

Kara and Node: Problems and Pedagogical Suggestions

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Abstract

Kara and *node* are both Japanese sentence conjunctions which function like English “because.” Studies show that learners of Japanese tend to overuse *kara* in situations where native speakers prefer to use *node*. Because some uses of *kara* can sound offensive, learners may offend native speakers unintentionally in such situations. Even though this is problematic, few practical pedagogical suggestions have been made to address it. Currently most textbooks introduce *node* several chapters after *kara* and lack good explanations as to how the two should be distinguished. This may have forced textbooks to use *kara* more often in the textbooks even when it is not appropriate and led to overuse of *kara* among teachers and learners. I will present results from a study that examines the naturalness of sentences with past tense *i*-ending adjectives and *kara* which appear in a textbook. The study suggests a reexamination of these examples is necessary. Studies by Hatakeyama (2011) and others found that while native speakers use *node* when speaking to people of higher status and when requesting, apologizing, and declining an invitation or a request, most learners use *kara*. Based on these studies, I suggest including practices using *kara* and *node* in combination with expressions that are often used for request, apology, and declining a suggestion/invitation in different speech styles.

Keywords: *kara*, *node*, native speaker's judgment, Japanese language pedagogy,

Introduction

The two conjunctions *kara* and *node* are used very frequently to introduce a clause/statement that provides a reason for a preceding or following statement in Japanese conversation. Because of their frequent use and importance, they are introduced relatively early in Japanese textbooks. Forming sentences using the two conjunctions is not difficult, yet many teachers and researchers have reported the students' odd use of *kara* as in (1).

(1) a. 今週私は一生懸命勉強しましたから、宿題を出すのが遅れました。すみません。

(Hagiwara 2010)

b. 頭が痛かったから、休みました。(Hatakeyama 2011)

These sentences are grammatically well-formed but reported by native speakers to be somewhat offensive. Japanese language learners who produce such sentences are unaware of their potential negative impressions. The unintentional offenses that may result from misuse of *kara* can result in misunderstandings or miscommunication and is as such problematic.

The second problem is found in textbook examples like the sentence in (2), which is taken from *Genki I*. This sentence does not sound offensive as the sentence is a statement about what the speaker did, and it does not impose anything on the hearer.

(2) 私は朝ご飯を食べませんでした。忙しかったですから。

However, while this sentence is neither offensive nor grammatically incorrect, it sounds somewhat odd. If we replace *kara* with *node* and change the ending to the form that is usually used with *node*, the sentence becomes fine.

These examples call for further investigation of the use of the two conjunctions and for the implementation of good teaching methods. In this paper, I first look at problems related to the learners' production of sentences with *kara* and *node*. I then point out another problem related to textbook examples and report results from a study which looked at native Japanese speakers' level of acceptance of the two conjunctions in sentences like the textbook example in (2). I will then suggest a solution that addresses both of these problems and give pedagogical suggestions, which can be easily implemented in classroom teaching. The final section concludes this paper.

The first problem

The first problem is with the Japanese language learners' use of *kara* and *node*. The learners do not have problems forming grammatical sentences with the two conjunctions,

but they do encounter difficulties in choosing between the two conjunctions. Overall, the learners overuse *kara* (Konishi 2010, Hagiwara 2010). Piao (2010) counted the number of instances of *kara* and the number of instances of *node* in Japanese learners' speech in Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI). Beginner to advanced students use *kara* more than *node*, and only superior students use *kara* and *node* at rate similar to native speakers. Studies by Hagiwara (2010), Yabe (1997, 2002), and Zhou (2009) examined how native speakers and Japanese learners use *kara* and *node* in cases such as apologizing, asking a favor, and declining an invitation or offer. Their studies all show that learners use *kara* in cases where *node* is preferred by native speakers. The choice of *kara* in these cases may result in offensive-sounding sentences like (1a) and (1b), and is therefore problematic. Kuramochi (2007) and several others point out that overuse may be due to the fact that most textbooks introduce *kara* long before *node* is introduced and relatedly to the fact that *kara* is easier than *node* to use as it can combine with the polite endings of the verbs which the learners use more often in the classroom, while *node* combines with the regular ending, which is used less often during the first year.

