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<td>長崎大学教育学部人文科学研究報告, 33, pp.43-57; 1984</td>
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<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>1984-03</td>
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<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/32919">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/32919</a></td>
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Some Notes on *Koto, No, To* in Japanese:
A Transformational Approach

Yoshiko OTSUBO

In this paper, I am concerned with *koto, no, and to* in Japanese. *Koto, no, and to* can be used as the markers of complement sentences and there are some differences in the use of them. For example, sentences (1) and (2) show a difference between *koto* and *to*:

(1) *asu-wa toppusei-no booekihu-ga huku koto ni natte-imasu.*
    tomorrow a sudden trade-wind blow it follows that
    gust of
    wind-gen.

    'It follows that the trade wind will blow tomorrow with sudden gusts of wind.'

(2) *getuyobi-wa kyujitu-notame nitiyobi-no sukejuru-de basu-ga unko-suru*¹
    on Monday because of holiday on Sunday’s schedule buses drive
    to iware-masu.
    is said

    'It is said that on Monday the city bus schedule operates on Sunday’s schedule on
    account of a holiday.'

Both (1) and (2), which come from the radio news on KOHO² are not acceptable. As a native speaker of Japanese, I wonder why the speaker as a weather forecaster in (1) can tell the weather forecast for tomorrow with such confidence. The weather conditions are usually changeable, and we can only say something like (3):

(3) *asu-wa toppusei-no booekihu-ga huku to iware-masu.*
    tomorrow a sudden trade-wind blow is said
    gust of
    wind-gen.

    'It is said that the trade wind with sudden gusts of wind will blow tomorrow.'

By using the phrase *to-iware-masu* (it is said that ...) in (3), the speaker shows that he does not refer to whether or not the proposition is true. It seems to me, however, that *to-iware-masu* (it is said that) does not fit the proposition *asu-wa toppusei-no booekihu-ga huku* (the trade wind with a sudden gust of wind blows tomorrow.), because it seems that the expression is too formal.

In example (2), by contrast, I wonder why the speaker does not have any confidence in the proposition *getuyobi-wa kyujitu-notame nitiyobi-no sukejuru-de busu-ga unko-*
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*sareru* (On Monday, the city bus schedule operates on Sunday’s schedule on account of a holiday.), because it is already decided and is a well-known fact in Honolulu. The correct form for (2) is (4):

(4) getuyobi-wa kyujitu-notame nitiyobi-no sukejuru-de basu-ga unko-sareru
on Monday because of holiday on Sunday’s schedule buses are driven

koto ni natte-imasu.
it follows that

'It follows that on Monday the city bus schedule operates on Sunday’s schedule on account of a holiday.'

Example (5) also comes from the radio program on KOHO, which is a part of the speech of a beauty consultant from Japan:

(5) watakusi-ni sukosidemo minasama-no otetudai-ga dekimasu koto-o
  me somewhat you-polite help-polite be able-polite
  negatte-orimasu.
  am expecting-polite

'I am hoping that I will be able to help you even a little.'

(5) is acceptable and a very polite expression while (6) is not acceptable:

(6) *watakusi-ni sukosidemo minasama-no otetudai-ga dekimasu-no-o
  me somewhat you-polite help-polite be able-polite
  negatte-orimasu.
  am expecting-polite

'I am hoping that I will be able to help you even a little.'

There is a difference between *koto* and *no* in the examples (5) and (6), but it is not clear why only *koto* can be acceptable in the context. It seems to me that (5) is a correct polite form but that it is too formal. The use of *koto* and *to* in (2) and (3) tells us that they have some relation with the speaker’s attitude about the content of the proposition, and also the use of *koto* and *no* in (5) and (6) tells us that they have some relation with formality and politeness.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine to what extent our Generative Theory can explain the differences in the use of *koto, no* and *to*. In section I, we try to show the structural differences among them briefly and explain how sentences with these forms would be derived in the Standard Model of Transformational Generative Grammar. In section II, the differences among *koto*, *no* and *to* are demonstrated with reference to the concepts of presupposition and factivity proposed by Kiparsky and
Kiparsky (1971). Kuno's two observations on the differences between *koto* and *no*, and Josephs' features ⟨direct⟩ and ⟨indirect⟩ for *koto*/*no* and *factive/nonpresuppositional* predicates, are briefly discussed. We try to explain some examples in terms of these results in semantics and show that these earlier finding do not account for all the uses of *koto* and *no*. In section III, we discuss the differences between *koto* and *no* from the viewpoint of pragmatics, and introduce the features ⟨formal⟩ and ⟨polite⟩.

