

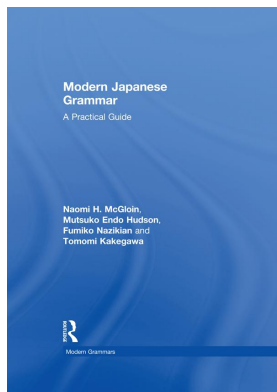
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Tense and aspect

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27

Tense and aspect

27.1 Tense and aspect in Japanese

Two tense forms are distinguished in Japanese: past and nonpast. The past tense is formed by attaching a derivational suffix **-ta**. The nonpast (plain) forms are **da** for the copula and **-na** adjectives, **-i** for **i**-adjectives, and **-ru/-u** for verbs.

▶ 12.1; 13

While tense indicates the time when an action or event takes place, aspect indicates how the action or event is viewed, such as ongoing, completed, not completed, or repeated. Aspect is generally indicated in Japanese by auxiliary verbs such as **-te iru**, **-te aru**, and **-te shimau**.

▶ 19.2

Sometimes, tense forms also indicate aspect, such as completion vs. non-completion. In sentence (a) below, **-ta** marks past tense, while in sentence (b) **-ta** indicates completion (i.e. perfective aspect.)

- (a) きのう料理をしました。
Kinoo ryoori o shimashita.
I cooked yesterday.
- (b) もう料理をしました。
Moo ryoori o shimashita.
I have already done the cooking.

27.2 Tense in the main clause

For verbs, **-ta** indicates past actions, events, and states, and **-ru/u**, present habitual actions and events or future actions and events. Examples are provided below in informal and formal styles.

去年日本に行った/行きました。
Kyonen Nihon ni itta/ikimashita.
I went to Japan last year.

毎年日本に行く/行きます。
Mainen Nihon ni iku/ikimasu.
I go to Japan every year.

来年日本に行く/行きます。
Rainen Nihon ni iku/ikimasu.
I will go to Japan next year.

私がかのころ、家は東京にあった/ありました。
Watashi ga kodomo no toki, ie wa Tookyoo ni atta/arimashita.
When I was a child, our house was in Tokyo.

Tense in relative and temporal clauses

家は東京にある/あります。

Ie wa Tookyoo ni aru/arimasu.

My house is in Tokyo.

日本語が話せる/話せます。

Nihongo ga hanaseru/hanasemasu.

I can speak Japanese.

Note that with an action verb such as **iku** ‘to go,’ the nonpast tense form describes either a habitual action or a future action. On the other hand, with stative verbs such as **aru** ‘to exist’ and **hanaseru** ‘can speak,’ the nonpast tense form only describes a current state.

27.3 Tense in a coordinate clause

When two clauses are conjoined by the **-te** form, the tense of the main predicate indicates the tense of both clauses. The **-te** form does not indicate tense by itself. In the following examples, in the first example, the speaker actually went to Japan, since the main verb **benkyoo shita** is in the past tense. In the second example, on the other hand, the main verb is in the nonpast tense, and so ‘going to Japan,’ as well as ‘studying Japanese,’ will happen in the future.

▶ 22.1

日本に行って、日本語を勉強した。

Nihon ni itte, Nihongo o benkyoo shita.

(I) went to Japan and studied Japanese.

日本に行って、日本語を勉強する。

Nihon ni itte, Nihongo o benkyoo suru.

(I) will go to Japan and study Japanese.

When two clauses are conjoined by other conjunctions such as **shi** ‘and also’ and **ga**, but each clause indicates the tense independently.

▶ 22.2.1; 22.5.2

きのう試験があったし、今日はアルバイトがあるし、休む暇もない。

Kinoo shiken ga atta shi, kyoo wa arubaito ga aru shi, yasumu hima mo nai.

I had an exam yesterday and have a part time job to do today, and I have no time to rest.

27.4 Tense in relative and temporal clauses

The tense markers **-ta** and **-ru/-u** in relative and temporal clauses do not necessarily indicate the actual time when an event occurs or when a certain condition is true. Rather, **-ta** indicates that an event has been completed before the main event, and **-ru/-u** indicates that an event has not been completed before the main event or that a state holds simultaneously with the main action.

27.4.1 Tense in relative clauses

(a) 日本に行った人に会った。

Nihon ni itta hito ni atta.

I met a person who had been to Japan.

(b) 日本に行く人に会った。

Nihon ni iku hito ni atta.

I met a person who will be going to Japan / I met a person who was going to go to Japan.

In relative clauses, **-ta** most often indicates that an action was completed before the main action. Thus, in (a), the person had gone to Japan before the speaker met him/her. On the other hand, in (b), the use of nonpast tense form **-u** indicates that the person had not been to Japan when the speaker met him/her. **-u** simply indicates that the person's going to Japan had not taken place at the time of meeting, but may have since. Hence, in (b) it is ambiguous whether the person has gone to Japan at the time of the speaker uttering this sentence.

- (c) 私は毎日母が作ったお弁当を食べる。
Watashi wa mainichi haha ga tsukutta obentoo o taberu.
 Every day I eat a boxed lunch that my mother prepares.

Here, **-ta** in the relative clause indicates that the mother's preparing lunch precedes the speaker's eating.

- (d) あした来た人にはアイスクリームをごちそうします。
Ashita kita hito ni wa aisukuriimu o gochisoo shimasu.
 I will treat whoever comes tomorrow to ice cream.

