

The Rise of the Lazy Classifier: Analysis of the Japanese Classifier *-ko*

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1. Introduction

Japanese shares a system of the classifier, or a subtype of phoronym, as Beckwith (2007) calls it¹, with Chinese, Burmese and Thai among other languages. Classifiers are considered to show how the speaker classifies nouns and/or referents with one or several salient features. The classifier in Japanese is morpho-syntactically bound to a numeral, and classifies the counted nouns and/or the referents. The Japanese classifier system includes "repeaters," which duplicate or partly duplicate the counted noun and fill the syntactically intended slot, and they increase the number of Japanese classifiers. According to Iida (2004: 3), there appear to be as many as six hundred of classifiers, including repeaters.

With such an extensive collection of classifiers, a "general category" is still needed to make "the entire classification exhaustive by filling the gaps between more specific categories" (Shimojo 1997: 705), and it seems the use of the "general" classifier is actually increasing.

This paper discusses *-ko*, one of the Japanese general classifiers, and motivation for choosing *-ko* over other possible classifiers.

2. Functions of *-ko* and Things *-ko* Classifies

-tsu and *-ko* are two "general classifiers" that are applied to inanimate nouns and/or referents. Zubin and Shimojo (1993: 491) argue that the general classifier has three functions, namely complement function, default function and unspecified-referent function. The complement function is that *-ko* classifies nouns and/or referents in "a remainder category outside the semantic domains of the other classifiers in the inventory (491)." The default function is that the general classifier "can be substituted for other classifiers under specialized

pragmatic conditions," and the unspecified-referent function is "in effect when the speaker has little or no information about a referent (491)." Shimojo (1997: 706) says that *-ko* "exhibits at least complement and default functions."

Another general classifier *-tsu*, on the other hand, is used for abstract nouns and/or referents, something difficult to identify its shape, and when the speaker puts different types of nouns and/or referents together (Iida 2005: 42).

Shimojo (1997: 707) also claims *-ko* as a specific classifier has "distinctive semantic properties for its central members," such as "manipulable by hand, proportionally three-dimensional, and solid." Iida (1999) lists three characteristics of *-ko*: 1) the referent's shape and size, 2) its materiality and substantiality, and 3) its non-functionality as an object.

In addition, Shimojo (1997) points out while the use of *-tsu* is declining, the use of *-ko* is increasing. One reason for the limitation that arises is because *-tsu* can only be used to refer to between one and nine objects.

3. How *-Ko* Is Utilized: Analysis of Examples

How is *-ko* utilized other than as a specific classifier? In order to examine what *-ko* classifies, I investigated examples with *-ko* from blogs and other articles on the Internet.

3.1 *-Ko* in Complement Function

There are examples in which the referents in question are considered to be better suited to *-tsu* rather than *-ko*, and yet *-ko* is used.

- (1) Ik-ko temae-no eki-de mezameru.
 1-CLF short-GEN station-LOC wake up
 '(I) woke up at a station one station before.'

- (2) Nanka iroiro ijitte-tara kiji ik-ko kiechatta.
 kind of a lot fiddle then article 1
 -CLF disappeared
 '(I) was kind of fiddling around, then one article was gone.'

- (3) Moo ik-ko kaki-tai neta aru.
 another 1-CLF write want topic be
 '(There) is another topic (I) want to write.'

In (1), the station in question is not a station building itself, but rather a concept. The speaker is merely talking about the order of the stations, and *-tsu* is considered to be better suited to such a case.

In (2), an article the speaker was dealing with on his or her computer is gone. An article can be counted by either *-hon* or *-tsu*, but it is treated as if it lied as a chunk in front of you, and so is 'the topic' in (3).

- (4) Hak-ko ue-no taisetsuna kareshi-ga imasu.
 8-CLF older-GEN sweet boyfriend-NOM be
 '(There) is a sweet boyfriend who is eight years older.'

- (5) Shukudai ik-ko-mo owatte-nai-zo.
 homework 1-CLF even finish-NEG-EMPH
 '(I) haven't finished homework at all.'

- (6) Kyoo tesuto-nanoni mada ik-ko-mo benkyoo-shite-nai.
 today test despite yet 1-CLF even study have-NEG
 '(I) haven't studied a bit yet despite I have a test today.'

- (7) Ichi-nichi ik-ko-wa kokoro odoru-koto-ga aru-hazu.
 1 day 1-CLF-TOP heart excite thing-NOM be should
 '(There) should be one thing a day which excites your heart.'

