

# The *I-Ochi* Construction in Japanese, Event Evidentiality, and Utterance Phrase\*

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## 1 Introduction

In this paper, we present a new analysis of the *i-ochi* construction, as illustrated in (1b) and (2b).

- (1) a. Wâ kyô mettya samui.  
wow today very cold  
'Wow, it is so cold today!'

\* This work was supported by the Special Research Grant entitled 'Theoretical and Experimental Verifications of the Endogenous Computational Variability Guideline' from Tsuda University (PI: Yosuke Sato). We wish to thank Hiroshi Aoyagi, Kazu Fukushima, Shun Ihara, Hideki Kishimoto, Kazu Moriyama, Keiko Murasugi, Yoshiki Ogawa, Mamoru Saito, Osamu Sawada, and Michinori Shimoji, as well as the audience members at JK 31, Nanzan University and Kobe University for valuable discussions. All errors are our own. The full paper is available in Sato et al. (2025). Abbreviations used in the data follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Additional abbreviations include DM = discourse marker; EXCL = exclamative; POL = politeness marker.

*Japanese/Korean Linguistics 31.*

Edited by William Giang, Lucien Brown, Shimako Iwasaki, Satoshi Nambu, and Daniel Pieper.  
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- b. Wâ kyô mettya samu?  
 wow today very cold  
 ‘Wow, it is so cold today!’
- (2) a. Kono râmen mettya mazui.  
 this noodle very awful  
 ‘This noodle is awful!’
- b. Kono râmen mettya mazu?  
 this noodle very awful  
 ‘This noodle is awful!’

The construction is so called because it involves the replacement of the regular adjectival ending *-i* in (1a) and (2a) with *?*, as shown in (1b) and (2b), respectively.

This ‘*i-ochi*’ construction is functionally characterized as a speaker’s verbal speech act that expresses their intuitive sense and judgement of a situation, or an object facing them in the instantaneous ‘here-and-now’ present tense (Konno 2012, 2017). This property is illustrated by the contrast in grammaticality between (3a) and (3b). For this reason, the construction also cannot be used to describe a past or future situation, as indicated by the ungrammaticality of (4).

- (3) a. Kono biru mettya taka?  
 this building very tall  
 ‘This building is so tall!’
- b. # Kono biru kono hen-de itiban taka?  
 this building this neighborhood-in most tall  
 ‘This building is the tallest in this neighborhood.’
- (4) \* Kore {sakkiwa/asuninareba} uma?  
 this earlier/tomorrow delicious  
 ‘(Intended) This was delicious earlier! / This will be delicious tomorrow.’

(Konno 2012: 18)

Konno (2012, 2017) proposes that the *i-ochi* construction instantiates the root small clause in the sense of Progovac (2006) (e.g., *case closed*, *everybody out*). He argues that this analysis correctly captures his observation that the construction cannot support material related to negation, tense, and complementizers, as shown in (5b), (6b) and (7b), respectively, precisely because the syntactic structure underlying it projects only up to the predicate-internal small clause/AP level.

- (5) a. Kyô samu-ku-nai!  
 today cold-PRED-NEG  
 ‘It is not cold today!’
- b. \* Kyô samu-ku-na?  
 today cold-PRED-NEG  
 ‘It is not cold today!’

- (6) a. Ozîtyan-ga mettya wakai!  
 grandpa-NOM very young  
 ‘This grandpa is so young!’  
 b. \* Ozîtyan-ga mettya waka?  
 grandpa-NOM very young  
 ‘This grandpa is so young!’
- (7) a. Kore-wa mettya umai!  
 this-TOP very delicious  
 ‘This is so delicious!’  
 b. \* Kore-wa mettya uma?  
 this-TOP very delicious  
 ‘This is so delicious!’

The purpose of this paper is to present a new analysis of the *i-ochi* construction as an alternative to Konno’s analysis. We propose that the syntactic structure of this construction is headed by Utterance Phrase (hereafter, UP), a pragmatically motivated syntactic projection, in its topmost layer, which is responsible for the speaker’s exclamative attitude toward their own utterance.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we develop and articulate our ‘big clause’ analysis of the *i-ochi* construction. In Section 3, we show that this analysis not only solves empirical problems with Konno’s (2012, 2017) analysis, but also yields an illuminating account of several other properties of this construction. In Section 4, we present novel data pointing to striking parallels between the *i-ochi* construction and the *saa*-exclamative construction in the Hichiku Dialect of Japanese. Section 5 is the conclusion.

