The Japanese Sentence-Final Particles in Talk-in-Interaction

Hideki Saigo
The Japanese Sentence-Final Particles in Talk-in-Interaction
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by Hideki Saigo
The Japanese Sentence-Final Particles in Talk-in-Interaction

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Transcript conventions

Comp complementizer
Cop various forms of copula
Int intensifier
LK interactional particle other than the particles (ne, na, yo and yone) examined in the present study
Neg negation
Nom nominalizer
O object marker
Q question marker
QT quotation marker
Tag tag-like expression
Top topic marker

CAPITALS words in capitals mark a section of speech noticeably louder than that surrounding it.
a stop indicates a falling intonation.
a comma indicates a ‘continuing’ intonation.
a question mark indicates a rising intonation.
an exclamation mark is used to indicate an animated or emphatic tone.
a colon indicates a lengthened vowel.
a stop enclosed in a bracket indicates a pause in the talk of less than two-tenths of a second.

(0.5) a number in brackets indicates a time in tenths of a second.
square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech indicate the onset and end of a spate of overlapping talk.

= the ‘equals’ sign indicates ‘latching’ between utterances.

- a dash indicates the cut-off of the prior word or sound as the speaker self-edits.

.hh a stop before ‘hh’ indicates speaker in-breath.
hh ‘hh’ indicates an out-breath.
( ) empty parentheses indicate the presence of an unclear fragment on the tape.
Ø the slashed zero symbol indicates the absence of a sentence-final particle.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Foreword

This introductory chapter sets out to answer the following six questions:

1. What is to be examined in the present study?
2. Why are the sentence-final particles chosen for investigation?
3. How are the sentence-final particles described in Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language (TJFL) materials?
4. What does the present study aim to achieve?
5. How is the present study significant?
6. How is the present study structured?

1.2 What is to be examined in the present study

Like many other languages, Japanese also has a variety of particles. Shibatani (1990: 334–335) classifies particles in five categories:

a. **Final particles**, which occur in sentence-final position
b. **Interjunctive particles**, which occur freely within a clause and whose presence or absence does not affect sentence formation
c. **Conjunctive particles**, which conjoin sentences
d. **Case particles**, which indicate the semantic or logical relationships of nominal elements with regard to other nominals or predicative elements
e. **Adverbial particles**, which modify the predicate

The interest of the present study is in the first category. Even this individual category contains a number of different sentence-final particles, which are also called interactional particles by some scholars (Maynard 1993: 183). They are so named because they appear only in spoken interaction (face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation, etc.) and written interaction (personal letters and emails, etc.), but not in theses, newspapers, business letters and so on. Among these particles, three, *ne*, *yo*, and *yone*, will be focused on. The reasons for this decision are discussed in the following section.
1.3 Why the sentence-final\(^1\) particles are chosen for investigation

There are four reasons why these particles are examined in the present study. Firstly, the occurrence of the particles in conversation is very frequent (Maynard 1993: 183–184), so much so that it is difficult or impossible to hold a conversation without them. Secondly, although a number of scholars have researched the particles, no comprehensive account of the functions of the particles has yet been provided (Kita and Ide 2007: 1246). Thirdly, they are one of the basic grammatical categories that TJFL (Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language) instructors have difficulties in explaining, and that those learning Japanese often use inappropriately or unacceptably. Mastering the use of the particles is not easy even for advanced learners of Japanese who have an excellent command of the language in all other respects. Fourthly, the unexpectable use of the particles may well be considered as a reflection of a speaker's odd personality rather than just as a grammatical mistake (Uyeno 1971: 62). The misuse of sentence-final particles is thus as much sociopragmatic as pragmalinguistic (Leech 1983; Thomas 1983). For all these reasons, the investigator, himself a teacher of TJFL, is strongly motivated to investigate this troublesome category.

1.4 How the sentence-final particles are described in TJFL materials

Focusing on the third reason mentioned above, this section considers how the particles are described in the TJFL pedagogic literature. Some shortcomings in the descriptions are also discussed.

1.4.1 Ne

Ne is described in major TJFL textbooks in the following ways:

*Ne [is used for] for soliciting the listener's agreement or confirmation.*


The particle *ne* comes at the end of sentence or phrase and, like 'you see' or 'isn't there/it?' in English, seeks the confirmation and agreement of the other person.

*(Japanese For Busy people 1, 2006: 50)*

---

1. Although this book will show that the topic of investigation would be more accurately described as utterance-final particles, here and elsewhere I follow the convention of referring to them as sentence-final particles.
The particle *ne* can be translated as ‘isn’t it?’ / ‘right?’ / ‘correct?’ in English. It indicates that the speaker thinks the listener shares the same information, opinions, or feelings. *Ne* is used when the speaker is seeking the listener’s agreement, or confirming a fact, or to create a sense of togetherness between the speakers.

*(Nakama la, 2009:155)*

The sentence-final particle *ne* ... is very common in Japanese. When said with a high or rising intonation, *ne(e)* is used to ask for someone’s agreement (‘don’t you think?’), to confirm that your knowledge is correct (‘that’s right,’ ‘isn’t it?’), and to check that the listener is following you (‘you see?’). When said with a falling intonation and extended to *nee*, the particle indicates your agreement with others or your hesitation.

