

It goes without saying: Denegated assertion in Japanese

Introduction This paper proposes an analysis of the Japanese sentence-final discourse marker *jan* as marking denegated assertion in the framework of commitment space semantics, thus explaining properties of *jan* which have been problematic for previous analyses. This analysis illustrates how denegations of assertions are used, and sheds light on their connections to requests for denegation, such as polar questions with outer negation.

Japanese *jan* Morphologically, *jan* is a reduction of a string consisting of a negated copula (*de-wanai > janai > jan*) and an (optional) question marker (*ka*) appearing in polar questions with outer negation. With discourse markers such as *daroo* or the sentence final particles *yo* and *ne*, it shares the ability to attach to verbal predicates without an intervening nominalizer. Like other discourse markers cross-linguistically, *jan* and its less reduced forms are always unstressed. Glossing over considerable variation in age and register as to which form is preferred and some subtle differences in usage, I use *jan* to represent all forms for ease of exposition.

While *jan* has so far eluded a unified analysis, its function has frequently been described as “request for confirmation” in the Japanese descriptive literature, a function shared with *daroo* and *yo-ne* (Hasunuma 1995). Hasunuma gives the examples below as cases where out of these, only *jan* can be used, where it conveys what she paraphrases as “conveying in an exclamative manner knowledge that the speaker has acquired”. While this seems to point to semantic mirativity (in the sense of Rett 2011), such a view is only compatible with (1), but not with (2) for lack of an obvious “surprise” nuance.

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| <p>(1) (A is opening a box)</p> <p>A: <i>Nan da, karappo jan.</i>
 what COP empty <i>jan</i></p> <p>A: What’s that, it’s empty <i>jan.</i></p> | <p>(2) (A is trying on a jacket.)</p> <p>A: This jacket is lovely <i>daroo</i></p> <p>B: <i>Un, nakanaka niatteru jan.</i>
 yes pretty suiting-you <i>jan</i></p> <p>B: Yeah, it suits you pretty well <i>jan.</i></p> |
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To illustrate the application of my analysis, I will focus on these uses as (a) they are unique to *jan* and (b) they can not be straightforwardly explained by extant theories such as *jan* marking shared knowledge (Adachi 1999) or introducing a proposition in contrast with the utterance context (Miyazaki 2002).

Commitment space semantics The analysis I propose is based on commitment space semantics (Krifka 2015), which models the meaning of speech acts (*i.e.* utterance types such as assertions, polar questions etc.) in terms of legal continuations of the discourse within a commitment space. A *commitment space* C is defined as the permissible continuations from a *root commitment state* \sqrt{C} , a set of all propositions the discourse participants are publicly committed to at the present stage in the discourse. Assertion of a proposition φ adds a public commitment of the speaker to φ to \sqrt{C} , thus changing the root commitment space. A neutral polar question is a request to the addressee to commit to either of φ or $\neg\varphi$, while a biased polar question requests the speaker to commit to φ (or $\neg\varphi$) only, thus requests constraining the addressee’s subsequent moves to either acting accordingly or rejecting the speaker’s move.

(Requests for) denegation Speech-act denegation is represented in (3).

$$(3) \quad C+ \sim \mathfrak{A} = C - [C + \mathfrak{A}]$$

This means that the denegation of a speech act \mathfrak{A} in a commitment space C excludes all possible continuations in which speech act \mathfrak{A} is performed. Following Krifka (to appear), polar questions with outer negation are an example of a denegation request, that is to exclude of all possible continuations where the addressee commits to φ . As the root state \sqrt{C} is not altered by this, this is a “meta speech-act” — future moves are restricted, but no speech-act performed. If such a restriction can be requested from the addressee, it should be possible for the speaker to restrict the commitment space in respect to her own commitments excluding future commitment to φ . In other words, there should be a meta speech-act *denegation of assertion*. This is what I claim *jan* does.

Denegating assertion: *jan* The first argument in favor of this claim is that morphosyntactically, *jan* is a reduced form of a polar question with outer negation with *final falling intonation*. The contribution of a final fall/rise can be reduced to resolving the agent of commitment to speaker/addressee, respectively (Gunlogson 2003), a final rise thus triggering a “request for” interpretation, a final fall conceivably a denegation of assertion. The second argument is that it can explain the uses of *jan* better than analyses based on shared belief or propositional contrast.

Starting with the seemingly mirative use of *jan* in (1), I argue that the nuance of surprise stems from a discrepancy of and belief. While the speaker has evidence for the box being empty, the expectation (or bias) is to the contrary. Denegation here means that the speaker expresses a choice not to assert φ = “the box is empty”, at the same time not asserting its negation. Thus, the speaker forgoes expressing that she does not believe φ or that it is not a (mutually) accepted proposition. Denegation is fully compatible with a scenario in which the φ enters the set of mutually accepted propositions *solely on the basis of perceptual evidence*, but not based a speaker belief based on possibly private evidence made public, as is the case when φ is asserted. Next, what (2) shares with (1) is that there is perceptual evidence for φ = “[The jacket] suits you pretty well”, and, in a salient context for the specific example, the speakers’ flattery appears more sincere since φ is presented as following from accessible evidence, or being “evident” in the colloquial sense. While no mirative reading arises in absence of a previous belief to the contrary, (1) and (2) can be explained in the same way.

Other uses of *jan* include “reminding” uses (often conveying exasperation) where the speaker is appealing to a fact considered common knowledge, as in (4). I argue that in these uses, by denegating assertion, the speaker avoids violation of a condition that φ not be known to the addressee (Searle 1969), while still proffering φ .

(4) (At the restaurant)

A: Why did this come?

B: *Kimi-ga tanonda jan.*
you-NOM ordered *jan*

B: You ordered it *jan*.

In sharp contrast to a polar question with outer negation, the *jan*-utterance in (4) leaves no doubt that the speaker believes φ to hold and be shared knowledge. Note that English polar questions with outer negation have similar uses when uttered with falling intonation, but have not fully conventionalized as denegation markers.

Conclusion Analyzing *jan*-utterances as denegations of assertion makes a unified analyses of uses possible and fills an empirical gap in the application of commitment space semantics. Considering the introduction of new propositions based on the speaker’s private beliefs and evidence as the function of assertions makes it plausible that denegation markers exist as signals that what the proposition denotes “goes without saying”, for one reason or another. As similar expressions are expected to exist in languages other than Japanese, the analysis opens a new empirical perspective to the study of discourse markers and speech acts within formal pragmatics.

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