

■ Characteristics of Potential Sentences

Potential sentences whose predicates are composed of potential and auxiliary verbs, such as *rareru* and *dekiru*, have the following semantic and structural characteristics.

● Semantic Characteristics of Potential Sentences

Semantically, potential sentences can be classified based on two criteria: (a) what makes the realization of the action possible or impossible, and (b) whether the sentence mentions if the action has been realized.

First, potential sentences are classified into “ability potential,” “circumstantial potential” and so on, depending on the reason why the realization of the action is or is not possible.

(1) *Boku wa eigo ga kakenai* ‘I cannot write (in) English.’

(2) *Isogashikute tegami ga nakanaka kakenai* ‘I am too busy and cannot get around to writing letters readily.’

In Example (1), the reason for the speaker not to be able to write is because s/he does not have the ability to write (in) English. In (2), it is not that the speaker does not have the ability to write a letter. What is preventing her/him from writing a letter is the busy schedule.

Second, one group of potential sentences express that what is possible has been actualized in that they include the realization of the action, while in the other group of potential sentences potentiality remains latent, that is, they only express the possibility of realizing the action.

(3) *Tarō wa kinō yatto shigoto o katazureru koto ga dekita* ‘Taro finally was able to finish the job yesterday.’

(4) *Tarō wa kinō, sono shigoto o katazureru koto ga dekita noni shinakatta* ‘Taro had the opportunity to finish the job yesterday, but he didn’t.’

In (3) the sentence states that the job was actually done, while in (4) it simply states there was just an opportunity to do so. The latent potential predicate expresses the present tense using the *-ru* form, and it is a stative predicate that does not collocate with *-teiru*. Latent potential predicates express various degrees of permanence. When the predicate is highly stative it behaves almost like an adjective.

(5) *Kono pasokon wa ima aite iru kara tsukaeru* ‘This PC is not in use now, so it’s OK to use it.’

(6) *Kono pasokon wa deeta no shori ni tsukaeru* ‘This PC is suitable for processing data.’

(7) *Kono pasokon wa tsukaeru* ‘This PC is very useful.’

Sentence (5) simply states the temporary state of the PC. Sentences (6) and (7) explain the characteristics of the PC, and (7) in particular may collocate with an adverb of degree, such as *totemo* ‘very,’ just like an adjectival sentence. Sentence (7) cannot be rewritten with *~koto ga dekiru* ‘be able to ~.’

● Structural Characteristics of Potential Sentences

Next, the subject and object of the potential sentences can be classified into three structural patterns:
~ga ~o, ~ga ~ni, and ~ni ~ga.

(8) *Kare ga Suwahirigo {ga/o} hanaseru no wa yūmei na hanashi da* ‘It’s a well-known fact that he can speak Swahili.’

(9) *Kare {ga/ni} Suwahirigo ga hanasenai no wa iu mademonai* ‘Needless to say, he cannot speak Swahili.’

When *dekiru* is the predicate, however, the object must take case *ga*, except when the form is “Chinese-origin word + *dekiru*” as in *kenkyū dekiru* ‘can do research.’

(10) *Boku wa Eigo {ga/*o} dekinai* ‘I am not good at English.’

Sentences expressing ability often show the subject with case *ni*.

(11) *Boku ni wa sonna koto totemo ienai* ‘I just cannot say such a thing.’

● Differences between Potential and Spontaneous Verbs

There is a problem of differentiating potential and spontaneous expressions, such as *mieru* ‘visible’ vs. *mirareru* ‘able to watch/see’, and *kikoeru* ‘audible’ vs. *kikeru* ‘able to listen/hear.’ The example below will clarify the difference.

(12) *Saikin wa isogashikute terebi ga {mirarenai/*mienai}* ‘I am so busy lately I cannot watch TV.’

Spontaneous verbs describe phenomena where events and situations come into one’s sight and hearing, whereas potential sentences presume that the subject intentionally initiates the action.

→可能文に用いられる形式 Forms Used in Potential Sentences (2-E)

● References

Shibuya, Katsumi (1995) ‘Kanō dōshi to *suru koto ga dekiru* – kanō dōshi no hyōgen’ (Potential Verbs and *suru koto ga dekiru* – Expressions Using Potential Verbs) in Miyajima, Tatsuo & Nitta Yoshio, ed., *Nihongo ruigi hyōgen no bunpō: jō* (Grammar of Japanese Synonymous Expressions I.) Kurosio Publishers.

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