A Disjunctive-Unconditional Analysis of Japanese Sukunakutomo ‘at least’

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1 Introduction

In this paper, I examine the Japanese numeral modifier sukunakutomo as in (1), which I argue is an adverbial clause that is interpreted as an alternative/disjunctive unconditional.

(1) Sukunakutomo go-nin-no gakusei-ga odot-ta.
at.least five-CL-GEN students-NOM dance-PAST
‘At least five students danced.’

My analysis of sukunakutomo being a type of unconditional construction is based on the presence of a conjunctive morpheme tomo ‘whether.’ (2) demonstrates that the morpheme is observed in an unconditional construction.¹

(i) a. Taro-ga ko-yooto(-mo), Hanako-wa yorokoba-nai.
Taro-NOM come-SBJV-MO, Hanako-TOP please-NEG
‘Whether Taro comes or not, Hanako won’t be pleased.’
b. Sukunakutomo*(mo) go-nin-no gakusei-ga odot-ta.
at.least five-CL-GEN students-NOM dance-PAST

¹ Some might argue that the unconditional tomo is not involved in sukunakutomo because although unconditional such as (2) are grammatical without mo of tomo, sukunakutomo is incomplete without it.
(2) Taro-ga ko-yoo-tomo, Hanako-wa yorokoba-nai.
Taro-NOM come-will-TOMO Hanako-TOP please-NEG
‘Whether Taro comes or not, Hanako won’t be pleased.’

(Hiraiwa and Nakanishi 2020, 399)

By analyzing sukunakutomo—for example (1)—as an unconditional with tomo, it is possible to naturally capture what is termed as an ignorance implicature of this item (Hirayama and Brasoveanu 2018; Ihara 2020; Ihara and Mizutani 2020). The ignorance implicature that sukunakutomo in (1) triggers is such that the utterer is uncertain as to exactly how many students actually danced. Conversely, the unconditional in (2) implicates that the speaker is uncertain whether Taro is actually going to come. In this paper, I demonstrate through the decomposition of sukunakutomo that the ignorance implicature of sukunakutomo derives from its disjunctive-unconditional nature.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section, I decompose sukunakutomo and present its structure as an adverbial clause. Then, in section 3, another inference of sukunakutomo is observed to illuminate that it is unconditional. Section 4 expands extensively on Rawlins 2008, 2013. In this section, I formulate the unconditional semantics of sukunakutomo. In section 5, I present its presupposition to derive inferences. To corroborate my analysis, I discuss, in section 6, the scope rigidity of sukunakutomo over negation. Some concluding remarks are provided in section 7.

2 Decomposition

As previous research, including Ihara 2020; Ihara and Mizutani 2020, has already proposed a decomposition analysis of sukunakutomo, I adopt a somewhat different route in this study. I decompose sukunakutomo into a comparative predicate sukunaku ‘smaller’ and tomo ‘whether,’ providing (1) a rough interpretation in (3), which amounts to saying that five students danced regardless of the actual number of students that danced.

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Although I have no ultimate answer to the reason why mo is required in sukunakutomo, it is certain that the mo is a general requirement in unconditional clauses with adjectives.
whether 5 is smaller than the number of the students who danced, 5 students danced.

My rationale for providing this interpretation is that tomo in sukunakutomo functions as a disjunctive unconditional morpheme, whereas sukunaku serves as a comparative that denotes an inequality between two numbers, namely the modified number 5 and the actual number of dancing students. In this proposal, the sentence with sukunakutomo involves a biclausal structure wherein sukunakutomo is an adverbial clause attached to the host clause with a modified numeral. Here, it is necessary to make clear how the modified numeral 5 is semantically composed both in sukunakutomo clause and in host clauses. Moreover elaboration is required with regard to the derivation of the comparative standard—that is what I refer to as the actual number—in the sukunakutomo clause. The resolutions that I postulate to these are the following two covert ingredients inside the sukunakutomo clause: (i) a covert pronoun indexed to the modified numeral and (ii) a covert comparative standard identified with the maximal degree of the set denoted by a QRed predicate of its host. These postulations yield the structure for (1) in (4). In (4), the pronoun indexed to the degree 5 is present. Furthermore, degree abstraction via QR operation applies in the host clause, and the resulting predicate also appears with a maximal operator as a comparative standard in the sukunakutomo clause. The predicate sukunaku compares and denotes the inequality between these two numbers such that five is smaller than the maximal number of the students who danced. Note that the pronoun is covert and the comparative standard is not pronounced due to ellipsis under the identity of the predicate in the host clause.

