Abstract

The Japanese language is known for its sentence-final particles (SFPs hereafter) that express modality. Although modality would seem to be inseparable from context, only a limited number of studies have explicated the nature of SFPs based on data from conversations.

This paper discusses the functions of SFP kana, based on 272 occurrences of the particle from over 7 hours of recorded conversation. I propose that kana, which is commonly defined as a doubt marker, frequently functions as a mitigation marker. My investigation also explores how speakers use this function beyond the sentence level. It suggests that traditional descriptions of the syntactic environments in which SFPs occur are not always substantiated by how kana is actually used. Yet, seemingly unsystematic uses of kana are quite systematic in terms of its semantic and pragmatic aspects. These findings suggest that in studying Japanese sentence-final particles, it’s important to study naturally occurring conversations.

Keywords: Japanese; sentence-final particle; doubt; interrogative; mitigation; naturally occurring conversation.

1. Introduction

The Japanese language is well known for its sentence-final particles (SFPs hereafter), which express modality (Tokieda 1951; Konoshima 1966; Sato 2000). Many of these SFPs are one-mora or two-morae and appear at the end of sentences. Following are some examples constructed to show how SFPs differentiate meanings.

Example 1:

(1) Yoku nonda.
A lot drink-PAST
‘(I/you/(s)he/we/they) drank a lot.’

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2 Differences between ‘sentence-final particles’ (traditionally called shuujoshi in Japanese linguistics) and ‘sentence-internal particles’ (traditionally called kantoojoshi in Japanese linguistics) are discussed later in my analysis. In that section, I propose that the so-called sentence-final particle kana appears both sentence-finally and sentence-internally. This paper follows the traditional categorization and refers to kana as a ‘sentence-final particle’ for convenience.

3 Sentences in naturally occurring conversations are not as clear as written language can be. Here, I use “sentence” in a loose sense.
Although scholars have extensively examined varieties of Japanese SFPs, only a limited number of studies have sought to explicate the nature of SFPs based on data from naturally occurring conversations (e.g., Cook 1992; Maynard 1993; Okamoto 1996; Kataoka 1997; Matsumoto 2001). Furthermore, one-mora SFPs, such as *ka*, *ne*, and *yo*, tend to be viewed as basic SFPs and receive most of the attention of researchers, while studies of multi-morae SFPs such as *yone* and *kana* are rarely seen. That is, in spite of the fact that some researchers, such as Kataoka (1995) and Ijima (1999), appear to consider multi-morae SFPs as one unit, many of them are often treated as a combination of one-mora SFPs, and their distinctive characteristics are overlooked. This is not because Japanese speakers exclusively use one-mora SFPs in their daily conversation. In an earlier study, I conducted quantitative research on the frequency of SFP usage by using twenty-four recorded conversations (totally approximately 170 minutes), ranking the particles based on their frequency (Matsugu ms). In this study, the multi-morae SFP *kana* was ranked among the ten most frequently used particles, as were its component parts *ka* and *na*.

This number shows that SFP *kana*, as a unit, takes an important role in expressing modality in naturally occurring Japanese conversations. Thus, one question that will be asked in this paper is what kind of an “important role” SFP *kana* takes in face-to-face interactions.

### 2. Doubt marker *Kana*

Linguists in Japan have provided insightful research on SFP *kana*. However, the focus of these studies is rarely an examination of functions of *kana* in use. Rather, they take *kana*’s traditional definition as a doubt marker – an SFP to express the speaker’s doubt about his/her judgment – as a foundation and, along with other doubt markers such as *daroo ka*, *deshoo ka*, and *kashira*, discuss the nature of doubt markers in general as compared with interrogative markers in the Japanese language.

Nonetheless, these studies propose some important characteristics of *kana*.