*(Yookoso!: An Invitation to Contemporary Japanese, 2006:19)*

The particle *ne* comes at the end of sentence or phrase and, like ‘you see’ or ‘isn’t there/it?’ in English, seeks the confirmation and agreement of the other person.

*(Japanese For Busy people I, 2006:50)*

*Ne*: a confirmation-seeker; with rising intonation seeks confirmation of an assumption made by the speaker: ‘right?’, ‘don’t you agree?’, ‘isn’t it?’, etc.


*Ne* is used at the end of a sentence. Usually it is used...to either solicit agreement from the hearer or to make sure that he is following the flow of the conversation. It roughly corresponds to English tag questions (‘isn’t it?’, ‘aren’t you?’, etc). It is usually pronounced with a rising pitch.

*(An Introduction to Modern Japanese, 1977:22)*

*Ne is* attached to the end of a sentence to add feeling to what the speaker says. It shows the speaker’s sympathy or the speaker’s expectation that the listener will agree. In the latter usage, it is often used to confirm something.

*(Minna no Nihongo I, 1998:35)*

If the speaker is seeking the listener’s confirmation or agreement to what has been said, then *ne* (‘right’) could be added.

*(Genki 1: An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese I, 1999:38)*

As seen above, as far as *ne* is concerned, there seems to be a consensus that it seeks the addressee’s agreement and confirmation, and it is viewed as equivalent to English tag questions. These accounts are extremely brief in comparison to those provided for other important grammatical categories and clearly do not provide learners with a sufficient explanation.

Consider:

(1) **ii** booshi desu
    nice hat Cop
That’s a nice hat Ø.
According to these textbook definitions, learner might utter (1) without using *ne* since he\(^2\) does not intend to seek the addressee’s agreement and merely wishes to compliment her on her hat. However, an addressee would probably feel uncomfortable if such an utterance was directed at her. This is because *ne* is more or less obligatory if the speaker is to maintain or establish mutual rapport with the addressee. The *zero* utterance here would indicate that the speaker expects no response, and thus the function of *ne* can be better understood in relation to the function of *zero*.

Consider another example. Having read that *ne* seeks agreement from the addressee, a learner may think that the following utterance should be marked with *ne*:

(2) *kinoo  honda san  ni aimashita ne.*

> *I met Ms Honda yesterday ne.*

However, this is only appropriate if the addressee already knows that the speaker met Ms Honda on the preceding day. But if the addressee does not know that the speaker met Ms Honda on the previous day, she would feel uncomfortable with his use of *ne* here. Learners are liable to be misled because grammar book descriptions of *ne* only explain its sequential, agreement-seeking function and not its pragmatic property, which requires an appropriate context, as we shall see later.

### 1.4.2 Yo

The textbook descriptions of *yo* seem more problematic than those of *ne*. *Yo* is described in a range of major TJFL textbooks in the ways indicated below:

*Yo*: a particle of assertion; common in assurances, contradictions, and warnings (to the addressees); indicates that the speaker assumes s/he is providing the addressee with new information or a new suggestion.


Added to the end of the sentence, final particles express the speaker’s emotions of doubt, emphasis, caution, hesitation, wonder, admiration and the like... *Yo* [is used] to indicate that the listener is being informed of something.


---

2. In this research, male designating pronouns and possessive determiners such as ‘he’, ‘his’, ‘him’ and ‘himself’ are used for speakers, and female designating forms such as ‘she’, ‘her’, and ‘herself’ for addressees. This decision is motivated purely for the sake of convenience and follows the convention adopted in Blakemore (1992:x).
Yo is placed at the end of a sentence. It is used to emphasize information which the listener does not know, or to show that you are giving your judgement or views assertively.  
(Minna no Nihongo I, 1998:41)

The sentence-final particle *yo* is used by a speaker to indicate strong conviction about a statement or to indicate that he or she is giving new information to the listener; that is, information that the speaker thinks he or she, but not the listener, knows.  
(Yookoso!: An Invitation to Contemporary Japanese, 2006:150)

The particle *yo* can be translated as 'I tell you' or 'you know' in English. *Yo* indicates the speaker's assumption that the listener does not share the speaker's opinion or information. Therefore, it is used when the speaker wishes to emphasize to the listener that he/she is imparting completely new information, and can sound authoritative. When overused or used improperly, *yo* sounds pushy and overly aggressive.  
(Nakama Ia, 2009:155)

The particle *yo* is added to the end of a sentence to call attention to information the speaker thinks the other person does not know.  
(Japanese For Busy people I, 2006:70)

...., *yo* ('I tell you'), is added to a statement if the speaker wants to assure the listener of what has been said. With *yo* added, a statement becomes an authoritative decree.  
(Genki 1: An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese 1, 1999:38)

What we have to consider here is whether or not the above explanations are clear enough for students of the language to understand the function of the particle. Let us consider some examples which demonstrate the problems inherent in the above explanations.

As seen above, it is often said in TJFL textbooks that when the speaker is providing information new to the addressee, he will attach *yo* to the utterance. A student who has read this explanation might well say:

(3) deibitto desu yo.  
David Cop yo  
I am David yo.

when he introduces himself to Ms Honda. He uses *yo* since he provides her with new information. However, she will probably feel uncomfortable with this use of *yo*.

Another learner of Japanese may say:

(4) kimi wa mada miseenen da Ø.  
you Top still under-age Cop  
You are still under age Ø.