I. Let us consider the following examples:

(7) watasi-wa taroo-ga hanako-to tenisu-o site-iru t no-o Nmita.
    I Taro Hanako tennis play *no-o *koto-o saw
    ‘I saw Taro playing tennis with Hanako.’

(8) Hanako-wa eigo-ga muzukasii koto-to)mananda.
    *no-o *to learned
    ‘Hanako learned that English is difficult.’

(9) Taroo-wa eigo-ga muzukasii toitta.
    *koto-o *no-o said
    ‘Taro said that English is difficult.’

In sentence (7), *no* can occur but not *koto* or *to*, in sentence (8), *koto* can occur but *no* and *to* cannot, while in sentence (9), only *to* can occur. In a transformational grammar, sentences (7) and (8) could be analyzed as having the following deep structures,³ (10) and (11) respectively:

(10) [Diagram]

   \[ S \] 
   \[ NP \] 
   \[ C \] subj
   \[ NP \] 
   \[ C \] obj
   watasi I wa S o mita saw
   taroo-ga hanako-to tenisu-o siteiru
   Taro is playing tennis with Hanako
   ‘I saw Taro playing tennis with Hanako.’
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NP VP

Hanako wa S o mananda

learned

eigo - ga muzukasii

English is difficult

'Thanako learned that English is difficult.'

The complementizers koto and no in both (7) and (8) can be introduced by the transformational rule (12):

(12) koto/no Insertion Rule:

That is, sentences (7) and (8) would have the following structures:

(7) NP[watasi-wa]NP [s[Taroo-ga Hanako-to tenisu-o site-iru]s no o]NP VP[mita.]VP

Subject Object Verb

(8) NP[Hanako-wa]NP [s[eigo-ga muzukasii]s koto o]NP VP[mananda.]VP

Subject Object Verb

Koto occurs after the embedded sentence, eigo-ga muzukasii in (8), and no after the embedded sentence, Taroo-ga Hanako-to tenisu-o siteiru in (7). These embedded sentences with koto and no are dominated by NP, accompanied by a case marker. Thus we can refer to koto and no as sentential nominalizers.

Sentence (9) may have a deep structure like (13):
Taro said that English is difficult.

To is introduced by the transformational rule (14):

(14) To Insertion Rule:

That is, sentence (9) has the following structure:

\[(9) \text{NP}[\text{Taro-wa}]_{\text{NP}} \text{Q}_{\text{s}[\text{eigo-ga muzukasii}]_{\text{s}} \text{to}]_{\text{Q}} \text{VP}[\text{itta}]_{\text{VP}}\]

The verb itta (said) must cooccur with only to, and not with the nominalizer plus object-case (koto-o or no-o). Sentence (15) is unacceptable in Japanese.

\[(15) *\text{Taro-wa eigo-ga muzukasii} \begin{cases} \text{koto-o} \\ \text{no-o} \end{cases} \text{itta}.\]

To is not a case marker: it simply marks the embedded sentence as a quotation. That is, the speaker is only reporting what Taro said. This is the reason why we use the node QUOTATION in this case. To can be called a predicate complementizer. Therefore we have a difficulty in using NP for the embedded sentence with to.5

As we can see from these examples, the complementizers koto/no/to are inserted by transformational rules like (12) or (14): Rule (12) introduces koto/no in the position immediately after the embedded sentences dominated by NP as in (10) and (11), while rule (14) introduces to in the position immediately after the embedded sentences dominated by the node QUOTATION as in (13). The use of the node QUOTATION allows us to
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distinguish koto/no from to. However, we cannot so easily show the syntactic difference between koto and no.

II. Following the notions of presupposition and factivity proposed by Kiparsky and Kiparsky (1971), Kuno makes the following two observations about koto/no/to. First, he observes that there is a difference between koto/no and to: i.e., the sentential nominal with koto/no implies that the speaker presumes that the action, the statement or the event in the sentential nominal is true, whereas the form with to has no such presupposition. Second, he observes that there is a difference between koto and no: i.e., koto implies that the sentential nominal has an abstract concept, whereas no implies that the action, the statement or the event in the sentential nominal is concrete and can be observed through the five senses.

