could be captured by the categorical status of MMC Noun in the two types. While it is clear that MMC Noun in the case of Type I is an N head, it is plausible to suggest that MMC Noun in the case of Type II would function as a C head.

It should be noted that this analysis could also account for NGC in Mermaid Constructions in Japanese regarding the D-licensing approach to NGC (Miyagawa 2011). Given that the D-licensing approach (Miyagawa 2011) assumes that a genitive subject in Japanese requires a D head to get licensed, now consider the following examples in (27).

- (27) a. Taro-ga/*no syaber-u seikaku-da.
Taro-NOM/GEN talk-NPST nature-COP

- ‘It is Taro that talks a lot.’ [Type I]
 b. Taro-ga/*no ku-ru moyoo-da.
 Taro-NOM/GEN come-NPST appearance-COP
 ‘It seems that Taro will come.’ [Type II]

Recall the structures of the two types of Mermaid Constructions in Japanese given in (15). It should be noted that Type I and Type II disallow NGC in (27) for different reasons. While *Taro-ga* in (27a) is located in the matrix clause, which would block NGC, *moyoo* in (27b) is a C head, therefore, there is no D head to license NGC in (27b).

Now consider cases of Japanese Mermaid Constructions in which multiple nominative NP/DPs are involved. Consider the following examples in (28) (*yuuzuu-ga* in (28a) and *menkyo-ga* in (28b) are clause-internal and this could be examined by *sika* licensing).

- (28) a. Taro-ga yuuzuu-ga/no kik-u seikaku-da.
 Taro-NOM flexibility-NOM/GEN work-NPST nature-COP
 ‘It is Taro that has a flexible personality.’ [Type I]
 b. Taro-ga menkyo-ga/*no tore-ru moyoo-da.
 Taro-NOM license-NOM/GEN can.get-NPST appearance-COP
 ‘It seems that Taro can get the license.’ [Type II]

As illustrated in (28), the analysis of the categorial status of MMC Noun in Type I and Type II successfully predicts NGC in (28a) to be grammatical while ruling out NGC in (28b).

7 Conclusion

To summarize, this paper focused on Mermaid Constructions in Japanese and re-examined the structures and syntactic properties of the two types of Mermaid Constructions in Japanese on the basis of Tsunoda (2020) and Kawashima (2020). More specifically, this paper made a slight modification to the structures of the two types of Mermaid Constructions given by Kawashima (2020) and argued that (i) Type I exhibits Complex NP Constraint and Type II does not, which could be examined by long-distance scrambling and PP topicalization; (ii) only Type I would allow gap-filler dependencies and could form multiple relative clauses. In conclusion, I suggested that MMC Noun in the case of Type I functions as an N head and MMC Noun in the case of Type II functions as a C head and this non-unified analysis could also account for the asymmetries concerning Nominative/Genitive Conversion in Japanese Mermaid Constructions.

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