This does not mean that students are not learning the differences between the two conjunctions. Most learners of Japanese are aware of the difference between *kara* and *node*. Konishi (2010) interviewed eleven students from several countries who were studying Japanese in Japan at the time of the study. When they were asked about their knowledge of differences between *kara* and *node*, they answered that they knew the two are different. However, their knowledge about the nature of the difference ranged from

subjective vs. objective, formal vs. informal, to written vs. spoken. Konishi also reported that analyzing the same students' speech on different topics in the interview revealed that their knowledge of the difference between the two conjunctions was not reflected in their usage of *kara* and *node*.

The second problem

In addition to overuse or misuse, some extent of learners' awkwardness in using *kara* seems to be associated with the kind of phrase that occurs preceding *kara*. I find textbook examples such as (2) (repeated in (3)) from *Genki I* odd.

(3) 私は朝ご飯を食べませんでした。忙しかったですから。

I assume that a reason for the awkwardness in such cases is due to the combination of the polite past tense of the adjective, *isogashikattadesu*, with *kara*. It sounds more natural to use *node* with the adjective with regular ending as in (4).

(4) 私は朝ご飯を食べませんでした。忙しかったので。

In order to see whether other native speakers share the same judgment, I conducted an experiment involving a sentence acceptability task, which is discussed in the next section.

Sentence Acceptability Test

Participants: Twenty eight native speakers of Japanese participated in the study. Six of them were teaching Japanese either as an instructor or an associate instructor at Indiana University using *Genki* textbooks. The others are not teachers of Japanese and lived either in Japan or in the United States at the time of the test.

Design: The sentence acceptability task included 21 sentences: seven sentences with *kara* preceded by past tense *i*-ending adjectives in polite form, another seven with *node* preceded by the same past tense *i*-ending adjectives in regular form, and seven distractors. Example test items are shown below.

- (5) 昨日デパートに行って気に入ったコートがあったんです。でも私は買いませんでした。高かったですから。
- (6) この間友人が欲しいと言っていた本を見に行っただんです。誕生日にあげようと思っただんですが、買えませんでした。高かったので。

The adjectives used in the test items were; *takai* “expensive,” *sugoi* “great,” *atsui* “hot,” *samui* “cold,” *urusai* “noisy,” *suki* “like, likable,” and *nai* “not (existing).” The statements preceding the reason statements with *kara* or *node* were in polite form so that the level of politeness was consistent. Moreover, the test sentences were simple explanatory

sentences; that is, they were not apologies, favors, orders, suggestions, or declinations in which native speakers prefer to use *node* in formal situations as discussed in Hagiwara (2010), Yabe (2002), Zhou (2009) (We will come back to this point later.) For each sentence, the participants were asked to indicate “good” (it sounds good and is used often), “a little odd” (it sounds a little odd but can be used), or “odd” (it sounds odd and is not used). The participants were given a space for comments after each test item.

Results: The non-teachers judged 18% of the *kara*-sentences as “good”, 56% as “a little odd”, and 26% as “odd” (Fig 1) . They judged 77% of *node*- sentences as “good”, 19% as “a little odd”, 3% as “odd,” and 1% had no answer (Fig 2). Teachers judged 50% of *kara*-sentences as “good”, 43% as “a little odd,” and 7% as “odd” (Fig 3). They judged 98% of *node*-sentences as “good,” and 2% as “a little odd” (Fig 4). By converting “good” as score of 3, “a little odd” as 2, and “odd” as 1, the mean score for *kara*-sentences by the non-teachers was 1.93 (SD=0.51) and the mean score for *node*-sentences was 2.71 (SD=0.37). The mean scores by the teachers were 2.4 (SD=0.39) for the *kara*-sentences and 2.9 (SD=0.06) for *node*-sentences. The teachers judged *kara*-sentences “good” significantly more than the non-teachers ($t(25) = 2.06, p < .05$); whereas, there was no significant difference in judging the *node*-sentences ($t(25) = 2.06, p > .05$).

