

# STATIVE POTENTIAL “VERBS?” BARE ROOTS IN JAPANESE

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In this paper, I consider a class of Japanese verbs that Nightingale (1999) refers to as stative potentials; these verbs have a stative interpretation, but only when they appear in the *V-te iru* form, which yields a progressive or perfective interpretation with verbs of other classes. As noted by Ezaki (2001), stative potentials are relatively unexplored in the literature; previous analyses treat these verbs as a type of instantaneous verb. However, I argue that treating stative potentials as fundamentally similar to verbs of other classes fails to take into account their unique properties; specifically, I claim that stative potentials should be analysed as bare roots rather than as verbs. First, I introduce the aspectual classification system of Kindaichi (1950), which establishes stative potentials as a distinct aspectual class. Next, I consider the aspectual character of stative potentials; I discuss the analyses of Ogihara (1998) and Shirai (2000), which treat stative potentials as “defective” instantaneous verbs, and present counter-evidence that shows that stative potentials behave significantly differently than instantaneous verbs do. Finally, I present my proposal that stative potentials are not verbs, but bare roots (in the sense of Marantz (1997) and Wiltschko (2005)). I argue that stative potentials have numerous non-verbal properties; notably, they seem to be aspectually incomplete. Because they are bare roots, they cannot function independently as predicates, requiring the auxiliary *iru* ‘to be’ to contribute the aspectual information of the clause.

## 1. Japanese Aspectual Classes

Kindaichi (1950) developed an aspectual classification system specifically for Japanese that predates Vendler’s (1957) more familiar one. In this system, verb classes are defined based on their interactions with the auxiliary *iru* ‘to be.’ Kindaichi’s (1950) four verb classes are given in (1) below:

(1) Kindaichi’s Aspect Table for *-te iru*

Verb Form	Stative	Instantaneous	Continuative	Stative Potential
<i>-te iru</i>	Ungrammatical	Perfective	Progressive	Mandatory (stative)
<b>Main Verb</b>	<i>iru</i> (be) <i>aru</i> (be) <i>iru</i> (need)	<i>shinu</i> (die) <i>iku</i> (go) <i>aku</i> (open)	<i>oyogu</i> (swim) <i>hashiru</i> (run) <i>aruku</i> (walk)	<i>sobieru</i> (tower over) <i>niru</i> (resemble)

(Nightingale 1999, p.14, his Table 1.4)

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Verbs of different classes have different interpretations in the *V-te iru* form; stative verbs are ungrammatical, instantaneous verbs are perfective, continuative verbs are progressive, and stative potentials are stative. In addition, verbs of different classes also have different interpretations in the simple nonpast form. Stative verbs have a present-time interpretation in the simple nonpast; instantaneous verbs have a future time interpretation; continuative verbs are interpreted as future or generic/habitual; and stative potentials are ungrammatical. These interpretations are given in (2)-(4) below:<sup>1</sup>

(2) **Stative:**

- a. Toronto-ni i-ru.  
Toronto-*loc* be-*nonpast*  
'I am in Toronto.'
- b. \* Toronto-ni i-te i-ru.  
Toronto-*loc* be-*te* be-*nonpast*

(3) **Instantaneous:**

- a. Wasure-ru.  
Forget-*nonpast*  
'I will forget.'
- b. Wasure-te i-ru.  
Forget-*te* be-*nonpast*  
'I have forgotten.'

(4) **Continuative:**

- a. Hashi-ru.  
Run-*nonpast*  
'I run/will run.'
- b. Hashi-te i-ru.  
Run-*te* be-*nonpast*  
'I am running.'

(5) **Stative potential:**

- a. \* Yama-ga sobie-ru.  
Mountain-*nom* tower-*nonpast*
- b. Yama-ga sobie-te i-ru.  
Mountain-*nom* tower-*te* be-*nonpast*  
'The mountain stands tall.'

Thus, the four classes identified by Kindaichi (1950) exhibit different behaviours in both the simple nonpast and the *V-te iru* form. Notably, unlike other verbs, stative potentials do not occur independently; they can only appear

<sup>1</sup> The morpheme *-te* is underspecified in meaning; I have glossed it simply as '*te*.' As well, it has several different phonological forms; I do not discuss this allomorphy here.

in the *V-te iru* form. I will explore this property of stative potentials in the next section.

