On the Focusing Function of the Japanese X toka Construction

Motomi Kajitani
On the Focusing Function of the Japanese X toka Construction

Motomi Kajitani
Department of Linguistics, The University of New Mexico

The X toka construction in Japanese is known for the various functions it expresses (cf. Taylor 2010). Some of the well-cited functions include exemplification (‘for example, X, etc.’) (Teramura 1991), defocusing (‘X or something like that’) (Barotto 2018), and focusing (‘such a thing as X’) (Amano 2001). Compared to the first two functions, the focusing function is puzzling: What exactly does “focusing” involve? What are the relationships between the focusing function and other less commonly illustrated functions of the construction, such as exclamative (‘X!’), self-mockery (‘X, hehe, I’m just kidding’) (Suzuki 2001), and topic-marking (‘talking about X…’) (Nakamata 2007)? How is it possible for the same construction to express both focusing and defocusing?

Based on data from the two corpora of spontaneous spoken discourse, BTSJ (Usami 2018) and Chiba Three-party Conversation Corpus (Den and Enomoto 2014), and other sources, the current study shows: (i) the focusing function of the X toka construction involves the speaker’s surprise toward the fact that X is P and their comments on the situation; (ii) exclamative carries the same basic schema, but the comments are not verbally expressed; (iii) in self-mockery, by acknowledging one’s own utterance as something surprising, the speaker creates a joking effect; and (iv) what has been called the topic-marking toka in fact has a topic-narrowing function, which is also based on the same schema with the speaker’s surprise being minimally expressed.

This study contributes to our current knowledge on the focusing function of the X toka construction and how the various other functions form an intricate semantic-pragmatic network around it. The study also reveals that the focusing, defocusing, and exemplification functions of the construction are different manifestations of the same basic schema in different pragmatic contexts. Finally, it also has implications for the studies of the origin of the focusing function in other constructions.