Native speakers' comments for *kara*-sentences include, “it would be better if ‘*Takakatta-kara desu,*’ or ‘*Takakatta kara,*’ instead of ‘*takakatta desu kara.*’”, “‘*desukara*’ sounds offensive,” and “it should be ‘*~ta node*’ instead of ‘*~desu kara*’”. A few

non-teachers commented that they did not like the construction of adding a reason at the end.
end.

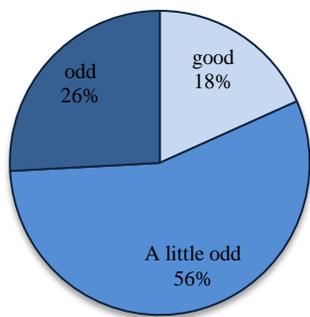


Figure 1: Non-teachers' judgment on kara-sentences.

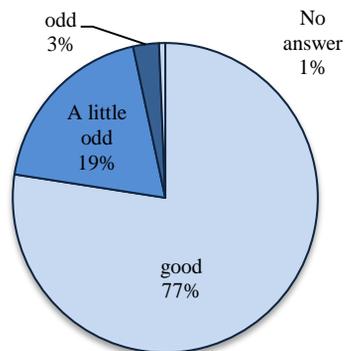


Figure 2: Non-teachers' judgment on node-sentences.

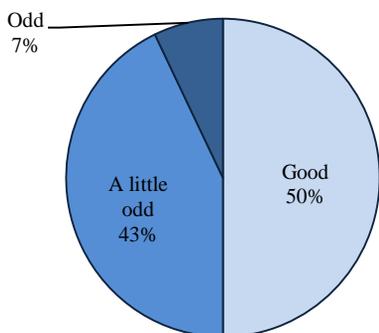


Figure 3: Teachers' judgment on kara-sentences.

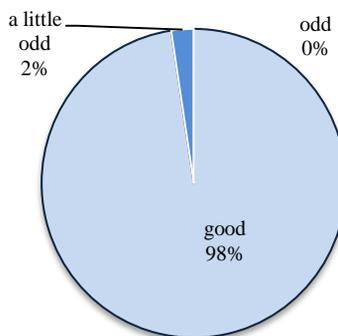


Figure 4: Teachers' judgment on node-sentences

Discussion: Non-teachers found sentences like (3) a little odd or odd (82%) whereas they found the alternative *node*-sentences good (77%). However, the percentage of “good” ratings for *node* sentences is lower than expected. This may be due to some speakers’ dispreference for the construction of adding a reason statement at the end, mentioned above. Teachers using the *Genki* textbook had a much higher acceptance rate (50%

“good”). They may become used to the odd use of the language by following the textbook examples because they feel they are obligated to and they feel the textbook is always correct. “*Kara desu*” instead of “*desu kara*” may be more appropriate in some cases, as some native speakers commented. The exact situation under which “*kara desu*” is preferred needs to be investigated further. The survey shows that the sentences like (3) do not sound natural. This study thus provides support for the contention that including such examples in textbooks and teaching them to the learners is problematic.

Solutions

The problem of the odd sentence examples may have arisen because the textbooks have tried to rely exclusively on material that has already been introduced in presenting new material. As such, the use of odd sentences with *kara* could be avoided by introducing *node* at the same time as or as soon as possible after *kara* is introduced. If *kara* and *node* are introduced at about the same time, students would be able to practice the two conjunctions at a similar rate, making them less inclined to overuse *kara*. Moreover, textbooks do not have to use *kara* when *node* is more appropriate. As the use of *node* requires the short form and pre-nominal form for noun and *na*-adjectives in the present tense, *node* can be introduced as soon as these forms have been introduced. If *node* is introduced early enough, odd examples with *kara* can be replaced with natural sentences with *node*.

We should also explain on what account the two conjunctions differ. Yamamoto

(2001) proposes that *kara* and *node* are different with respect to politeness. Based on Brown and Levinson (1987), she proposed an analysis according to which *kara* is used when the relative distance and difference between the status of the speaker and that of the hearer is small, while *node* is used when the relative distance between the two interlocutor's statuses is big. Hagiwara (2010) claims that the difference can be explained in terms of [+/-assertive](主張性 in her original text). She suggests that *kara* is [+assertive] and has the following four characteristics: i) it is assertive, ii) it gives no modest impression, iii) it can be rude because it pushes personal opinions on the hearer, and iv) it sounds like the speaker is blaming the hearer. On the other hand, *node* is [-assertive] and it has three characteristics; i) it sounds modest, ii) it is neutral, and iii) it is considerate of the hearer.

