Functional/Grammaticalization

How ‘things’ (mono) get reanalyzed in Japanese discourse

Reference grammars for learners of Japanese commonly explain the ‘formal noun’ (keisiki meisi) mono as roughly expressing the meaning ‘thing’ of English, and employ conceptual terms such as “concreteness” (Martin 1975, McGloin 1989) or “tangibility” (Makino and Tsutsui 1989) to account for its underlying semantics [See example 1]. However, there exist cases where the logical referent of mono does not appear to possess any obvious features of "concreteness / tangibility" [See example 2].

Mono functions frequently as a complementizer noun in Japanese, the common pattern being that of [complement] clause + mono + copula da. Past studies (e.g., Teramura 1981, Agetsuma 1991, Tsubone 1994, Fujii 1999) have noted the -monoda construction’s pragmatic effects of conveying a wide range of speaker emotive affect, such as nostalgic reminiscences, conviction toward a natural truth, deep-seated desires, amazement, indirect commands, etc. [Examples of these provided in 3 - 7]. Mono (and its contracted form mon) can also appear in the sentence / utterance-final position to reflect the speaker’s subjective attitude or “stance” toward the proposition uttered. [See example 8]. Previous analyses, however, have neglected to offer a unified explanation as to what particular characteristics--i.e., in terms of its semantic and syntactic features—is imbuing the mono-construction with such a broad range of pragmatic implications.

This study presents an alternative, unitary analysis to account for the discourse modal functions of mono in Modern Japanese. It does so by first proposing that the semantics of a “physically perceived / unationalized” existence lies at the core of mono’s meaning when it is to take on a referential reading. This proposal is arrived at through an etymological examination of mono’s meaning in Pre-Modern Japanese, as evidenced by the existence of, and significances held by such terms as mononoke (‘evil spirit’), mononohu (‘warrior’), etc. in Classical Japanese.

It is moreover claimed that when mono is employed in the –monoda construction where it receives a non-referential reading, the semantics signaled by the formal noun “shifts” by way of metaphorical inferencing from denoting an entity with a spatial orientation, to one with temporal persistence. This reanalysis (SPACE > TIME) is hypothesized to arise in part as a result of –monoda’s syntactic conformities to the topic-comment (A wa B da) construction in Japanese. Finally, it suggests that the "incomplete" state of the rationalization process signaled by mono's core meaning is what imparts a highly subjective, personal "voice" to discourse modal –monoda, as well as sentence-final mon(o).

The aim of this study is three-fold: 1.) to provide an overview of the various grammatical uses mono possesses in current Japanese discourse, 2.) to show that mono’s seeming polyfunctionality” is not due to a case of polysemy, but represent grammaticalized meanings inferable by metathoric / metonymic processes from its proposed core semantics as a noun, and 3.) to suggest the role played by pre-modern Japanese beliefs in the development of such inferential processes.
Examples:

(1) *Hasi wa taberu toki ni tukau mono da.* (Constructed example)
chopsticks TOP eat:NPST when LOC use: NPST MONO: COP
‘Chopsticks are (some)thing (one) uses when (one) eats.’

(2) *Wakare wa kanasii mono da.* (Examples 2-7 adapted from Martin 1975)
separation TOP sad MONO COP
‘Parting is a sad thing / affair.’

(3) *Mukasi wa yoku kono kooen de asonda mon(o)da. → nostalgic reminiscence*
long ago TOP often this park at play: PST MONO: COP
‘Way back then, (I) sure used to play in this park alot’

(4) *Imu wa hoeru mon(o)da. → conviction toward a natural truth*
dog TOP bark:NPST MONO: COP
‘Dogs naturally bark ./ It’s expected that dogs bark.’

(5) *Konna rippa-na uti ni itido wa sumitai mon(o)da. → deep-seated desire*
like this magnificient:ATT house LOC once TOP want to live MONO: COP
‘If just once, (I) sure would want to live in a magnificent house like this.’

(6) *Yoku yatta mon(o)da. → amazement*
well do: PST MONO: COP
‘How well (you) did!’ / It's amazing (you) did so well.’

(7) *Hito ni wa amari meiwaku o kakenai mon(o)da. → indirect command*
people DAT TOP too much trouble ACC cause:NEG: NPST MONO: COP
‘(You) shouldn't cause people too much trouble.’

(8) Mother: *Sarada, tabetenai- janai no.* (Constructed example)
‘Why haven’t (you) eaten (your) salad?’
Child: *Datte, yasai kirai da mon.* → subjective reasoning
because vegetable hate COP: NPST MONO
‘Because I hate vegetables.’

Abbreviations used in Gloss:

| ACC = accusative | ATT = attributive | COP = copula | DAT = dative | GEN = genitive |
| LOC = locative   | NEG = negative    | NPST = nonpast | PST = past | TOP = topic |

References (Cited in Abstract):