(4) ‘sukunakutomo five students danced’

The proposition that five is smaller than the actual number is composed with the morpheme tomo, eventually providing an antecedent for the unconditional semantics and interpreted as ‘whether or not 5 is smaller than the maximal number of the students who danced.’ The more formal seman-
tics of *sukunakutomo* is elaborated in section 4; in the following section, I present relational indifference, an observed implicature to corroborate the unconditional-clause nature of *sukunakutomo*.

3 Relational Indifference

Rawlins (2013) and Nakanishi (2021) observe that unconditionals can trigger another inference of relational indifference. For instance, (2), repeated as (5), can express an implication that whether Taro comes is irrelevant to Hanako’s pleasure.

(5) Taro-ga ko-yoo-*tomo*, Hanako-wa yorokoba-nai.
   Taro-NOM come-will-TOMO Hanako-TOP please-NEG
   ‘Whether Taro comes or not, Hanako won’t be pleased.’

If *sukunakutomo* is really given an unconditional interpretation, it is predicted that in some cases, *sukunakutomo* introduces a commitment to indifference rather than ignorance. This prediction is borne out in (6).

(6) Context:
   In a city council, more than half affirmative of 18 votes were required to pass a bill, and the speaker knows that exactly 15 people have voted in favor of the relevant bill.

   **Sukunakutomo** 10-nin sansee sita kara sono hooan-wa
   at.least 10-CL affirmative did because that top
   kaketu-sare-ta.
   endorse-PASSIVE-PAST
   ‘Because at least 10 voted for the bill, it was endorsed.’

   This utterance is perfect even in the context where the speaker knows exactly how many members voted for the bill, suggesting that the *sukunakutomo* in (6) derives no ignorance inference. Instead, it triggers a relational indifference that is described in words as below.

(7) Relative to the fact that the minimum requirement, namely 10 affirmative votes, was satisfied, it does not matter whether the number 10 was equal to or smaller than the actual number of 15.

   The above fact that *sukunakutomo* can express such an implicature as relational indifference, in addition to that of ignorance, argues that it should be analyzed as an unconditional construction. In the following section, I enter into the formulation of unconditional semantics of *sukunakutomo* by capitalizing on a proposal made by Rawlins.
4 Unconditional Semantics of sukunakutomo

In this section, I apply to sukunakutomo the analysis of unconditionals given by Rawlins (2008, 2013), in which a disjunctive unconditional is assumed to introduce a pair of alternatives. Given this, the antecedent of the unconditional in (5) is translated, as below.

(8) \[ \text{Taro-ga ko-yoo tomo}^c = \{ \lambda w. \text{Taro comes in } w, \lambda w. \text{Taro does not come in } w \} \]

On par with (8), I argue that the sukunakutomo clause of (1), repeated in (9), is also interpreted as an alternative set. To compose it, I define the lexical entry of each item in the sukunakutomo clause, as below.

(9) Sukunakutomo go-nin-no gakusei-ga odot-ta.
      ‘At least five students danced.’

(10) a. \[ \text{tomo}^c = \lambda P(s,t). \{ \lambda w. P(w), \lambda w. \neg P(w) \} \]
    b. \[ \text{sukunaku}^c = \lambda n(d), n(n'), n' < n \]
    c. \[ \text{covert pronoun}^c = 5 = \text{max}\{d : 0 \leq d \leq 5\} \]
    d. \[ \text{comparative standard}^c = \text{max}\{\text{d: } d\text{-many students danced}\} \rightarrow \text{abbreviated as } \text{max}(\text{st.}) \text{ for the sake of saving space} \]

As the denotation in (10a) shows, tomo takes a proposition and returns a pair of alternatives with one negated. In addition, (10b) shows that sukunaku is a comparative predicate that denotes an inequality relation between two numbers, as I mentioned in section 2. Composing the lexical items in (10) with the structure in (4) yields (11) for the interpretation of the sukunakutomo clause.

(11) \[ [\text{sukunaku comparative standard tomo}]^c = \{ \lambda w. 5 < \text{max}(\text{st.}) \text{ in } w, \lambda w. 5 \geq \text{max}(\text{st.}) \text{ in } w \} \]

Sukunakutomo as a pair of alternatives is then composed pointwise with its host. According to Rawlins (2008, 2013), unconditionals semantically function as ordinary conditionals, and after Kratzer (1986) a conditional is analyzed as providing a restrictor for the covert necessity modal. Given this assumption, (12) follows.

(12) \[ [\text{(9)}]^c = \{ \text{[\text{□} 5 < \text{max}(\text{st.})]} \text{ 5 students danced] } \{ \text{[\text{□} 5 \geq \text{max}(\text{st.})]} \text{ 5 students danced] } \}

To derive the conditional meaning, the necessity modal is defined as universal quantification over worlds accessible from the evaluation world according to a contextually provided accessibility function \( F_e \) (namely, the modal base), and the definition is given bellow.
This applies to the pair in (12), and finally (14) gains.