## 2 Our ‘Big Clause’ Analysis of the *I-Ochi* Construction

Our central proposal is that the syntax of the *i-ochi* construction is more involved than the small clause structure and, in fact, more complex than that of ordinary declarative clauses. Our proposed derivation is depicted in (8), using (2b) for illustration. Following Nishiyama’s (1999) analysis, canonical adjectives such as *mazui* ‘awful’ involve the Predication Phrase (Bowers 1993), realized as /k/, and the dummy copula; we are assuming here, following Tateishi (2013), that the velar consonant is subsequently deleted to avoid a violation of the Obligatory Contour Principle that would otherwise ensue if it occurred right before the glottal stop (i.e., \*/kʔ/)

- (8) [UP [TP [NP kono râmen]<sub>i</sub> [<sub>i</sub> [VP [PredP [AP t<sub>NP</sub> A(maz)] Pred(k)] V(∅)] T(∅)]] U[ʔ]]

This analysis is based on three independently motivated assumptions. Firstly, we assume that the ʔ of the *i-ochi* construction is an independent functional head in Japanese to express event evidentiality (Tateishi 2013), where an event is currently occurring in front of the speaker, and the subject of the event is perceived as being under a certain state only temporarily. This assumption receives strong confirmation from the literature on sound symbolism in Japanese. Thus, Tamori (1993, 2002), and Tamori and Schourup (1999) point out that ʔ symbolizes instantaneity, temporariness and suddenness. This observation is illustrated by the utterance in (9b).

- (9) a. Ano nanameoodan abunai! [general statement]  
 that jaywalking dangerous  
 ‘That jaywalking is dangerous!’
- b. Ano nanameoodan abuna?! [‘here-and-now’ sensation]  
 that jaywalking dangerous  
 ‘That jaywalking is dangerous!’

(9a) is perceived as a general statement to the effect that a particular kind of jaywalking that the speaker has just witnessed is dangerous. This statement, thus, may be used felicitously to describe the speaker’s belief that the action in question is dangerous independently of the current traffic situation they are witnessing. This is not the case with (9b), however. It vividly brings out the “here-and-now” sensation missing in (9a), namely, that someone is jaywalking in front of the speaker at this very moment, and they express their intuitive instantaneous judgement of the action as dangerous.

Secondly, the ? of the *i-ochi* construction heads the UP that expresses the speaker’s attitude toward their own utterance: exclamative force (see Shimizu 2015, and Shimada and Nagano 2017 for the evidence for an exclamative analysis of the construction. Finally, we assume that the ‘present’ interpretation of the *i-ochi* construction is not due to tensed T but is obtained through the factative effect, known from the literature on tense recovery in morphologically tenseless sentences in creole and African languages; that is, in the absence of any explicit tense specification, a tense interpretation is computed using other present factors (Déchaine 1991, Fitzpatrick 2006). Event evidentiality is resorted to so that the tense is fixed as instantaneous ‘present’ through its ‘here-and-now’ sound symbolism. This analysis correctly captures the observation that the *i-ochi* construction is restricted to the present tense interpretation, as illustrated earlier in (4) and now further shown in (10a–c).

- (10) a. Kyô Satô-sensei-no zatudan mettya omoro?.  
 today S-teacher-GEN small.talk very interesting  
 ‘Professor Sato’s small talk is so interesting today!’
- b. \* Kinô Satô-sensei-no zatudan mettya omoro?.  
 yesterday S-teacher-GEN small.talk very interesting  
 ‘intended: Professor Sato’s small talk was so interesting today!’
- c. \* Asuwa Satô-sensei-no zatudan mettya omoro?.  
 tomorrow S-teacher-GEN small.talk very interesting  
 ‘intended: Professor Sato’s small talk will be so interesting tomorrow!’

### 3 Deriving the Properties of the *I-Ochi* Construction

Our analysis hypothesizes that the *i-ochi* construction projects up to the UP, which in turn selects the TP headed by the semantically vacuous T head. Suppose that present tense sentences involving a negated canonical adjective such as *samukunai* ‘not cold’ have the following syntactic derivation.

- (11) [TP [VP [NegP [PredP [AP A(samu)] Pred(k)] Neg(na)] V(∅)] T]

Now, assuming this analysis of negated adjectives, our analysis predicts that negation may, in principle, occur within the *i-ochi* construction. This prediction is borne out. The construction permits negation under appropriate discourse contexts such as the one specified in (12).