First of all, let us examine our examples (16)-(18) in terms of these observations:


(17) NP[Hanako-wa]NP NP[s[eigo-ga muzukasii]s koto-o]NP VP[mananda.]VP

(18) NP[Taroo-wa]NP Q[s[eigo-ga muzukasii]s to]Q VP[itta.]VP

According to the first observation, koto and no imply that the propositions of the embedded sentences are true: in (16) the speaker is reporting a fact, that the speaker saw the event, Taroo-ga Hanako-to tenisu-o siteiru (Taro is playing tennis with Hanako.); and in (17) the speaker is reporting the fact that Hanako learned that English is difficult. The speaker here presupposes that the proposition represented in embedded sentence is true. On the other hand, in (18), the speaker is only telling that Taro said that English is difficult, but he is not referring to whether or not his statement is true. We can test whether or not the above is correct by adding, ga, sore-wa uso-datta (but it was a lie).

(16) *watasi-wa Taroo-ga Hanako-to tenisu-o site-iru no o mita, ga, sore-wa uso datta.
   'I saw Taro playing tennis with Hanako, but it was a lie.'

(17) *Hanako-wa eigo-ga muzukasii koto o mananda, ga, sore-wa uso datta.
   'Hanako learned that English is difficult, but it was a lie.'

(18) Taroo-ga eigo-ga muzukasii to itta, ga, sore-wa uso datta.
   'Taro said that English is difficult, but it was a lie.'

In (16), the speaker tells us that he saw the event (Taro is playing tennis with Hanako.) and in (17) that Hanako learned that English is difficult. (16) and (17) are unacceptable, however, because of the contradiction between the first
sentence and the second sentence. In (8), the speaker does not refer to the factivity of the proposition of the embedded sentence, and thus (8) is acceptable.

The second observation says that *koto* nominalizes propositions designating abstract concepts whereas *no* nominalizes propositions denoting concrete events: in our examples, *no* in (9) occurs after the embedded sentence whose proposition is the concrete event, *Taro-ga Hanako-to tenisu-o site-iru* (Taro is playing tennis with Hanako.), which can be observed through our five senses, whereas *koto* in (11) occurs after the embedded sentence whose proposition is the abstract concept, *eigo-ga muzukasii* (English is difficult.). Thus we can accept these observations as appropriate.

Notice that *no* in (9) does not imply that the speaker presupposes the proposition of the embedded sentence to be true: he is only reporting the proposition to be true by saying that he saw Taro playing tennis with Hanako. In the following sentences, however, the use of *koto/no* implies that the speaker presupposes the proposition of the embedded sentence to be true:

\[(9)\] Ziroo-wa Taro-ga tunbo de-aru \(\{\text{koto-}\}\) omoidasita.  
\[\text{deaf is}\ \{\text{no-}\}\ \text{recalled}\]  
‘Jiro recalled that Taro is deaf.’

\[(10)\] Taro-wa Hanako-ga satta \(\{\text{koto-}\}\) oboete-ita.  
\[\text{left}\ \{\text{no-}\}\ \text{remembered}\]  
‘Taro remembered that Hanako left.’

\[(11)\] Taro-o Hanako-ga satta \(\{\text{koto-}\}\) zannen-ni omotta.  
\[\text{left}\ \{\text{no-}\}\ \text{regretted}\]  
‘Taro regretted that Hanako left.’

Furthermore, in the following sentences, neither *koto* nor *no* implies the speaker’s presupposition:

\[(12)\] Hanako-wa kaimono-ni iku \(\{\text{koto-}\}\) ga suki-desu.  
\[\text{shopping go}\ \{\text{no-}\}\ \text{like}\]  
‘Hanako likes going shopping.’

\[(13)\] Gittą-o hiku \(\{\text{koto-}\}\) wa yasasii.  
\[\text{guitar play}\ \{\text{no-}\}\ \text{easy}\]  
‘It is easy to play the guitar.’