(14)  \[
\square = \lambda P, Q, \forall w. \forall w' \in F_c[w] \exists s, t : P(w) \rightarrow Q(w')
\]

(14) is a pair of alternatives, such that for every accessible world \(w'\), if 5 is less than or greater than the number of the students who danced in \(w'\), then there were 5 students who danced in \(w'\).

This is not the end of the story because the original sentence denotes not a set of propositions like in (14) but a singleton set. Thus, following Kratzer and Shimoyama (2002), a Hamblin universal operator in (15) must be assumed to assert that every proposition in the set is true.

(15)  \[
\forall \alpha |^w.g = \{ \lambda w. \forall p \in [\alpha]^{w.g} : p(w) = 1 \}
\]

(Kratzer and Shimoyama, 2002)

This creates the conjunction of the two alternatives, namely \(\{\text{if } 5 < \text{max(st.) then five students danced } \land \text{if } 5 = \text{max(st.) then five students danced}\}\).

Note also that \(5 > \text{max(st.)}\) is ruled out of the second alternative, and it is interpreted as \(5 = \text{max(st.)}\) because its consequent asserts that there were five students. In this way, we interpret \text{supunakutomo} as an unconditional construction with the meaning ‘whether the modified number is equal to or less than the actual number.’ In the next section, I succinctly illustrate how ignorance and indifference arise in unconditionals.

5 Presuppositions and Inferences

In this section, following Rawlins (2008, 2013), I first explicate how relational indifference arises in unconditional constructions, and then move on to the discussion of ignorance implicatures.

5.1 Relational indifference

Conducting a number of tests (see Rawlins 2013: section 3.1), Rawlins suggests that an unconditional adjunct like \(\text{whether Mary cooked pasta or pizza}\) is an interrogative clause and that a question operator is syntactically present within the clause, as in (16).

(16)  \[
\forall \ Q \left[ \text{whether Mary cooked pasta or pizza} \right] \left[ \text{John was pleased} \right]
\]

Rawlins further assumes that this operator triggers the two presuppositions of domain exhaustivity and mutual exclusivity, as in (17a) and (17b), where \(cs\) stands for the context set provided by the input context of interpretation.

(17)  \[
\square = [\alpha]^c, \text{ defined for } w, g, \alpha \text{ only if } [\alpha]^{w.g} \subseteq D_{\{st\}} \text{ and }
\quad \forall w \in cs : \exists p \in [\alpha]^c : p(w) = 1
\]

(exhaustivity)
(17a) presupposes that for every possible world, either of the alternatives holds true. (17b), on the other hand, presupposes the impossibility for both the alternatives to be true in the same world.

I would like to remind the reader of two things mentioned in the last section: An unconditional adjunct provides domain restrictors for the modal [see (12)], and the final denotation of an unconditional sentence is a singleton set (see (15)). This unconditional semantics, augmented with the presuppositions, results in an unconditional adjunct that provides a jointly exhaustive set of modal restrictors. For any domain restriction for a modal we could try, the modal claim is always true (see Rawlins 2013 section 2.4 for more detail). Thus, in the case of sukunakutomo 10 voted for the bill, in any domain, i.e., however many voted for the bill in a world, it is necessarily true that 10 people voted for the bill, which amounts to a relational indifference.

5.2 Ignorance

Let us enter into the discussion of ignorance implicature. We have already seen that an unconditional adjunct provides exhaustive and exclusive restrictors for the modal.

Rawlins adds another assumption that has to do with the modality, according to which the modal is subject to the non-triviality presupposition in (18).

\[ F_c(w) \cap p \neq \emptyset, \]

where \( F_c(w) \) is the modal base and \( p \) is the set of the worlds characterized by the restrictors

This presupposes that in the modal base contains some world in which a restrictor argument is true. Given that alternatives are composed pointwise, (18) applies to each proposition in the alternative set. For instance, the non-triviality of ‘whether 5 < max(st.)’ in sukunakutomo 5 students danced is described as below.

\[
\left\{ \begin{array}{l} F_c(w) \cap \{5 < \text{max(}st.)\}, \text{not} \ 5 = \text{max(}st.)\} \neq \emptyset \\
F_c(w) \cap \{5 = \text{max(}st.)\}, \text{not} \ 5 < \text{max(}st.)\} \neq \emptyset \end{array} \right. 
\]

In the above set, I add not A because of mutual exclusivity in (17b), i.e., both alternatives cannot simultaneously hold true. As long as the modal base \( F_c(w) \) is compatible with the speaker’s belief in the evaluation world, (19) denotes that the speaker’s belief includes, for each alternative, at least one world in which it holds. This is equivalent to the speaker’s ignorance such that she is not sure whether the actual number exceeds 5.
6 Above Negation

It follows from my account of the implicatures that sukunakutomo cannot be interpreted under negation. Specifically, sukunaku cannot take as its comparative standard a QRed predicate that negation outscopes in the host clause, which is schematized as (20).