- (8) Kyoo-no watashi-no ki-ni-naru pointo ik-ko kiite.
 today-GEN I-GEN curious point 1-CLF listen
 'Listen to a point which I am curious about today.'

In (4), age difference is counted by *-ko*, which is traditionally counted by *-sai* (a repeater), or *-tsu*. This usage is rapidly increasing and now widespread² and it seems speakers have this specific image of steps of age (cf. Iida 2009).

In (5), homework is counted by *-ko*, and so is the act of studying in (6). Here, the act of studying is perceived as a concrete object. It is also considered to be an example of individualizing and emphasizing the unit as is discussed later. In (7) and (8), an event and a point, both of which are abstract objects, are counted by *-ko*.

- (9) Nan-ko-mo nan-ko-mo shuhoo hoo-hoo-o
 many-CLF-EMPH many-CLF-EMPH means method-OBJ
 tamesu-koto-wa yoi-koto-demo-arui-to omoimasu.
 try-NMLZ-TOP good-NMLZ-also-be-QUOT think
 '(I) think trying many many means and methods is also a good thing.'

- (10) Anata-ni au biyoo-hoo-ga nan-ko at-ta-de-shoo.
 you-DAT suit beauty method-NOM how many-CLF be-PST-PP
 'How many beauty methods that suit you were (there)?'

In these examples, again, *-ko* is used for abstract nouns and/or referents that are usually considered to be better suited to *-tsu*.

3.2 *-Ko* in Default Function

-Ko is also seen with nouns and/or referents which have their specific classifiers.

3.2.1 *-Ko* as a Substitute for a Specific Classifier

It is usually considered that the use of *-ko* as a default classifier would be blocked when other specific classifiers, such as *-hon* for one-dimensional referents and *-mai* for two-dimensional referents, are more suited to the nouns/referents in question (Matsumoto 1991). Let us look at the examples

below.

- (11) Kinoo tabeta-mono shugaa-toosuto ni-ko.
 yesterday eat-PST-thing sugar toast 2-CLF
 'Things (I) ate yesterday, two pieces of sugar toast.'
- (12) Ikki-ni biiru juu-ik-ko toka tanoma-nai-de kure.
 at once-LOC beer eleven-CLF or ask NEG please
 'Don't order as many as eleven beers at once.'
- (13) Iro-mo howaito-to nayanda-kedo, howaito-no kotton-wanpi-mo
 color also white-COM think-PST but white-GEN cotton dress also
 nan-ko-ka motteta-shi, masshiro-tte yappari nigate-da-kara
 some-CLF have-PST and sparkling white after all uncomfortable so
 beeju-pinku.
 beige pink
 '(I) thought about the white one, but (I) have several white cotton
 dresses, and (I) am uncomfortable with its sparkling white, so (I
 picked) a beige pink one.'
- (14) San-jikan-kurai aruki-mawatte kekkyoku sandaru ik-ko dake
 3 hours about walk around after all sandal 1-CLF only
 kaimashi-ta.
 buy-PST
 '(I) walked around for about three hours, (but) (I) bought only a (pair
 of) sandals after all.'

In (11), a piece of toast is normally recognized as a thin and flat object and hence would be counted by *-mai*. In (12), a glass of beer would usually be counted by *-hai*, a classifier for objects unitized with a glass or a cup.³ In (13), a dress, which is typically categorized with *-chaku*, a classifier for clothes, or *-mai*, is counted by *-ko*. In (14), sandals are counted by *-ko*; moreover, the

speaker uses *-ko* for a pair of sandals, not one sandal.

These referents in the examples have salient features for each specific classifier, and they are prototypical members of each category, rather than peripheral members.

3.2.2 *-Ko* as a Substitute for a Repeater

Even in examples in which nouns and/or referents are habitually accompanied by their repeater, a kind of the specific classifier, *-ko* can still be used.

- (15) Kekkyoku zasshi yon-da-ri chanpyonzu riigu-ga kininattari
 after all magazine read-PST champions league-NOM wonder
 shitetara ik-ko shika bunshoo kangae-re-masen-deshi-ta.
 doing 1-CLF only sentence think able NEG COP PST
 'Reading a magazine or wondering about Champions League, (I)
 couldn't think of any sentences but one.'
- (16) Mada kuroozetto-no hanbun-shika katazuite-inai-noni sude-ni
 Yet closet-GEN half only clean-NEG despite already-LOC
 gomi-bukuro go-ko.
 garbage bag 5-CLF
 'Though (I) haven't cleaned only a half of the closet yet, (there) are
 already five garbage bags.'
- (17) Demo roku-juu-go-nin zen'in-o ikinari oboero-nante
 but 65 people all member-DAT suddenly memorize
 iu-hoo-ga okashii! Ikki-ni ei-tango roku-juu-go-ko oboerot-te
 say side-NOM wrong at once English words 65-CLF memorize
 itteru-yoona mono!
 say like thing
 'But it's wrong to say suddenly to memorize all the 65 members! It's
 like saying to memorize 65 English words at once!'