- (12) [Context: The weather forecast said that it would be cold this morning, but when the speaker got out of her house to go to work at 8am, it was not as cold as she had anticipated.]  
 Speaker: Are? Kyô samu-ku-na?. (= (5b))  
           what today cold-PRED-NEG  
           ‘Wait. It is not so cold today!’

Secondly, Konno (2012) points out that this construction is a root phenomenon. This property is illustrated by the contrast in grammaticality between (13a) and (13b). This property, however, is simply stated as such in Konno’s root small clause analysis.

- (13) a. Tarô-wa [<sub>SC</sub> Hanako-o uzaku] omotta.  
           T-TOP H-ACC annoying thought  
           ‘Taro thought Hanako annoying.’  
       b. \* Tarô-wa [<sub>I-OCHI</sub> Hanako-o uza?] omotta.  
           T-TOP H-ACC annoying thought  
           ‘intended: Taro thought Hanako annoying!’

(Konno 2012: 14)

A hint to solving this puzzle comes from Altinok and Tomioka’s (2023) analysis of right dislocation in Japanese. To set the stage, consider first (14a–c).

- (14) a. Aya-wa [<sub>CP</sub> Mari-ga neko-o hirotte-kita to] omotteiru.  
           A-TOP M-NOM cat-ACC pick.up-came COMP think  
           ‘Aya thinks that Mari adopted a cat.’  
       b. Aya-wa [<sub>CP</sub> Mari-ga hirotte-kita to] omotteiru, neko-o.  
           A-TOP M-NOM pick.up-came COMP think cat-ACC  
           ‘Aya thinks that Mari adopted a cat.’  
       c. \* Aya-wa [<sub>CP</sub> Mari-ga hirotte-kita, neko-o to] omotteiru.  
           A-TOP M-NOM pick.up-came cat-ACC COMP think  
           ‘Aya thinks that Mari adopted a cat.’

((14a, c) from Altinok & Tomioka 2023: 6)

(14a) is a baseline example with *neko-o* ‘cat-ACC’ within the embedded clause. When this object undergoes right dislocation to the end of the matrix clause, the result is grammatical, as shown in (14b). However, the same object cannot undergo right dislocation to the right periphery of the embedded clause, as shown in (14c). The contrast between (14b) and (14c), thus, shows that right dislocation is a matrix level phenomenon, just like the *i-ochi* construction.

To account for this restriction, Altinok and Tomioka (2023) point out that right dislocation is almost exclusively found in oral communication. To see this observation, compare (15b) and (15c).

- (15) a. Iriomote-yamaneko-wa zetumetukigusyu-dearu.  
 Iriomote-mountain.cat-TOP endangered.species-be  
 ‘Iriomote mountain cats are an endangered species.’
- b. ?? Zetumetukigusyu-dearu, Iriomote-yamaneko-wa.  
 endangered.species-be Iriomote-mountain.cat-TOP  
 ‘They are an endangered species, Iriomote mountain cats.’
- c. Zetumetukigusyu-desu-yo, Iriomote-yamaneko-wa.  
 endangered.species-be.POL-DM Iriomote-mountain.cat-TOP  
 ‘They are an endangered species, Iriomote mountain cats.’

(Altinok &amp; Tomioka 2023: 7)

The verbal predicate *dearu* ‘be’ has a register-based restriction in that it can only be used in written language. The awkwardness of (15b) shows that the topic cannot undergo right dislocation when the nominal *zetumetukigusyu* ‘an endangered species’ is marked with this predicate. Indeed, when *dearu* is replaced with *desu*, another form of the verbal predicate that is commonly used in spoken language, right dislocation of the topic does not result in awkwardness, as shown in (15c). Taking *desu-yo* as the manifestation of the head of the UP that expresses a speaker’s attitude toward their own utterance, Altinok and Tomioka (2023) conclude that the derivation of (15c) involves attachment of the right-dislocated topic phrase to the host clause at the level of UP.

Now, given this conclusion, the fact that right dislocation is a root phenomenon immediately follows from the simple observation that UP, in general, cannot be embedded, as indicated by the ungrammaticality of (16).