(20) The uninterpretable structure with sukunakutomo under negation

This structure is uninterpretable because a contradiction arises between the implicature introduced by sukunakutomo and the assertion of the host clause. As elaborated in the previous section, sukunakutomo induces an implicature based on the presuppositions, which are immune to the negation as a hole. Thus, the implicature obtained from (20) is that there is at least one possible world for either alternative, i.e., (i) the modified number is equal to the exact number and (ii) the modified number is smaller than the exact number, where it is true. The host clause, however, is susceptible to the existence of negation, and thus its resulting reading from the structure in (20) is such that P is true for “less than” the modified number.

To illustrate this point more clearly, it suffices to observe the uninterpretability of sukunakutomo in an environment in which its narrow scope reading is forced with regard to negation. For such an environment, (21a), adapted from Watanabe 2004, shows that the scope of an item under negation is determined by the relative position of a negative polarity item (NPI) like mettani.

    meeting-GEN-TOP 10-CL come-NEG-PAST
    ‘It was not the case that 10 people came to the meeting.’
    ‘There were 10 people who did not come to the meeting’
    (not > 10; 10 > not)

    Kaigi-ni-wa  mettani 10-nin ko-nak-atta.
    meeting-GEN-TOP rarely 10-CL come-NEG-PAST
‘It was often the case that at most 9 people came to the meeting.’

\(\text{not} > 10; \neg10 > \text{not}\)

Given this, it is predicted that the sequence ‘NPI ... sukunakutomo ... NEG’ must be uninterpretable, which (22b) verifies.

\[\begin{align*}
(22) & \quad \textbf{a. Sukunakutomo} \ 10\text{-nin mettani ko-nai.} \\
& \quad \text{at.least} \quad 10\text{-CL} \quad \text{rarely} \quad \text{come-NEG} \\
& \quad \text{‘There are at least 10 people who rarely come.’} \\
& \quad \textbf{b. Mettani sukunakutomo} \ 10\text{-nin ko-nai.} \\
& \quad \text{rarely} \quad \text{at.least} \quad 10\text{-CL} \quad \text{come-NEG} \\
& \quad \text{‘It is often the case that at most 9 people come.’}
\end{align*}\]

In (22a), there arises no conflict between (i) the implicature of \textit{sukunakutomo} and (ii) the host-clause assertion: (i) \(10\) or more than \(10\) people rarely come and (ii) there are (at least) \(10\) people who rarely come. Conversely, (22b) invokes a conflict between the two: (i) \(10\) or more than \(10\) people come and (ii) it is often the case that at most \(9\) people come.\(^2\)

In the following final section, I briefly summarize my proposal and mention a remaining question.

7 Concluding Remarks

In this paper I propose that \textit{sukunakutomo} should be analyzed as a disjunctive unconditional construction. Through its decomposition, I demonstrate that the implicatures of \textit{sukunakutomo}, \textit{ignorance} and \textit{relational indifference}, derive from its unconditional nature.

Before closing this section, I would like to mention one case where \textit{sukunakutomo} modifies a non-numerical expression.

\[\begin{align*}
(23) & \quad \textbf{Sukunakutomo} \ John \ to \ Mary\text{-wa} \ ki-ta. \\
& \quad \text{at.least} \quad \text{John} \ and \ Mary\text{-TOP} \ \text{come-PAST} \\
& \quad \text{‘At least John and Mary came.’}
\end{align*}\]

My current proposal indeed fails to capture the above case because it is not simple to define the maximality of John and Mary in a way that fits into the intuitive meaning of (23). However, we could solve this by revising the semantics of \textit{sukunaku} ‘smaller.’ If \textit{sukunaku} is defined in terms of a subset relation, e.g., John and Mary is a subset of the individuals who came, (23) would be interpreted in a fashion similar to what I have explicated in this

\(^2\)Schwarz and Shimoyama (2009) also observe that \textit{sukunakutomo} coerces a numeral to have a wide scope w.r.t negation while Ihara (2020) and Ihara and Mizutani (2020) argue that the narrow-scope reading leads to “at most” interpretation. I put aside this discussion for future work.
paper. Adopting this sort of subset semantics requires us to meticulously examine numerical cases once again, though.

Acknowledgments

I express my gratitude to Shoichi Takahashi, Elin McCready, and all the audience at the 29th conference on Japanese/Korean linguistics.

References


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