(9)/(10) and (11) can be explained in terms of the first observation: the sentential nominal with *koto/no* implies that the speaker presupposes that the action, the statement or the
event in the sentential nominal is true. (22) and (23), however, show us that there are also non-presuppositional sentential nominals with koto/no.

(22) and (23) are general statements in which the action or activity of the embedded sentence is construed as a habit or skill rather than as a specific, actually realized event. The predicates, sukidesu (like) in (22) and yasasii (is easy) in (23) do not involve the speaker's presupposition that the embedded proposition is a true fact; instead, they impose on the embedded proposition the interpretation that the designated action or activity is being viewed as a general habit or skill.

Josephs developed Kuno's observation on koto and no as follows:

No is used as nominalizer when the matrix predicate imposes connotations of directness, simultaneity, immediacy or urgency on the event of the embedded proposition. Thus, S no is required with verbs of sense perception such as miru (see), kiku (hear), and kanziru (feel) and verbs of discovery such as mitukeru (find) and tukamaeru (catch), all of which have inherent features that impose upon the embedded proposition the interpretation of a directly perceived, simultaneously occurring event. (p. 324)

…Koto is used when the matrix predicate imposes connotations of indirectness, abstractness, non-simultaneity, or non-realization on the embedded proposition. Thus, with certain types of futuritive predicates—e.g., verbs of ordering or request, such as meiziru (order) and tanomu (ask) and verbs of proposal or advice, such as teian-suru (propose) and susumeru (advise)—only S koto can occur. (p. 324)

On the basis of these observations, Josephs proposes that the nominalizers no and koto are independent lexical items with opposing meaning: No means something like “directly perceived, simultaneously occurring, or imminent action, event, etc.,” while koto means “non-simultaneous, non-realized, or abstractly perceived action, event, state, etc.” He summarizes this inherent meaning difference by characterizing no with a semantic feature like <direct> and koto with a semantic feature like <indirect>. He says that that each of these features is merely a cover term for the wide range of meanings that the nominalizers no and koto individually subsume. The distribution of the two nominalizers can be explained in terms of semantic compatibility with cooccurring predicates (and, sometimes, with the whole embedded proposition). For example, since verbs of sense perception, discovery, helping and stopping have an inherent semantic feature such as <direct>, they occur with <direct> no, but not with <indirect> koto. On the other hand, verbs of ordering, request, proposal and advice contain the feature <indirect> and occur with <indirect> koto, but not with <direct> no.

III. Josephs developed Kuno's concepts of presupposition and factivity and showed the
difference between *koto* and *no* by using the features *<indirect>* and *<direct>* , which cooccur with factive/nonpresuppositional verbs with the features *<indirect>* or *<direct>* . It seems to me, however, that the features *<indirect>* and *<direct>* do not cover all the uses of *koto* and *no* .

Consider the following examples:

(24) *(Bosu-wa) [Yamada-san-ni] [yoku hataraku koto-o] [meizita.]*
    boss Mr. Yamada well work ordered
    ‘The boss ordered Mr. Yamada to work diligently.’

(25) *(Watakusi-wa) [bosu-ni] [zisyoku-suru koto-o] [tanonda.]*
    I boss resign asked
    ‘I asked the boss to resign.’

(26) *(Zirro-wa) [Taroo-ni] [narubeku hayaku zisyoku-suru koto-o] [kankoku-sita.]*
    as soon as possible resign advised
    ‘Jiro advised Taro to resign as soon as possible.’

All these examples come from Joseph (p. 321). He uses them as examples of nonpresuppositional predicates (primarily verbs of *ordering, request,* and *advice* ) that require deep structure identity between the complement subject and the matrix indirect object. Following this indication, the deep structures of these sentences will be shown as follows:

\[ S \]
\[ NP \]
\[ C \]
\[ bosu \]
\[ wa \]
\[ Yamada-san \]
\[ ni \]
\[ o \]
\[ meizita \]
\[ Yamada-san-ga \]
\[ yoku hataraku \]
As a native speaker of Japanese, however, I cannot accept any of these sentences: meizita (ordered) in (27) is very formal, and it does not fit the object sentential nominal, yamada-san-ga yoku hataraku koto-o. Sentence (27) is a natural form for meizita:


ordered-formal

'The boss ordered Mr. Yamada to resign.'

Incidentally, (28) shows a natural predicate for sentence (24):


said, asked

'The boss asked Mr. Yamada to work well.'