According to these previous studies, a ‘question’ requires, at least, two conditions. These are that the speaker has some kind of uncertainty and that he/she expects his/her interlocutor to provide information to resolve the uncertainty (Minami 1985; Nitta 1991; Adachi 1999). On the other hand, ‘doubt’ requires only that the first of the two conditions be met (Nitta 1991; Adachi 1999; Miyachi 2000; Moriyama, Nitta, & Kudo 2002). In other words, unlike interrogative markers, the doubt marker *kana* forms a statement which expresses the speaker’s doubt about the factual status of the proposition; and formally it does not seek information from or interaction with his/her interlocutor. Based on this definition, fundamentally, *kana* is understood to form a monologue question (Miyachi 1960; Miyake 2000; Adachi 2002). However, if the speaker is dubious about some information in his/her proposition, that information is
unstable for the speaker. Therefore, expressing the doubt in an interlocutor’s presence invites the interlocutor to provide information that would resolve the doubt (Nitta 1991, 1994; Miyake 2000; Adachi 2002). Consequently, pragmatically, kana is most commonly used as an interrogative marker (Miyachi 1960; Nitta 1994, 1997; Miyake 2000). This use of a doubt marker kana differs from a question marker because kana implies that a speaker has an assumption – most likely a negative impression – of the factual status of the proposition (Fujita 1987; Adachi 2002). In addition, since kana does not require an answer from the interlocutor, it may be used as an indirect, polite question (Adachi 1999, 2002; Miyake 2000).

Diagram 1 below is adapted from Miyachi (1960) and displays a summary of the discussion above. Henceforth, for convenience, the traditionally claimed functions of kana – its original function as a monologue question marker and its extended function as an interrogative marker – are called ‘self-addressed interrogative marker’ and ‘other-addressed interrogative marker’ respectively.

Diagram 1: Traditional Understanding of kana

[Formal Nature of kana]

Expression of speaker’s judgment
\[\text{Decided judgment} \xrightarrow{\text{Question = kana}} \text{Undecided judgment} \xrightarrow{\text{Doubt about judgment = kana}}\]

[Pragmatic Nature of kana]

Doubt
\[\xrightarrow{\text{Function as \textbf{self-addressed interrogative marker}}} \xrightarrow{\text{Function as \textbf{other-addressed interrogative marker}}}\]

1) Question which implies a speaker’s negative assumption
2) Polite question

I examine over 430 minutes of talk in which kana occurs 272 times.\(^7\) Of the 272 cases of kana in my data, there are some cases which clearly fit the traditional definitions: Self or other-addressed interrogative marker. In Example 2-1, two friends are discussing whether their respective high schools had an after-school judo club, a club to practice a type of Japanese martial arts. Here speaker A utters a sentence with kana wondering whether A’s high school had one. Since her interlocutor does not know about A’s high school, it is hard to imagine that the question was directly addressed to her interlocutor. Moreover, given the fact that A answers the question herself, the utterance is most likely a self-addressed question. In contrast, in Example 2-2, speaker B is holding a camera and asking if C is ready to have her picture taken. Although the utterance does not have an explicit addressee, from the context and speaker C’s immediate response, the sentence is clearly a question to speaker C.

Example 2:\(^8\)

(1) Self-addressed question
A: \ldots koookoo de atta no kana. A: \ldots Was there a judo-club at my highschool?
\[\text{high school - at exist-PAST nom - PRT}\]
\[\ldots atta atta atta.\]  ... There was, there was, there was.
\[\text{exist-PAST exist-PAST exist-PAST}\]

(2) Other-addressed question
B: \ldots \textit{ii} kana=. B: \ldots OK?
\[\text{good PRT}\]

\(^7\) The nature of the data set will be discussed in a following section.
\(^8\) See appendix for transcript conventions.
These kinds of clear cases are, however, rather uncommon in the conversations I examined. As I showed with Example 2, I examined the contents of the phrases followed by kana and reactions to those utterances in all 272 cases. If either the speaker who used kana or the interlocutor answered clearly within one minute or 10 intonation units after the utterance of kana, I considered the kana to be a self or an other-addressed interrogative marker respectively. Of the 272 occurrences of kana, only 6 cases can be clearly categorized as a self-addressed question, and 34 cases can be clearly categorized as an other-addressed question. Besides these 40 cases, there were 20 other cases which seemed to receive somewhat relevant responses. The remaining 212 cases – 78% of all the occurrences of kana – were not followed by responses. These numbers seem to contradict previous studies which claim that kana is most commonly used as an interrogative marker. To understand this unexpected tendency of kana in use, I propose that although kana may form an interrogative sentence, it often functions as a mitigation marker in naturally occurring conversations. In other words, a reason why kana usually does not receive a response is not because it cannot force the speaker (for a self-addressed question) or the interlocutor (for an other-addressed question) to answer the question. Rather, kana is not used as a question marker per se. Instead, it is used for a quite different purpose: mitigating various aspects of talk. I further categorize this function into three levels: The sentence level, the interactional level, and the discourse level. I should note, however, that the distinctions between these three are not always clear-cut, and a particular token of kana may have multiple interpretations.

