Japanese adjectives

April 24, 2005

1 Introduction

Nearly all Japanese adjectives are in one of two classes: i-adjectives (like *kuroi* (黒い): black) and na-adjectives (like *shizukana* (静かな): quiet). One adjective is irregular, in that it doesn't quite follow the rules its class dictates; *ii* (良い): good.

A fact that may be surprising to the reader of languages like French is that, in Japanese, adjectives don't vary depending on the number of objects they qualify; instead, they depend on tense (past or present) and negativeness.

2 い-adjectives

猫は黒いです。	*Neko wa kuroi desu.*	The cat is black.
猫は黒かったです。	*Neko wa kurokatta desu.*	The cat was black.
猫は黒くないです。	*Neko wa kurokunai desu.*	The cat isn't black.
猫は黒くなかったです。	*Neko wa kurokunakatta desu.*	The cat wasn't black.

Here, one can observe that the verb doesn't need to carry any time or negativeness information, because everything "fits" in the い-adjective, whose "i" gets altered as necessary.

3 な-adjectives

In this second case, the adjective doesn't vary at all, and the verb carries all of the grammatical information.

海は静かです。	*Umi wa shizuka desu.*	The sea is quiet.
海は静かでした。	*Umi wa shizuka deshita.*	The sea was quiet.
海は静かではありません。	*Umi wa shizuka dewa arimasen.*	The sea isn't quiet.
海は静かではありませんでした。	*Umi wa shizuka dewa arimasen deshita.*	The sea wasn't quiet.

4 Exception

The adjective *ii* (良い), which is in the category of い-adjectives, is irregular in the sense that although it, and not the verb, carries temporal information, not only the い part gets altered in this case: the whole adjective changes.

Sentence	Reading	Transcription
映画は良いです。	いい	*ii*
映画は良かったです。	よかった	*yokatta*
映画は良くないです。	よくない	*yokunai*
映画は良くなかったです。	よくなかった	*yokunakatta*

The sentence, by the way, means "the movie was good". Note how fun this can get for someone who isn't fluent in the language: the kanji writing of the adjective in the leftmost column doesn't vary, although its reading does. Since there is nothing suspicious in the way the different forms of 良 are written down, one cannot guess without knowing in advance that they are pronounced differently. This is one of the numerous traps the Japanese language has set for its foreign learners.

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