Again, in (d), the person has not come yet. The person will come tomorrow, but 'coming' will take place before being treated to ice cream. Hence, **-ta** is used.

- (e) 着物を着ている人も見かけました。
Kimono o kite iru hito mo mikakemashita.
 I also saw people wearing kimonos.

In (e), **-ru** is used because 'wearing kimonos' and 'seeing' were concurrent.

- (f) クラスにハワイに別荘のある生徒がいた。
Kurasu ni Hawaii ni bessoo no aru seito ga ita.
 In my class there was a student who had a vacation house in Hawaii.

In (f), the student had a vacation house in Hawaii when he was in the speaker's class. The sentence does not say anything about whether he still has the house in Hawaii now.

▶ 7.2; 25

27.4.2 Tense in temporal clauses

The same basic rules hold both in relative clauses and temporal clauses. Hence, in temporal clauses **-ta** indicates completion and **-ru/-u** indicates non-completion or simultaneity.

27.4.2.1 Tense in 'before' and 'after' clauses

The verb which comes before **mae ni** 'before' is always in the nonpast tense form. This is because in V_1 **mae ni** V_2 , V_1 occurs after V_2 (i.e. V_1 is not completed when V_2 occurs.)

▶ 46.1

- 日本に行く前に日本語を勉強した方がいい。
Nihon ni iku mae ni Nihongo o benkyoo shita hoo ga ii.
 It's better to study Japanese before going to Japan.

- ご飯を食べる前に手を洗います。
Gohan o taberu mae ni te o araimasu.
 I wash my hands before eating.

In V_1 **ato (de)** V_2 , on the other hand, V_1 is always in the past tense form. This is because V_1 is always completed before V_2 in this construction.

- ご飯を食べたあと雑談をします。
Gohan o tabeta ato zatsudan o shimasu.
 (We) chat after eating dinner.

お風呂に入ったあと少し本を読んでから寝ます。

Ofuro ni haitta ato sukoshi hon o yonde kara nemasu.

After I take a bath, I read a little and then go to sleep.

27.4.2.2 Tense in 'when' clauses

Again, **-ta** in 'when' clauses indicates completion, and **-ru/-u** indicates non-completion.

▶ 23.1

- (a) 日本に行った時に買いました。
Nihon ni itta toki ni kaimashita.
I bought it when (after) I went to Japan.
- (b) 日本に行く時に買いました。
Nihon ni iku toki ni kaimashita.
I bought it when I went to Japan.

In the above examples, when **-ta** is used, going to Japan happened before buying – i.e. the speaker bought (it) in Japan. On the other hand, when **-ru/-u** is used, the speaker bought (it) either prior to going to Japan or on the way to Japan (such as at the airport).

- (c) ご飯を食べる時「いただきます」と言います。
Gohan o taberu toki 'itadakimasu' to iimasu.
When I eat, I say 'itadakimasu.'
- (d) 日本人は、ご飯を食べる時おはしを使います。
Nihonjin wa, gohan o taberu toki ohashi o tsukaimasu.
Japanese people use chopsticks when they eat.
- (e) ご飯を食べた時「ごちそうさま」と言います。
Gohan o tabeta toki 'gochisoosama' to iimasu.
When I have eaten, I say 'gochisoosama.'

In (c), **-ru** indicates 'prior to eating,' and in (d), **-ru** indicates concurrent actions – i.e. eating and using chopsticks are simultaneous. In (e), one says 'Gochisoosama' when one finishes eating. This is indicated by **-ta**.

In some cases (mostly with stative predicates and adjectives), however, **-ta** in **toki** clauses can simply indicate past time, just as in English.

- (f) 日本に住んでいる時は、毎日日本語を使いました。
Nihon ni sunde iru toki wa, mainichi Nihongo o tsukaimashita.
When I lived in Japan, I used Japanese every day.
- (g) 日本に住んでいた時は、毎日日本語を使いました。
Nihon ni sunde ita toki wa, mainichi Nihongo o tsukaimashita.
When I lived in Japan, I used Japanese every day.
- (h) 値段が安い時に買いました。
Nedan ga yasui toki ni kaimashita.
I bought it when the price was low.
- (i) 値段が安かった時に買いました。
Nedan ga yasukatta toki ni kaimashita.
I bought it when the price was low.

In (f) and (g), **-ru** and **-ta** are used respectively. However, the meanings are basically the same. In (g), because the verb expresses a state of being in Japan, the notion of completion is not appropriate here. Hence, **-ta** in (g) indicates a simple past tense. Similarly, sentences (h) and (i) mean the same thing, although (h) is somewhat preferred.

27.4.2.3 Tense in a tokoro clause

tokoro is a noun meaning ‘place,’ but it can also be used to indicate a temporal space. Meanings vary depending on the tense of the verb which precedes **tokoro**. When it is in the past tense form, it means ‘have just done something.’ When it is in the nonpast tense form, it means ‘about to do something,’ and with the progressive form **-te iru**, it means ‘in the midst of doing something.’

今電話をかけるところです。

Ima denwa o kakeru tokoro desu.

I am just about to make a phone call.

今電話をかけているところですから、あとで来てください。

Ima denwa o kakete iru tokoro desu kara, ato de kite kudasai.

I am in the midst of a telephone call, so please come back later.

今電話をかけたところです。

Ima denwa o kaketa tokoro desu.

I have just made a phone call.

▶ 18.5; 23.3