## 2. The Nature of Stative Potentials

As shown above, stative potentials are ungrammatical independently; thus, It is difficult to determine their properties. They seem to be neither stative nor eventive; they do not denote states in the simple nonpast as stative verbs do, as shown in (6), and they do not denote events in the simple past as both continuative and instantaneous verbs do, as shown in (7):

- (6) \* Taroo-wa suugaku-no seeseki-ga zubanuke-ru.  
 Taro-*top* math-*gen* grades-*nom* be.outstanding-*nonpast*  
 [Intended]: ‘Taro is outstanding in math.’
- (7) \* Taroo-wa suugaku-no seeseki-ga ichigatsu-ni zubanuke-ta.  
 Taro-*top* math-*gen* grades-*nom* January-*dat* be.outstanding-*pst*  
 [Intended]: ‘Taro became outstanding in math in January.’

Given their ungrammaticality in the simple tenses, how should stative potentials be characterized? In this section, I discuss the claim of Ogihara (1998) and Shirai (2000) that stative potentials are in fact “defective” instantaneous verbs; I show that stative potentials exhibit behaviour that differs considerably from that of instantaneous verb, and argue that this different behaviour justifies treating stative potentials as a distinct class.

### 2.1 Stative Potentials as Instantaneous Verbs?

Ogihara (1998) and Shirai (2000) both treat stative potentials as “defective instantaneous verbs”; they claim that stative potentials have a syntactic restriction that prevents them from appearing in the simple tenses in main clauses. The evidence that Ogihara (1998) presents for this comes from relative clauses; he argues that both stative potentials and instantaneous verbs can be used in the past tense in relative clauses to describe a present state while other verbs cannot. In (8) and (9) below, both the stative potential *sobieru* ‘to stand tall’ and the instantaneous verb *yabureru* ‘to tear’ are used in the past tense to describe a present state in a relative clause. However, in (10) and (11), the continuative verb *oyogu* ‘to swim’ and the stative verb *iru* ‘to be’ can only refer to a past state in the past tense; they cannot describe a present-time situation.

- (8) Taroo-wa [takaku **sobie-ta** yama]-wo mi-te i-ru.  
 Taro-*top* high tower-*pst* mountain-*acc* see-*te* be-*nonpast*  
 ‘Taro is looking at a mountain that stands tall.’  
 (Ogihara 1998, p.27, his (34b))

- (9) Taroo-wa [hyooshi-no **yabure-ta** hon]-wo mot-te i-ru.  
 Taro-*top* cover-*gen* be.torn-*pst* book-*acc* get-*te* be-*nonpast*  
 ‘Taro has a book the cover of which is torn.’  
 (Ogihara 1998, p.27, his (34d))
- (10) Taroo-wa [puuru-de **oyo-ida** hito]-ga suki-da.  
 Taro-*top* pool-at swim-*pst* person-*nom* like-*cop.nonpast*  
 ‘Taro likes the person who swam in the pool.’  
 \* ‘Taro likes the person who is swimming in the pool.’
- (11) Taroo-wa [heya-ni **i-ta** hito]-ga suki-da.  
 Taro-*top* room-*dat* be-*pst* person-*nom* like-*cop.nonpast*  
 ‘Taro likes the person who was in the room.’  
 \* ‘Taro likes the person who is in the room.’

This common feature, Ogihara (1998) says, indicates that stative potentials denote inchoative events, just as instantaneous verbs do; therefore, the two classes should be collapsed into a single class of instantaneous verbs. This characterization of stative potentials requires that their interpretation in the *V-te iru* form be revised; Ogihara (1998) says that, like instantaneous verbs, stative potentials receive a perfective interpretation in the *V-te iru* form. Thus, in (13) below, the stative potential *sugureru*, usually glossed as ‘to be excellent,’ is glossed as ‘to become excellent,’ and denotes a perfective event with *V-te iru*, just as the instantaneous verb *taoreru* ‘to fall’ does in (12):

- (12) **Instantaneous:**  
 Taore-te i-ru.  
 Fall-*te* be-*nonpast*  
 ‘I have fallen.’
- (13) **Stative potential:**  
 Taroo-wa seeseeki-ga sugure-te i-ru.  
 Taro-*top* grades-*nom* become.excellent-*te* be-*nonpast*  
 ‘Taro’s grades have become excellent.’