In (15), though the noun 'a sentence' is traditionally counted by a repeater *-bun*, here, it is counted by *-ko*. Trash bags in example (16) are counted by *-ko*, and not *-hukuro*, which means 'a bag.'

3.2.3 *-ko* as a Superordinate Classifier for Respective Specific Classifiers

The use of *-ko* can also be observed when different referents are collected and enumerated all together.

- (18) *Konkai-no furoku-wa MARS korabo-no haato-gata*
 this time-GEN supplement-TOP MARS collaboration-GEN heart shaped
chaamu-tsuki hea-gomu & tooto-baggu-no ni-ko da-yo!
 charm attached hair rubberband & tote bag-GEN 2-CLF COP-SFP
 'The free supplement this time is a hair elastic with a heart-shaped
 charm in collaboration with MARS, and a tote bag, (which makes) two
 (items)!'

In (18), the speaker enumerates two different kinds of referents at one time. Elastic hair bands are typically counted by *-hon* and *-tsu*, while tote bags are counted by *-ko* or *-tsu*. *-tsu* is characterized to be more abstract than *-ko*, and it is a motivated convention that people use *-tsu* rather than *-ko* when they want to collect several different things into one category; despite that, *-ko* is utilized.

- (19) *San-ko chuu ik-ko-no kooshin puroguramu-o*
 three-CLF out of 1-CLF-GEN update program-OBJ
insutooru-shite-imasu.
 install do be
 'Installing one of three program updates.'

Example (19) is a sentence that appears on a computer screen when software updates occur. It must be a burden for programmers to arrange two

different patterns according to the number of updates, as *-tsu* can only be used with up to nine and a different classifier namely *-ko* would be necessary for ten or more updates, even though program updates might be better suited to *-tsu* according to their characteristics. *-Ko*, being able to stick to any number, is thus preferred.

- (20) *Gendai-bunka Sutadiizu. Zaiko ari. Nokori ato ik-ko desu.*
 modern culture studies stock be remainder more 1-CLF COP
 'Modern Culture Studies. In stock. One more left.'

This is an example shown on a page in the website of an online bookstore. The first phrase is a title of the book. Books are typically categorized with *-satsu*, and it appears relatively awkward to see that books are counted by *-ko*. However, the online bookstore is no longer just a bookstore, but deals with various types of items, such as CDs, DVDs, and game software. This situation prevents the use of *-satsu*, as the website designer is probably not willing to line up different patterns specialized in CDs and DVDs with *-mai*, books and magazines with *-satsu*, and game software with *-tsu* and *-ko*. In these examples, *-ko* plays a role of the superordinate classifier for other classifiers, including respective specific classifiers and the general classifier *-tsu*.

3.2.4 *-Ko* as an Enumerator

-Ko can be used solely to enumerate the nouns/referents, especially one intends to list them.

- (21) *Juu-yon-kai-me-no kenketsu. Shuukaku? Tisshu hito-hako,*
 14 time-th-GEN blood donation harvest tissue 1 box
POM juusu ik-ko, kuria-fairu ik-ko, booru-pen ni-ko.
 POM juice 1-CLF clear file 1-CLF ballpoint pen 2-CLF
 '(My) fourteenth blood donation. (What did I) get? A tissue box,
 a (bottle of) POM juice, a transparent folder, two ballpoint pens.'

Although a bottle of juice and pens are usually classified with *-hon*, the speaker uses *-ko* here. No native speakers of Japanese might answer they would classify pens with *-ko* when they are asked if they do that, and yet some of them actually do it under specialized pragmatic conditions. It is not just because *-ko* is a superordinate classifier for inanimates, but when people list objects, they like to focus on the number only, and since using different kinds of classifiers gives more information than they need, it distracts them easily. Using the same classifier to any nouns, in that sense, helps them focus on the numbers only, and makes it easier to list different kinds of referents.

3.2.5 *-ko* as an Individuator

Even when you use a different classifier earlier in a sentence, *-ko* can be used later for the same noun in the same sentence.

