# The perfective imperative in Japanese

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## Abstract

The present discussion focuses on a phenomenon in Japanese in which an imperative is expressed through the use of the markers of past tense and perfective aspect *-ta* and *-tari*, as seen in the example sentences below.

(1)    Doi-ta,              doi-ta!
       move.away-PAST  move.away-PAST
       'Get out of my way!' (lit.) 'You got out of my way!'

(2)    Saa saa,  it-tari       it-tari!
       Well well   go-TARI   go-TARI
       'Go on, scram!' (lit.) 'You went!'

The constructions shall here be called imperative *-ta* and *-tari*. The use of these forms as imperatives has been touched upon by various scholars, but a detailed account of the phenomenon, its diachrony, and its place in a cross-linguistic context has not previously been performed.

The constructions are described in detail, and a contrastive analysis determines how imperative *-ta* differs from other imperatives in modern Japanese. The relation between aspect and imperative utterances seen in imperative *-ta* and *-tari* is discussed, focusing on their connection to perfective aspect.

The discussion briefly touches on the occurrence of past tense and perfective imperatives cross-linguistically, comparing the Japanese constructions with similar phenomena found in German, Russian, Polish, Persian, Mandarin Chinese, and other languages. It is argued that these phenomena may be connected through the concept of deictic projection (Lyons 1977, Tavangar and Amouzadeh 2006). The attempt to identify perfective imperatives in other languages is in conjunction with the search for hortative and near-future uses of past tense or perfective markers. A typological generalization is posited: Languages that employ the past/perfective to express the certain future are more likely to also express the imperative through their use than languages that do not. Conversely: if we, in a certain

language, identify the use of a past/perfective marker as an imperative, chances are high that we shall also find uses of the past/perfective to express the certain future. It is concluded that these constructions, viewed by scholars as a quirk of Japanese pragmatics, may now be placed in a wider category, as a linguistic phenomenon shared in principle, if not necessarily in the details of usage and historical development, with many other languages.

However, the main focus of the presentation is on the history and development of the perfective imperative in Japanese, including an overview of previous hypotheses on the subject by Yoshida (1971) and Shinzato (2005). The goal is to establish all the facts currently available as to the possible origins of the constructions. Various explanations of the emergence of imperative *-tari* and *-ta* are discussed, and a number of alternate hypotheses as to their development, all with their consequences in interpreting the diachronic evolution as well as synchronic function of the constructions, are presented. The discussion concludes with a final outline of the history of the perfective imperative in Japanese, based on the historical data available, which unifies some of the proposals previously made in the literature.