We also find the same kind of unacceptability in (26): the predicate, kankoku-sita (advised) is very formal. Thus the person or the agent who gives the kankoku (advice) should have authority over the person who receives it. One of the natural forms for
The National Personnel Authority advised (the Government) to raise by five percent the national officers' wages.'

(24) is ambiguous: whether the speaker himself resigns or the boss does. If we follow the deep structure we showed above, there seems to be misuse of honorifics: The boss should be in a higher position than the speaker (watakushi = I), and thus onegai-sita (asked + polite) should be used instead of tanonda (asked). (30) is better than (25):

(30) watakushi-wa bosu-ni zisyoku-suru koto-o onegai-sita.
'I asked (+ polite) the boss to resign.'

(30) is still ambiguous, however: Since suru in zisyoku-suru is not a polite form, zisyoku-suru may be watakushi-ga (= I) zisyoku-suru or bosu-ga (the boss) zisyoku-suru. And watakushi-ga zisyoku-suru is a natural form, while bosu-ga zisyoku-suru is not natural or acceptable because of the impolite expression for the boss. In the latter, we have to use sareru instead of suru: (31) is no longer ambiguous.

(31) watakushi-wa bosu-ni zisyoku-sareru koto-o onegai-sita.
resign + polite asked + polite

But the most natural expression for (25) is (32):

(32) watakushi-wa bosu-ni zisyoku { suru \} koto o moosi-ireta.
{ sareru \} requested

'I requested the boss to resign.'

(32) is a formal expression. It is interesting to find that a formal expression does not necessarily require politeness. It seems to me that formal expressions in Japanese usually have koto, no and to. In other words, koto, no, and to can be used for formal expressions in Japanese. In particular, koto can be used in the most typical formal forms in Japanese:
migino-mono-wa honkoo-no seito-de-aru *koto-o syomei-simasu.
this person this school student certify
'I certify that this person is a student of the institution indicated.'

wareware-wa supootu-man-shippu-ni nottotte seisei-dodo-to tatakau-*koto-o
we sportmanship based on fair play
tikai-masu.
promise
'We promise to play fair based on the sportmanship.'

III. 1. Let us consider the following examples:

Yamada-san-ga kur"o no *koto -o tanosimi-ni-site-imasu.
Mr. Yamada come *koto am looking forward to
'I am looking forward to seeing Mr. Yamada.'

Yamada-ga kuru *no koto -o kitai-suru.
'I expect Yamada to come.'

In (5) *no can cooccur with *tanosimi-ni-site-imasu (am looking forward to) but *koto cannot, whereas in (6) *koto can cooccur with *kitai-suru (expect) but *no cannot. The predicate verbs, *tanosimi-ni-site-imasu in (5) and *kitai-suru in (6) have almost the same meaning in that the speaker in (5) and the one in (6) are waiting for Mr. Yamada (Yamada). However, these verbs show us some differences in the speaker's mental attitude toward the person he is concerned about: in (5) the speaker shows his intimacy toward the person he is concerned about in his speech by using the expression, *tanosimi-ni-site-imasu, which is less formal, while in (6) the speaker shows his formality by using the expression *kitai-suru, which is formal.

We can observe the same phenomena in the following examples:
I am looking forward to seeing the teacher.

I expect the teacher to come.

In (37), we can see the speaker feel an intimacy toward the teacher (sensei) because of the less formal expression tanosimi-ni-site-imasu. However, we cannot accept (38) as a correct expression even though it has the form with koto. Notice that in (38) kitai-suru (expect) cooccurs with koto because it is formal whereas in (37) the same verb kitai-suru cannot cooccur with koto although it is still formal.

It seems to me that the verbs conveying the feature of formality like kitai-suru (expect), meiziru (order) and kankoku-suru (advise) give some authority to the speaker. That is, formality implies the authority of the speaker. Thus, if the person with whom the speaker is concerned in his speech is superior to the speaker, a contradiction can be observed between the authority of the speaker in the formal form and the superiority of the person with whom the speaker is concerned. For example, in (38) the teacher, sensei, is superior to the speaker and the formal expression implies the authority of the speaker. I.e., (38) shows a contradiction: In Japanese culture, the teacher has an absolute authority; therefore, the speaker cannot use such a verb as kitai-suru (expect) toward the teacher (sensei), which is very impolite.