- (22) Kankoku it-te hando-kuriimu yot-tsu kat-ta. Ik-ko-wa
 Korea go hand cream 4-CLF buy-PST 1-CLF-TOP
 tomodachi-ni age-ta.
 friend-DAT give-PST
 '(I) went to Korea, and bought four (jars of) hand cream. (I) gave
 one to a friend.'
- (23) Ie-ni yunihoomu ni-setto aru-kara moo-ik-ko-no
 home-LOC uniform 2 sets be so more 1-CLF-GEN
 hoo-ni-mo neemu ireru-kanatte.
 one on also name put wonder
 'Since (I have) two sets of uniforms at home, (I) wonder if (I should) also
 put (my) name on the other one.'
- (24) Resipi-doori-da-to tamago mit-tsu. Shikashi mit-tsu-mo
 recipe according to-QUOT egg 3-CLF but 3-CLF-EMPH

tsukau-to o-kaa-san-ga kanashimu. Nantoka ik-ko-de
 use then mom-NOM feel sad somehow 1-CLF-INST
 tsukuroo-to ganbatte-mi-ta.
 make-QUOT strive-PST
 'According to the recipe, three eggs. But if (you) use as many as
 three, mom will feel sad. (I) somehow strived to make (it) with one.'

- (25) Heya-o deru-to 6F-no biru-ga
 room exit when 6 story-GEN building-NOM
 60F-no biru-ni natte-ite, erebeetaa-ga
 60 story-GEN building become elevator-TOP
 ik-ko-shika nakat-ta-no-ga mit-tsu aru.
 1-CLF only absent-PST-NMLZ-NOM 3-CLF be
 'When (I) get out of the room, a six-story-building becomes a sixty-story
 building, and there was only one elevator but (now) there are three.'

In order to enumerate the referent, one needs to individuate the referent. It seems that it becomes easier to use *-ko* when the number is one, as shown in examples (22), (23), (24) and (25). *-ko* individuates referents so one can count them. It also emphasizes the cognitive saliency of individuality, which motivates the speaker to use *-ko* when there is only one referent, even though he or she used *-tsu* earlier for the several referents with the same characteristics. This nature leads one to use *-ko* for an act of studying in example (6); *ik-ko* emphasizes the smallness of the number, hence when one applies *ik-ko* to an abstract referent, it also implicates that the referent is little in amount, less important or casual (cf. Iida 2009).

4. Conclusion: The Act of Enumeration and *-ko*

When young children start to learn counting, they may not know large numbers yet. If there are twelve apples and they only know up to ten, can't they count apples? The answer is still yes, because they can say "ten and two," for example. Even if they don't know numbers at all, they still can

count objects by using wooden sticks or matches. However, they cannot count if they don't have objects to count.

When you count objects, if they are located far apart from each other, it makes counting difficult. If the objects are not perceived as some kind of gathering, there is no point of enumeration. Each object, however, has to be individual enough to be recognized as a unit at the same time (cf. Utsunomiya 2001).

Using a classifier *-ko* satisfies both requirements. It provides a minimum common characteristic, which is inanimacy, and yet it features individuality of the objects. All the functions can be aggregable into one word, namely "default," because when *-ko* is a default classifier for inanimates, it is a selection made automatically or without active consideration, and it can basically be used for any inanimate nouns and/or referents except when a specific classifier strongly blocks it, and one can be lazy to recognize referents' characteristics, hence its name, the "lazy classifier."

Abbreviations

CLF: classifier

COM: comitative particle

COP: copula

DAT: dative particle

EMPH: emphatic marker

GEN: genitive marker

INST: instrumental marker

LOC: locative marker

NEG: negative marker

NMLZ: nominalizer

NOM: nominative marker

OBJ: object marker

PP: pragmatic particle

PST: past tense marker
Q: question marker
QUOT: quotative marker
SFP: sentence-final particle
TOP: topic particle

Notes

- 1 Beckwith (2007: 203) defines "phoronym" as "the pseudopartitive function term, the grammatical category to which unit classifiers, group classifiers, repeaters, measures, and other forms that perform the same basic grammatical function belong." It is a newly coined term by Beckwith, and it is understandable to see the necessity to come up with a new term for a grammatical category with rather diverse notions. However, it is a less commonly used term, and it does not yet seem to widely recognized; therefore, I remain to use the more generally accepted term, "classifier."
- 2 According to a national language survey conducted by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2003, the percentage of the questionees whether they use *-ko* for the age difference is 50.8%, while it was 41.7% in 1996.
- 3 *-Hai* is a mensural classifier, or a measure classifier, which doesn't classify the noun/referent inherently, but rather classifies a means to unitize the noun/referent (cf. Beckwith 2007), but I will not discuss this further here.

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Data (in the order of appearance)

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