

Clause reduction and pragmatic preference in Japanese

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Few auxiliary verbs, excluding the passive and causative ones, of Old Japanese used predominantly before the 12th century and markedly different, both in grammar and vocabulary — from the present-day Japanese, have survived the transition to Modern Japanese. Most of the auxiliary verbs used today are the products of grammaticalization, which involves changing the sentence structure, from complex to simplex. Referred to as *declausalization*, this process diminishes the superiority of the main clause within the sentence by combining it with a functional word or syntagma. The disappearance of the main clause elevates the position of subordinate clause, which then occupies the main clause position in the sentence.

Although Japanese has been viewed as a rigid verb-final language, recent studies have highlighted the preference for using light verbs in Japanese, even copulas, instead of lexical verbs. In most light-verb constructions, nouns are the head of the predicate. In Japanese, which lacks relative forms, head nouns modified by a subordinate clause sometimes function as a complementizer. When these nouns nominalize the whole clause or sentence, they lose their essential or lexical meaning and function as a grammatical form, typically classified as *formal nouns* in the traditional framework of Japanese linguistics. “*Koto (event or state of affairs)*” and “*mono (thing or object)*” are typical examples of formal nouns, which should be better understood as grammatical nouns cross-linguistically, and are employed very productively in Modern Japanese. Some sentence-final particles are known to have developed from these nouns.

This study proposes that this strong pragmatic preference in Japanese explains the frequent use of nominalized clauses in discourse and that this preference leads to noun-centered grammaticalization and declausalization.