Other studies support these two accounts. Yabe (1997, 2002) found that native speakers in a workplace use *kara* dominantly in informal situations whereas they use *node* more often in formal situations. Studies from Zhou (2009), Hatakeyama (2011), Fujimori (1995) show OPI, a discourse completion task, and a preference task reveal that when declining a suggestion/invitation, ordering, or giving advice, native speakers use *kara* with friends and family members and they use *node* with people of higher status, or people with whom they are not close. Situations where the polite form is used often coincide with situations where the speakers want to be modest and not assertive. Especially in the cases where the speaker has to ask for something, apologize, or reject someone's proposal, they tend to be more modest. Thus, [+polite] and [-assertive] often

go together, and *node* is used. If one wants to be polite and assertive, he or she would use the polite speech form and *kara*. In casual speech, however, the use of *node* would sound odd since *node* sounds polite by itself. If one wants to be modest in casual speech style, he or she would use a strategy other than replacing *kara* with *node*.

Teaching differences between *kara* and *node* in terms of politeness/assertiveness may be the best approach as it reflects native speakers' use, and it can help learners avoid miscommunication or offenses through inappropriate use of *kara*. Hagiwara (2010) offers a list of situations in which *kara* and *node* are used. While this list is very useful and would be a great aid for students and teachers, a single course will most likely not afford enough time to go through all of the situations in the list. Therefore, we can use the list as a reference. For classroom exercises, I would like to suggest a simple and practical way to teach the two conjunctions. We do not have enough time to spend on just *kara* and *node*, so explanations and practices should be short and effective. The most important goal is that students understand that the two are different in terms of when and with whom the conjunctions are used and that they do not offend anyone by using *kara*. I suggest that we teach *kara* and *node* in combination with phrases that are frequently used when declining an invitation, apologizing, asking for a favor, etc. that vary in terms of politeness

(7) Declining an invitation or an offer

- a. Polite: ありがとうございます。でも～ので。「ありがとうございます。でも今はお腹がいっぱいなので。」
- b. Casual: ありがとう。でも～から。「ありがとう。でも今日はたくさん宿題があるから。」

(8) Apology

- a. Polite: すみません (でした)。～ので。「すみませんでした。バスが遅れてしまったので。」
- b. Casual: ごめん (なさい)。～から。「忘れてごめん。忙しかったから・・・。」

(9) Asking for a favor

- a. Polite (Honorific): ～ので、～いただけませんか。「先生、**大学に留学したいので、推薦状を書いていただけませんか。」
- b. Polite: ～ので (から)、～くれませんか。「宿題がわからないので、教えてくださいませんか。」
- c. Casual: ～から、～くれない? 「今日ペンを忘れちゃったから、貸してくれない?」

The best way to practice these combinations is through brief role play exercises. Teachers can explain how *kara* and *node* are used differently with respect to politeness and assertiveness. The combinations are easy for teachers to implement in their plan, and also easy for students to practice. By practicing these combinations, students will be aware of the differences and be able to use them appropriately and avoid sounding offensive.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the current problems associated with learners' use of two conjunctions, *kara* and *node*. Overuse of *kara* has been noted by several researchers, and I pointed out that certain phrase combinations with *kara* that appear in a textbook sounds odd to native speakers of Japanese. In order to overcome the overuse of *kara* and the use of odd examples in textbooks, I suggested that we introduce *kara* and *node* around the same time, and use *node* when it is more appropriate than *kara*. Moreover, I suggested including practices that are simple and practical in our teaching so that learners can learn the appropriate uses of *kara* and *node*. The suggested combinations focus on situations

where the learners could sound offensive by using *kara*. In sentences other than requests, apologies, and invitation rejections, the choice of *kara* or *node* depends on how polite and assertive the speakers want to be.

This study is one of many cases that show the importance of teaching not only grammatical forms but also the communicative functions of the forms in order for learners become truly competent in Japanese.

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