Thus, Ogihara’s (1998) account of stative potentials, also adopted by Shirai (2000), treats this verb class as a sub-class of instantaneous verbs; Ogihara (1998) explains the inability of stative potentials to appear in simple tenses in main clauses as the result of a syntactic restriction.

## 2.2 Counter-evidence

Ogihara’s (1998) analysis provides a simple way to account for the behaviour of stative potentials; however, there are some questions that this analysis fails to address. As well, there is other evidence that stative potentials are better treated as a distinct verb class.

Although Ogihara (1998) maintains that stative potentials are inchoative verbs, they are syntactically restricted from referring to the events that they

describe; in fact, it is not even necessary that the inchoative events denoted by stative potentials ever took place. Consider (14) below:

- (14) Ningen-wa umare-ta toki kara gengo-no honshitu-wo  
 people-*top* be.born-*pst* time from language-*genessence-acc*

**shi-tte i-ru.**  
 learn-*te* be-*nonpast*

‘A human being knows the essence of human language from birth.’

(Ogihara 1998, p.29, his (36b))

In (14), the stative potential *shiru* is glossed by Ogihara (1998) as ‘to learn’; however, it is used in the *V-te iru* form to specifically describe a state of knowing that arose without any event of learning having taken place. Thus, according to Ogihara (1998), it is not a requirement that the inchoative event denoted by a stative potential actually occurred. This, however, is not true of regular instantaneous verbs. A regular instantaneous verb in the *V-te iru* form requires that the state it describes is the result of an earlier event, as shown in (15) below. In the infelicitous (15a), the instantaneous verb *ochiru* ‘to drop’ in the *V-te iru* form cannot refer to a state that arose independent of the dropping event; only a construction such as (15b), in which the current state denoted by the verb *taoreru* ‘to fall’ is the result of a prior event, is felicitous.

- (15) a. # Matto-ga yuka-ni ochi-te i-ru.  
 Mat-*nom* floor-*dat* drop-*te* be-*nonpast*  
 [Intended] ‘A mat is on the floor.’
- b. Hei-ga taore-te i-ru.  
 Wall-*nom* fall-*te* be-*nonpast*  
 ‘There is a fallen wall [e.g., on the ground].’

Therefore, stative potentials and instantaneous verbs display asymmetric behaviour in this respect; while stative potentials can be used to refer to states that did not arise as the result of a prior inchoative event, regular instantaneous verbs cannot.

Further evidence that stative potentials should be treated as distinct from instantaneous verbs comes from the fact that these two verb types interact differently with the auxiliary *shimau*, which is usually interpreted as a completive aspect marker. Strauss (2003) describes the meaning of the *V-te shimau* form as ‘to do V completely (and the speaker is affected)’; that is, the speaker is affected by the completion of the action denoted by the verb. This is shown in (16) below:

- (16) Taroo-ga ringo-wo tabe-te shima-tta.  
 Taro-*nom* apple-*acc* eat-*te* put.away-*pst*  
 ‘Taro ate the apple up (and I was surprised, disappointed, angry, etc.).’<sup>2</sup>

While this construction is most often referred to as a marker of completive aspect, Clarke (2005) argues that it is better described as encoding *irreversible* aspect. She notes that this construction can be used to describe an event that is not complete at the reference time, as shown in (17) below:

- (17) Megumi-ga ne-te shima-tta.  
 Megumi-*noms*sleep-*te* put.away-*pst*  
 ‘Megumi fell asleep.’  
 (Clarke 2005, p.4, her (9b))

When used with the continuative verb *neru* ‘to sleep,’ the *V-te shimau* construction does not describe the completion of the action of sleeping, but the inception; (17) is felicitous if Megumi is still sleeping at the moment of speech. The sentence refers exclusively to the point at which the event of sleeping began. Thus, Clarke (2005) argues that the *V-te shimau* construction is best described as an aspectual compression; it condenses the eventuality to the point at which it becomes irreversible (as well as adding some additional emotional connotation). For an activity verb with no inherent culmination, such as *neru* ‘to sleep,’ this point is the initial point; for a telic verb, such as *ringo-wo taberu* ‘to eat an apple,’ this point is the final point.