3. Data

The data for this study come from recordings of 48 naturally occurring conversations which were recorded between 1988 and 2002 in the United States and in Japan. They include informal conversations among friends or family members as well as speakers meeting for the first time. The length of each conversation varies from 2 minutes to 28 minutes, with a total of approximately 432 minutes of talk. All participants are native speakers of so-called Standard Japanese. They are 82 female speakers and 45 male speakers who are in their late teens to their sixties.

In approximately 432 minutes of conversation, kana occurs 318 times, almost once a minute. Among the 318 occurrences, 46 occurrences are categorized in two ‘set-phrases,’ soo kana (e.g., Is it so?), nante iu no kana (e.g., How should I put it...), and their variations such as soo datta kana (e.g., Was it so?) and nante ittara iu no kana (e.g., What would be the best way to put it...). Since each set-phrase seems to have a fixed meaning, I treated them separately. The discussion in this paper is, therefore, based on

9 Spoken language lends itself to segmentation into intonation units (Chafe 1994: 69). Such units are identifiable on the basis of a variety of criteria, among which are pauses or breaks in timing, acceleration and deceleration, and so on. See Chafe (1994: 53-70) for definitions and criteria of intonation unit.

10 Needless to say, receiving an explicit oral answer is not the criterion to determine if an utterance is a question. For instance, an interlocutor may intentionally avoid answering a question for some reasons. Moreover, a question could receive a nonverbal response, which is not observable in my tape-recorded data. However, by using an explicit, oral reaction as the criterion, I aim to be objective as possible to categorize functions of kana here.

11 1) soo kana. Is it so?/Maybe so./I wonder if that’s right. (13 occurrences)
2) nante iu no kana. How should I put it.../What do you call it... (33 occurrences)
the remaining 272 cases. Transcriptions are based on Du Bois, Schueze-Coburn, Cumming, & Paolino (1993) and given on the left side. Brief translations in English are provided to the right. To avoid having the translation favor either a traditional understanding or my own understanding of SFP kana, I have underlined the phrases preceding kana and left kana at the end of each translated phrase.

4. Analyses

In this section, the function of kana as a ‘mitigation’ marker at the sentence level is first examined with some excerpts from naturally occurring conversation. Then, I illustrate how speakers of the Japanese language use it effectively in conversation (at the interactional level and at the discourse level). I occasionally touch upon the positional and prosodic characteristics of kana. Since kana tends to appear at the end of a sentence, it is often produced more quietly and/or overlapped with a backchannel. These aspects make it difficult to use computer software consistently to study its prosodic characteristics. Hence, all prosodic analyses in this paper are perceptual and suggestive rather than being conclusive. Yet, I believe that the analyses may suggest interesting regularities between prosodic characteristics and the functions of kana.

4.1. A ‘mitigation’ marker at the sentence level: Reducing certainty of information

As discussed previously, an utterance preceding kana (a kana-phrase hereafter) is expected to express a self-addressed question or an other-addressed question. In contradiction to this assumption, however, in naturally occurring conversation interlocutors do not necessarily perceive kana-phrases as either self or other-addressed questions. In this section, I will look at some examples of kana which are used to reduce the certainty of the preceding content.