- (16) \* [<sub>UP</sub> Raisyû-wa isogasi-desu-yo]-kara, saraisyû-ni site-kudasai.  
 next.week-TOP busy-be.POL-DM-because the.week.after.next-to make-please  
 ‘Because I will be busy next week, please make it to the following week.’

(Altinok &amp; Tomioka 2023: 20)

Given this logic, the reason why the *i-ochi* construction exhibits the matrix-clause restriction should be clear given our analysis. Its derivation involves UP, as shown in (8).

Thirdly, we observe that neither *-ga* ‘nominative’ nor *-o* ‘accusative’ can appear in this construction, but inherent cases such as *-ni* ‘dative’ and *-kara* ‘ablative’ can survive. This asymmetry is illustrated by the contrast in grammaticality between (17a–b) and (17c–d).

- (17) a. \* Ozityan-ga mettya waka?. (=6b))  
 grandpa-NOM very young  
 ‘This old man is so young!’
- b. \* Bîru-o nomita?.  
 beer-ACC want.to.drink  
 ‘I want to drink beer!’
- c. Ozityan wakai onnanoko-ni yasasi?.  
 grandpa young girl-to kind  
 ‘This old man is kind to young girls!’

- d. Kono sùpâ eki-ni/kara mettya tika?  
 this supermarket station-to/from very close  
 ‘This supermarket is so close to/from the station!’

It is not clear how the structural versus inherent case asymmetry above is accounted for under Konno’s (2012, 2017) root small clause analysis. Our analysis, by contrast, provides a principled explanation for the origin of this asymmetry. Firstly, the impossibility of the nominative case marker *-ga* in the *i-ochi* construction is straightforwardly predicted under our analysis as a natural result of the non-tensed T head involved in its derivation, as shown in (8), given the standard assumption that a nominative subject is assigned/licensed/checked by a tensed T head (Takezawa 1987: 73, 83). Recall that the T head involved in the derivation is the semantically vacuous T head and hence cannot serve as assigner of nominative case, as per Takezawa’s theory, with the apparent ‘present’ tense being an epiphenomenal consequence of the pragmatic ‘here-and-now’ sensation brought about by ?, which heads the UP on top of the semantically defective TP.

What about the impossibility of the accusative case marker *-o*, as illustrated in (17b)? We argue that this fact is derived as a natural consequence of the impossibility of the nominative case marker *-ga*, under a version of the Dependent Case Theory (Marantz 1991, Baker 2015) as applied to Japanese case marking/assignment/checking (Hiraiwa 2001, Aoyagi 2004). For our present purposes, we adopt Aoyagi’s (2004) generalization in (18) that governs the dependency of the realization of *-o* on *-ga*. Hiraiwa’s (2001) generalization in (19) will also do.

- (18) Aoyagi’s (2004: 63) Generalization on Accusative Case *-o* in Japanese  
 The presence of *-o* is dependent on the presence of *-ga*.
- (19) Hiraiwa’s (2001: 115) Generalization on Accusative Case Checking in Japanese  
 Spell-out of morphological accusative case triggers nominative Case checking on T in the next strong phase.

Given (18)–(19), our analysis correctly derives the fact that *-o* cannot appear in the *i-ochi* construction: It is because *-ga* cannot appear due to the tenseless T head. Notably, this dependency relation on case assignment does not affect realization of inherent cases such as *-ni* and *-kara* (recall (17c, d)).

#### 4 A Unified Syntax of the *I-Ochi* and *Saa-Exclamative* Constructions

In this section, we study the *saa*-exclamative construction (see Hamanaka 2000, 2009, 2012, 2013, Takada 2015, and Moriyama et al. 2022) used in the Hichiku Dialect, a group of the Japanese dialects in Western Kyushu (Fukuoka, Saga, Nagasaki, and Kumamoto) as a further extension of our analysis of the *i-ochi* construction articulated in the previous sections. A sample of examples illustrating this construction from various parts of the Hichiku Dialect region are shown in (20)–(23).