Nightingale (1999) argues that all verbs except for stative verbs are compatible with the *V-te shimau* construction; however, stative potentials are ungrammatical in this form:

- (18) \* Yoku benkyoo shi-ta ga, arifure-te shima-tta.  
 Often study do-*pst* but be.mediochre-*te* put.away-*pst*  
 [Intended] ‘I studied frequently, but I was completely/ended up being mediochre.’
- (19) \* Amari benkyoo shi-naka-tta ga, sugure-te  
 Seldom study do-*neg-pst* but be.excellent-*te*  
 shima-tta.  
 put.away-*pst*  
 [Intended] ‘I seldom studied, but I was completely/ended up being excellent.’

(18) and (19) show that the stative potentials *arifureru* ‘to be mediochre’ and *sugureru* ‘to be excellent’ cannot be condensed to a single point of irreversibility; the *V-te shimau* construction cannot compress the event to an

<sup>2</sup> The emotional connotation of *-te shimau* is determined through the context of the utterance; I will not be discussing this aspect of the construction. For a thorough analysis of this issue, see Strauss (2003).

endpoint or an initial point. There is nothing in Ogihara's (1998) theory that rules out the use of stative potentials in the *V-te shimau* form; he says that these verbs are only syntactically restricted from appearing in simple tenses. Thus, if stative potentials are syntactically defective instantaneous verbs, they should be able to appear in the *V-te shimau* construction; however, (18) and (19) show that this is not the case.

This evidence, therefore, shows that stative potentials behave significantly differently from instantaneous verbs; they can be used to refer to a state that arose independent of a prior event, and they cannot be aspectually compressed with the *V-te shimau* construction. This evidence suggests that stative potentials are somehow aspectually incomplete; this would explain why they cannot appear independently in the simple tenses, and why they cannot be used with *V-te shimau*. Therefore, what characteristic can be posited for stative potentials to explain this aspectual incompleteness?

### 3. Stative Potentials as Bare Roots

It has been proposed elsewhere (Marantz (1997), Wiltschko (2005), *inter alia*) that the bare root is itself a syntactic category, with status within the grammar before categorization as noun, verb, or adjective. Marantz (1997) posits that a root is transformed into a verb by virtue of the aspectual properties contained within the verbalizing head that selects it. In this section, I adopt this idea; based on their non-verbal properties, I propose that stative potentials are not verbs, but bare roots, and use this property to explain their stative interpretation in the *V-te iru* form.

#### 3.1. Non-Verbal Properties

As we have seen above, stative potentials have properties that distinguish them from other verbs. Syntactically, they are ungrammatical in the simple tenses and incompatible with *V-te shimau*, which indicates their aspectual incompleteness. Semantically, stative potentials cannot be associated with an event; they always denote individual-level properties, such as *sobieru* 'to stand tall,' *sugureru* 'to be excellent,' and *niru* 'to resemble.' Morphologically, however, stative potentials do appear to exhibit verbal behaviour. The "dictionary form" of stative potentials is the form that verbs appear in, the root followed by the nonpast verbal inflection, even though this form never appears in the language. As well, the only form in which stative potentials ever appear in main clauses is the *V-te iru* form, a construction that is unique to verbs.

Although stative potentials can appear in the *V-te iru* construction, it is significant that they cannot otherwise appear with the *-te* inflection. They cannot appear in the *V-te wa ikenai* 'V-ing is not permitted' construction, as shown in (20) below; unlike the continuative verb *suu* 'to smoke' in (20a), the stative potential *arifureru* 'to be commonplace' in (20b) is ungrammatical in this form:

- (20) a. Su-tte-wa ik-e-nai.  
Smoke-*te-top* go-can-*neg.nonpast*  
'Smoking is not permitted.'
- b. \* Arifure-te-wa ik-e-nai.  
be.commonplace-*te-top* go-can-*neg.nonpast*  
[Intended] 'Being commonplace is not permitted.'

It should be noted that this ungrammaticality is not for pragmatic reasons (i.e., you cannot forbid someone to be commonplace); the construction becomes grammatical if *arifureru* is put into the *V-te iru* form, as shown in (21):

- (21) Arifure-te i-te-wa ik-e-nai.  
be.commonplace-*te* be-*conj-top* go-can-*neg.nonpast*  
'Being commonplace is not permitted.'