In Example 3, speaker D asks speaker E if it is the 15th today. To reply to this question, speaker E says, ‘juugonichi kana (15th kana).’ According to the traditional explanation, the utterance should be interpreted as the speaker’s expression of doubt about the statement, that it is the 15th today, or as a repetitive question back to speaker D. However, speaker D’s response shows that she may take E’s utterance, ‘juugonichi kana (15th kana),’ as an affirmative answer to her original question.

Example 3:

1 D: kyoo juugonichi? D: … Is it the 15th today?
today fifteenth-day-of-a-month

fifteenth-day-of-a-month PRT

3 D: juugo ka, D: The 15th.
fifteenth PRT

4 … soo ka. … I see.
sot PRT

If speaker D did not perceive speaker E’s utterance as an assertion, but instead took it as a question or an expressing doubt, she would probably present her understanding by saying something like ‘I guess so’ or try to confirm speaker E’s understanding by asking ‘Isn’t it?.' However, neither pattern appears in her response in the data. On the contrary, speaker D’s response, ‘juugo ka … soo ka (The 15th … I see),’ displays her understanding that it is indeed the 15th.

Unlike a straightforward assertion such as ‘It’s the 15th,’ kana may imply that the utterance in line 2 still forms interrogative; yet, it does not seem to function as a question. In addition, the kana-phrase does not seem to express the speaker’s negative assumptions about the statement either. Rather, the kana-phrase seems to express the
speaker’s reduced confidence in the information and commitment to an answer. In other words, the kana-phrase in Example 3 does not function as a strong assertion (e.g., It is the 15th), a question (e.g., Is it the 15th?), or an expression of doubt (e.g., I wonder if it is the 15th). However, it seems appropriate to interpret the kana-phrase as a mitigated assertion such as ‘I think it is the 15th.’

Nitta (1994: 11) and Adachi (2002: 193) also point out this phenomenon and state that kana can provide uncertain information only when it is used as a reply to a question. However, surprisingly, a fair number of kana-phrases seem to provide uncertain information even when they do not reply to questions. Example 4 is one such case.

In Example 4, speaker F shows his sympathy to speaker G who got lost the other day, by saying ‘The roads look like a perfect grid and give us the impression that it is very simple (but it is not).’ Here, he says that he was just talking about it with someone, Mr. Tada, the other day.

Example 4:

1 F: ... ano=, F: ... Well,
2 … konoaida ne=, well
the other-day PRT
3→ … Tadasan to kana= ano=, ... with Mr. Tada kana= well
Mr. Tada with well
4 .. iya .. Tsuuson tte no wa, .. gee .. as for Tucson,
gee Tucson PRT NOM PRT
5 .. hijoo ni koo guriddo tte iu ka, ..(the roads are) very much like
very PRT like-this grid QUO say PRT
6 aminome ni natteru kara ne, mesh become because PRT
7 G: .. un, G: .. Uh-huh.
8 F: ... de wakari yasuku natteru n desu yo=, F: ... So it is easy to understand,
then understand easy become NOM COP
9 .. toka iu fuuna koto o hanashi o shite, .. I was saying something like
something-like say like PRT thing PRT do-GER

In this example, there is no question which the kana-phrase may answer. However, the kana-phrase seems to provide an additional information. Interestingly, the conversation moves on without determining if it was really Mr. Tada whom speaker F talked to the other day. However, both speaker F and G refer to Mr. Tada later in this conversation as if there is no need to confirm the fact. This suggests that the kana-phrase in Example 4 may be being treated as an expression of factual information, rather than as an expression of doubt about the statement.

We have observed that a kana-phrase in conversation like Example 3 and 4 does not stand as ‘I wonder’ or ‘I doubt.’ Rather, it functions as ‘I think’ in which the certainty and assertiveness of the information in a kana-phrase decreases. For this particular usage, kana, which is known as a sentence-final particle, sometimes appears sentence internally.12 For instance, kana in Example 4 comes right after the phrase