On the other hand, in (36), the fact that the form with koto can be accepted means that the speaker is superior to the person he is concerned about (i.e., Yamada). That is, the form with koto is fit for the social status relation between the speaker and Yamada. In order to distinguish the difference between kitai-suru (expect) and tanosimi-ni-site-imasu (am looking forward to), we need the feature ⟨formal⟩: kitai-suru (expect), meiziru (order), kankoku-suru (advise), yakuwoku-suru (promise) etc. have the feature ⟨formal⟩. And they cooccur with koto.

Koto also can be used in very polite expressions:

I apologize to you for having kept you waiting for a very long time.

We can often hear (39) at a train station in Japan: It is a very formal and polite expression. As we have pointed out in the preceding discussion, the formal forms do not necessarily require a speaker to be polite, and thus we need the feature ⟨+ polite⟩ in order to distinguish an expression such as (39) from such expressions as (32), (33), (34) and
III. 2. Turning our attention to examples (1) and (2), their unacceptability can be explained in terms of the concepts of presupposition and factivity: that is, S koto implies that the proposition is true, and the speaker presupposes that the embedded proposition is true. In (1), however, we do not know whether or not the embedded proposition is true, because the weather is so changeable. Nobody has such confidence in the weather forecast for tomorrow. That is, (1) shows the misuse of koto. (2) also shows the misuse of to: To implies that the speaker does not refer to whether or not the embedded proposition is true. However, we know that the embedded proposition in (2) is true. Thus the speaker should use koto instead of to in this case.

The difference between (5) and (6) can be explained in terms of formality and politeness: Since the speaker is a beauty consultant, she has to use formal and polite forms to the hearers. Koto can be used in formal and polite forms but no cannot.

Notice that (3), which is the acceptable form for (1), is still not a natural form; To-iware-masu (it is said that) in (3) seems to be too formal. (3') is a natural form for (3):

3'. asu-wa toppu-o tomonatta booekihu-ga huku-desyo.
    tomorrow with a sudden gust trade wind will blow
    of wind

   ‘The trade wind with sudden gusts of wind will probably blow tomorrow.’

Example (4), which is the correct form for (2), and example (5) are also formal forms: (4) and (5) are their natural forms respectively.

4'. getuyobi-wa kyujitu-no-tame nitiyobi-no sukejure-de basu-ga unko-saremasu.
   on Monday because of holiday Sunday’s schedule buses are driven
   will be driven

   ‘On Monday the city dus schedule will operate on Sunday’s schedule
   on account of its being a holiday.’

5'. watakusi-ni sukisodesimo minasama-no otetudai-ga dekimasitara, saiwai-desu.
    me somewhat you + polite help if it will be able am happy

   ‘I am happy if I can help you even a little.’

Since these examples (1) (2) come from the radio program on KOHO, the speaker is trying to use formal expressions or formal and polite forms. However, he is a Japanese nisei in Hawaii, and has trouble in the use of formal expressions of Japanese.

IV. We have so far examined to what extent the standard theory of Transformational
Grammar can explain the uses of *koto, no*, and *to*, and shown that information from pragmatics is indispensable to explain their uses, in particular, the uses of *koto* and *no*. In Japanese culture, formality and politeness are important elements, and thus we can not avoid these elements in studying Japanese.

**Notes:**

1. unko-*suru* (drive) should be *sareru* as in unko-*sareru* (is driven).
2. ‘KOHO’ is the name of a Japanese broadcasting station in Honolulu.
4. Shibatani, p. 69.
5. In English, *that* can be used in both (i) and (ii): (i) Taro *said that* English is difficult. (ii) Hanako *learned that* English is difficult. In Japanese, “*said that*” in (i) becomes “*to-itta*”, and “*learned that*” in (ii) “koto-o *mananda*”. *To* is not a sentential nominalizer.

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“Some notes on Koto, No, To in Japanese”


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N. B. The first draft of this paper was submitted to Dr. Roderich Jacobs as a term paper for his course, Ling. 650, Advanced Linguistic Analysis: Syntax (Fall, 1981) at the Department of Linguistics, the University of Hawaii.

(Received Oct. 31, 1983)