Another verbal construction that uses the *-te* form is the imperative; again, stative potentials are ungrammatical in this construction. While the continuative verb *taberu* 'to eat' in (22a) receives an imperative interpretation, the stative potential *zubanukeru* 'to be outstanding' in (22b) is ungrammatical:

- (22) a. Tabe-te!  
Eat-*te*  
'Eat!'
- b. \* Zubanuke-te!  
Be.outstanding-*te*  
[Intended] 'Be outstanding!'

Again, it is not pragmatics that rules out this construction; if *zubanukeru* 'to be outstanding' is put into the *V-te iru* form, the resulting construction is grammatical, and could be said, for example, by a demanding parent to a child:

- (23) Zubanuke-te i-te!  
Be.outstanding-*te* be-*te*  
'Be outstanding (from now on)!'

Thus, even though stative potentials appear in the verbal *V-te iru* construction, they do not exhibit canonical verbal behaviour in the *-te* form. This evidence, coupled with the other unique properties described above, justify considering the possibility that stative potentials are bare roots rather than verbs.

### 3.2. Stative Potentials and the *V-te iru* Form

We have seen above that stative potentials do not behave the same as other verbs in the *-te* form; nevertheless, they still appear in the verbal *V-te iru* construction. If we are to analyse stative potentials as bare roots rather than verbs, their occurrence in this construction must be explained.

The morpheme *-te* is not restricted to verbs; it is also a nominal and adjectival inflection, as shown in (24)-(26) below:

(24) **Adjective**

Hon-wa **nagaku-te** omoshiro-i.  
 Book-*top* long-*te* interesting-*nonpast*  
 ‘The book is long and interesting.’

(25) **Noun**

Yoshi-wa **gakusei-de**, okusan-wa sensee da.  
 Yoshi-*top* student-*te* wife-*top* teacher *cop.nonpast*  
 ‘Yoshi is a student, and his wife is a teacher.’

(26) **Verb**

Koohii-wo **no-nde**, shinbun-wo yo-mu.  
 Coffee-*acc* drink-*te* paper-*acc* read-*nonpast*  
 ‘I will drink a coffee and read the paper.’

The morpheme *-te* is highly unrestricted; it can appear on words of any syntactic category, and cannot be associated with a particular meaning. Its distribution suggests that it is a default morpheme, and is inserted in any non-finite context. Thus, in principle, there is nothing that would prevent *-te* from attaching to a bare root as well.

Analysing stative potentials as bare roots accounts for their stative interpretation in the *V-te iru* form. As noted above, stative potentials are aspectually incomplete, which is consistent with the behaviour of bare roots; if it is the verbalizing morpheme that contains the aspectual information, as argued by Marantz (1997) and Arad (2002), then a bare root by itself is aspectually unspecified. By itself, a bare root does not have any aspectual information to contribute to the clause; therefore, it cannot function independently as a predicate. If a stative potential is combined with the auxiliary *iru* ‘to be,’ a stative lexical verb, then the auxiliary contributes all of the aspectual information to the predicate, yielding a stative interpretation. Thus, in a sentence like (27) below, it is the auxiliary *iru* that contributes the aspectual information, while the stative potential *sobieru* ‘to stand tall’ contributes nothing but lexical meaning:

(27) Yama-ga sobie-te i-ru.  
 Mountain-*nom* tower-*conj* be-*nonpast*  
 ‘The mountain stands tall.’

Therefore, in analysing stative potentials as bare roots, we are able to explain their unique properties. Their occurrence in the *V-te iru* form, as well as their interpretation in this form, is not surprising; these properties are a consequence of the lack of aspectual information contained within bare roots.

#### 4. Conclusion

Stative potentials are often treated as a sub-type of instantaneous verbs; however, the evidence presented here shows that they are significantly different from other verbs. Their inability to appear in simple tenses and the *V-te shimau* form, as well as their stative interpretation in the *V-te iru* form, suggests that they are bare roots; they lack aspectual information, and therefore cannot be used independently, nor can they undergo aspectual compression through the *V-te shimau* construction. They must be used in conjunction with the auxiliary *iru* 'to be,' which contributes a stative interpretation to the entire predicate. Thus, the stative interpretation of stative potentials in the *V-te iru* form is straightforwardly accounted for in a way that also explains their other unique properties.

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