12 The differences between a sentence-final particle (SFP) and a sentence-internal particle (SIP) are controversial (Matsumura 1989; Saji 1991); yet, fundamentally, they differ in their positions in a sentence. Traditionally, it is understood that an SFP shows modality toward the contents a speaker is talking about, while an SIP shows modality toward the interlocutors (Matsumura 1989; Sato 2000). In other words, an SFP changes the meaning of what a speaker is talking about, while an SIP does not – without an SIP, the content would be the same (Matsumura 1989). From this point of view, despite its position, kana definitely functions as an SFP – kana changes the contents of utterances. Although it is an
‘Tadasan to (with Mr. Tada)’ in line 3 rather than after its predicate ‘hanashi o shite ((I) talk)’ in line 9 where a sentence-final particle is expected.\footnote{Japanese is a SOV language.} What the \textit{kana} in this example marks is neither whether the roads are a grid nor whether speaker F has previously talked to someone about the roads in Tucson – it is whom he talked to the other day. That is, \textit{kana} appears right after the content that the speaker wishes to mitigate, regardless of its position in the sentence. Although this is relatively infrequent, happening in only 18 of the 212 cases, this observation suggests that \textit{kana} is closely associated with its preceding content rather than with its “canonical” position as a sentence-final particle.

\section{A ‘mitigation’ marker at the interactional level: Reducing assertiveness}

In this section, we observe some cases in which speakers use \textit{kana} to downplay their previous statements or to reduce the force with which they assert thoughts such as disagreement. Speakers of the Japanese language seem to use this function of \textit{kana} quite systematically in interaction. With these examples, I discuss that \textit{kana} can mitigate not only the certainty of the preceding information in the sentence level, but also thoughts which are directly or indirectly presented beforehand.

Example 5 shows how the speaker uses \textit{kana} to reduce the assertiveness of her previous statement. Right before this excerpt, the two college students were talking about their mutual friend, who is the spoiled son of a rich family. They had criticized him for wasting too much money, money which they assume he gets from his parents. Right after the criticism, speaker H says that she wants an additional 200,000 yen (around $1,750) per month from her parents. 200,000 yen is a lot of money, but compared to their mutual friend, who spends $2,000 on his monthly phone bill, it may sound “reasonable enough.” However, speaker H did not get a positive reaction from her interlocutor. What she does then is to utter \textit{kana} alone, thus reducing the assertiveness of what she had just said.

Example 5:
\begin{tabular}{lll}
1 & H: \ldots & nijuuman irete kuretara ureshii kedo, \\
 & & two-hundred-thousands deposit-GER give-CON happy though \\
2 & I: \ldots & mmm. \\
 & & hmmm. \\
\rightarrow 3 & H: \ldots & \textbf{kana=}. \\
4 & \ldots & shooganai kamo shirenai. \\
 & & something NEG maybe know-NEG \\
5 & I: \ldots & zenbu hataraitte kaesanakya ne. \\
 & & all work-GER return PRT \\
\end{tabular}

H: \ldots I would be happy if my parents gave me an additional 200,000 yen though,
I: \ldots hmmm.
H: \ldots \textbf{kana=}.
I: \ldots We get to return all the money back to our parents once we start working.

Unlike \textit{un} (yes/uh-huh) in Example 2-2 and Example 4, speaker I’s response, ‘\ldots mmm (\ldots hmmm),’ uttered with a creaky voice, sounds negative and suggests the possibility that speaker I might be critical of speaker H’s statement. Speaker H then says simply ‘\ldots \textbf{kana=}.’ Since \textit{kana} cannot come after the conjunction \textit{kedo} (though),\footnote{\textit{Kana} comes after a noun or a part of speech which conjugates (e.g., a verb and an adjective) (Nihondaijitenkankoukai 1976; Kindaichi & Ikeda eds. 1978; Sanseido henshujo 1984; Shogakukan ed. 1987; Matsumura 1989). In Japanese, conjunctions do not conjugate; therefore, \textit{kedo} should not be able to precede \textit{kana}.} it does not grammatically belong to speaker H’s previous utterance in line 1 and stands by itself. Yet, it seems to mitigate the previously stated idea as a whole and downplay the

\footnote{I will not aim to determine if \textit{kana} is an SFP or an SIP in this paper.}
statements. It is like adding “maybe?” after seeing an interlocutor’s possibly negative reaction. By doing so, speaker H can reduce the assertiveness of her previous statement and may be able to avoid a potential conflict with her interlocutor.

