On the Form/ Meaning Correspondence in the Japanese *Nani-o X-o* Construction

The *nani-o X-o* construction in Japanese, exemplified by sentences like (1), is a colloquial and idiomatic interrogative expression that characteristically contains two accusative-marked phrases in a single clause.

(1) * Nani-o bakagetakoto-o yuu nda?  
    what-Acc rubbish-Acc say Q  
    ‘Why do you talk rubbish?’

One of the two accusative-marked phrases is the *wh*-adjunct *nani-o* (*what-Acc*), which, according to Kurafuji (1997), is interpreted as *naze* (*why*), and the other is (prototypically) the object of a transitive verb.

The *nani-o X-o* construction has properties not predictable from the general grammatical properties of Japanese and counts as a “construction” in the Construction Grammar sense (cf. Goldberg (1995:4)). First, the order of the two accusative phrases *nani-o* and *X-o* is fixed in the construction.

(2) * Bakagetakoto-o nani-o yuu nda? (cf. (1))

*Nani-o* has to precede *X-o* and switching their order directly affects grammaticality. The irreversibility cannot be predicted on general grounds, since, as is well-known, scrambling is generally allowed in Japanese.

(3) {Naze bakagetakoto-o / Bakagetakoto-o naze} yuu nda?  
    why rubbish-Acc rubbish-Acc why say Q  
    ‘Why do you talk rubbish?’

Second, there are cases where it is impossible to take the second accusative-marked phrase, i.e. *X-o*, as contributed by the main verb of the construction. Observe the following:

(4) * Nani-o kurdaranaikoto-o sawaide-i-ru nda.  
    what-Acc trifle-Acc make.noise-be-Pres Q  
    ‘Why are you making a fuss about such a trifle?’

As in (1), the second accusative phrase is normally the object of a transitive verb in the *nani-o X-o* construction. In (4), however, it is impossible to view *kurdaranaikoto-o* (*trifle-Acc*) as the object of the verb *sawa* (*make noise*). For *sawa* is an intransitive verb and does not take an accusative object.

(5) * Taroo-wa kurdaranaikoto-o sawaide-i-ru.  
    Taro-Top trifle-Acc make.noise-be-Pres  
    ‘Taro is making a fuss about a trifle.’

What, then, licenses *kurdaranaikoto-o* in (4)? The licensing of *kurdaranaikoto-o* in (4), I argue, parallels that of *the napkin* in *He sneezed the napkin off the table*. According to Goldberg (1995:ch. 2), *the napkin* is licensed (not by the intransitive verb *sneeze* but) by the caused-motion construction. Given this parallelism, we can say that it is the *nani-o X-o* construction that contributes the second accusative-marked phrase *kurdaranaikoto-o* in (4).

Although it is idiosyncratic as seen above, the *nani-o X-o* construction shows a systematic form-meaning correspondence, too. The systematic correspondence to be demonstrated is characterized in terms of “formal markedness” (cf. Levinson (2000)) and “functional specialization” and is described as follows:

(6) Generalization about the Correlation between Formal Markedness and Functional Specialization

If a grammatical form is marked with reference to the grammatical convention of a
given language, then the function of that form is more specialized than that of the corresponding unmarked form(s). (Konno (2005))

The nani-o X-o construction contains two o-marked phrases in a single clause, as seen in (1) and (4). As Kurafuji (1997:257) correctly points out, the simultaneous occurrence of nani-o and X-o in the construction is in conflict with the Double-O Constraint (DOC) in Japanese (Harada (1973)), which forbids that a simple sentence contain more than one o-marked phrase. Violating the DOC, the nani-o X-o construction is regarded as formally marked. (Note that although it violates the DOC, the nani-o X-o construction does exist. In fact, it is not difficult to find instances of the construction in both transcribed and written texts.)

On the meaning side, the nani-o X-o construction functions exclusively as an accusation, not as a question.

(7) a. Taroo-wa “Nani-o bakagetakoto-o yuu no?” to Hanako-o hinanshita.
   Taro-Top what-Acc rubbish-Acc say Q Quot Hanako-Acc accused
   ‘(Lit.) Taro accused Hanako, “Why do you talk rubbish?”’

   Taro-Top what-Acc rubbish-Acc say Q Quot Hanako-Dat asked
   ‘Taro asked Hanako, “Why do you talk rubbish?”’

Example (7a), where the construction occurs as the quoted part of a sentence with hinansuru (‘accuse’) as the quoting verb, is impeccable, while example (7b), where it occurs as the quoted part of a sentence with tazuneru (‘ask’) as the quoting verb, sounds unacceptable. This means that the nani-o X-o construction is a rhetorical question that conventionally and exclusively expresses an accusation and further that it counts as a “speech act construction” in the sense of Lakoff (1984). The nani-o X-o construction is characterized as functionally specialized. In this way, the formal markedness of the nani-o X-o construction is in proportion to its functional specialization.

A comparison of the nani-o X-o construction with the naze construction, which does not violate the DOC and hence is formally unmarked, helps to understand this point better. In contrast to the former, the latter functions either as an accusation or a question.

(8) a. Taroo-wa “Naze bakagetakoto-o yuu no?” to Hanako-o hinanshita.
   Taro-Top why rubbish-Acc say Q Quot Hanako-Acc accused
   ‘(Lit.) Taro accused Hanako, “Why do you talk rubbish?”’

b. Taroo-wa “Naze bakagetakoto-o yuu no?” to Hanako-ni tazuneta.
   Taro-Top why rubbish-Acc say Q Quot Hanako-Dat asked
   ‘Taro asked Hanako, “Why do you talk rubbish?”’

The formally marked nani-o X-o construction is functionally more specialized than the formally unmarked naze construction. This conclusion is in perfect accordance with generalization (6).

References