- (20) [Context: Flies are buzzing around the speaker's face.]  
 Sekarassâ.  
 noisy  
 'They are noisy!' (Fukuoka Prefecture, Kurume City; Hamanaka 2009: 175)
- (21) [Context: The speaker is impressed by a beautiful sunset.]  
 Yûhi-no akasâ.  
 sunset-GEN red.EXCL  
 'The setting sun is so crimson today!' (Saga Prefecture, Fujitsu-gun, Tara-cho; Hamanaka 2009: 175)
- (22) [Context: The speaker has just eaten a pickled plum.]  
 Ottorosika kono otya attakasâ.  
 oh dear this tea warm.EXCL  
 'Oh dear! This tea is so warm!' (Nagasaki Prefecture, Isahaya City; Hamanaka 2009: 175)
- (23) [Context: The speaker is impressed with a red snapper.]  
 Kon tai-no umasâ.  
 this red.snapper-GEN delicious.EXCL  
 'This red snapper is so delicious!' (Kumamoto Prefecture, Yatsushiro City; Hamanaka 2009: 176)

The *saa*-exclamative construction shares five grammatical properties with the *i-ochi* construction. Firstly, the *saa*-exclamative is used to express exclamative force for an event or an object facing the speaker, a function similar to that of the *i-ochi* construction. Secondly, negation may occur in the *saa*-exclamative construction, just as in the *i-ochi* construction (recall (12)), though admittedly such use is not that frequent (see also Moriyama et al. 2022: 44, however, for the opposite observation that negation does not occur in this construction for their native speaker consultants from Fukuoka and Nagasaki Prefectures). This observation is illustrated in (24).

- (24) Takônasâ.  
 high.NEG.EXCL  
 '[This] is not high!' (Saga Prefecture; Takada 2015: 10)

Thirdly, given its discourse function, the *saa*-exclamative construction cannot be used to describe a past or future event, as shown by the ill-formedness of (25a–b) (recall (4) and (10a–c)).

- (25) a. [Context: The speaker remembers the taste of the sake that they had last night.]  
 \*Ano sake-wa umasâ.  
 that sake-TOP delicious.EXCL  
 '(Intended) That sake was delicious!'

- b. [Context: The speaker imagines the taste of the sake that they have not had yet.]  
 \* Ano sake-wa umasâ.  
 that sake-TOP delicious.EXCL  
 ‘(Intended) That sake will be delicious!’

(Saga Prefecture; Takada 2015: 10)

Fourthly, the *saa*-exclamative construction is a root phenomenon, just like the *i-ochi* construction (recall (13b)). Thus, it cannot be embedded as a complement of verbs like *kanziru* ‘to think’, as the ungrammaticality of (26a) illustrates. It can occur on its own as a matrix clause, as shown in (26b). The intended meaning of (26a) minus exclamative force can be expressed instead by the genitive-marked clause with the inflected form of the adjective *muzukasyû* ‘difficult’, as shown in (26c).

- (26) a. \* Taro-wa setumei-no muzukasisâ kanzita.  
 T-TOP explanation-GEN difficult.EXCL felt  
 ‘intended: Taro found the explanation difficult.’  
 b. Setumei-no muzukasisâ.  
 explanation-GEN difficult.EXCL  
 ‘The explanation is difficult!’  
 c. Taro-wa setumei-no muzukasyû kanzita.  
 T-TOP explanation-GEN difficult.PRED felt  
 ‘intended: Taro found the explanation difficult.’

(Nagasaki Prefecture; Kazu Moriyama, personal communication, June 2024)

Finally, the *saa*-exclamative construction cannot cooccur with nominative *-ga*, as shown in (27), just like the *i-ochi* construction (recall (6b)). This observation is also reported by Hamanaka (2009: 176) and Moriyama et al. (2022: 42).

- (27) \* Yama-ga takasâ.  
 mountain-NOM high.EXCL  
 ‘This mountain is high!’

(Saga Prefecture; Takada 2015: 10)

Given the striking parallels documented above between the *i-ochi* construction and the *saa*-exclamative construction, it is reasonable to assume that the derivation of the latter is essentially identical in fundamental respects to that of the former.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented a new analysis of the *i-ochi* construction in colloquial/informal Japanese. We have demonstrated that this analysis solves several empirical puzzles with Konno’s (2012, 2017) earlier root small clause analysis. We have also shown that this analysis brings about clear theoretical implications for other areas of Japanese grammar, including the nature and mode of structural case marking in standard Japanese. Finally, we have presented novel data showing that the so-called *saa*-exclamative construction in the Hichiku Dialect exhibits nontrivial structural and

functional similarities with the *i-ochi* construction and have argued that our analysis developed for the latter construction can be directly transported to the former construction. See Sato et al. (2025) for further details of the analysis sketched here and its consequences for other aspects of Japanese grammar, such as the nature of case marking and the syntacticization of discourse.

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