In the next example, Example 6, once again, we see the same usage of kana by speaker J: The speaker reduces the assertiveness of her previous statement by adding kana after she realizes that she has not received a positive backchannel from her interlocutor. In addition, more interestingly, we also observe that another speaker, speaker K, uses kana to reduce the assertiveness of her interlocutor’s statement instead of explicitly correcting the assertion. This example is an excerpt from a conversation among three friends. Previously, speaker K had stated that her younger brother might get married before she and her younger sister do. Then, in lines 1 and 2, one of her interlocutors, speaker J, says, ‘So, you are going to have another sister.’ To reply to this comment, speaker K does not directly agree or disagree with the idea and says ‘mmm kana=’ after a short pause. Speaker J seems to sense that K is not fully in agreement. She then downplays her assertion by saying ‘… kana=’ and adds ‘mada wakannai kedo ne=’ (nobody knows yet but…).’

Example 6:
1  J: ... Hanachan mo. Hanachan (you) PRT
2   iimooto ga fuerun. little-sister PRT increase
3  K: ... mmm. hmmm
4 →  kana=. PRT
5 →  J: ... kana=. kana=.
6   ...(1.8) maa, well
7   ...(1.8) Well, nobody knows yet but…
8  mada, yet
9  wakannai kedo ne=. know-NEG though PRT
10 K: ... mada ne. yet PRT
11   ...(1.8) Well, nobody knows yet but…
12   Well, nobody knows yet but…
13  K: ... Not yet.

In contrast to speaker J’s statement in lines 1 to 2, in which the couple’s marriage sounds assured, speaker J’s second statement in lines 6 to 8, ‘well, nobody knows yet but...’ sounds very tentative. This big change in merely a moment seems to be a reaction to speaker K’s ‘… mmm kana=.’ There is no utterance or information presented by speaker K to which the kana may be attached. The only utterance that kana could possibly be related to is the preceding statement by speaker J. If so, then, does speaker K simply question whether her brother will get married? As the last utterance in Example 6 shows, speaker K thinks that the couple’s marriage is not yet assured. However, she does not explicitly state her opinion right after speaker J makes the statement that she disagrees with. Rather, she says, ‘… mmm kana=.’

By viewing kana as a ‘mitigation’ marker, one interpretation which we might take here is that kana by speaker K reduces the assertiveness of her interlocutor’s preceding comment. In other words, without explicitly saying that what speaker J said might not be true, speaker K successfully, but implicitly, states that the couple’s marriage might not occur. In return, speaker J downplays the assertiveness of her previous statement by also using kana followed by a more explicit expression of uncertainty. As a result, speaker K finally states her opinion in line 9 – she thinks that their marriage is not yet assured.

In cases like Example 5 and 6, kana can mitigate statements which have already
been stated explicitly. That is, by using *kana*, speakers can downplay their previous statements or their interlocutors’ statements. As a result, it is possible for speakers to change their statements and/or to express their disagreements indirectly. In this type of usage, as Example 5 and 6 clearly present, *kana* can stand by itself without any preceding utterance. Although this happens only 7 times, these cases suggest that the “preceding phrase” to be mitigated by *kana* is not restricted to something within the same “syntactic unit” and might instead simply be within the same interactional unit.

In addition to the fact that *kana* can stand alone, an interesting prosodic tendency is also observed for this usage. In my data, there are 20 cases in which a *kana*-phrase appears while speakers have been explicitly exchanging their contrary views. In 19 of the 20 cases, the final vowel of the *kana* is lengthened and becomes *kana*=. Beside these cases, 10 out of 13 occurrences of the set phrase, ‘soo kana (maybe so/I wonder if that’s right),’ are also used in interactions when speakers explicitly disagree with each other. Since ‘soo kana’ tends to be uttered softly, it is hard to determine if the final vowel of *kana* in ‘soo kana’ is fully lengthened. However, at any rate, the final vowel of *kana* in these 10 cases does not sound like a short vowel.

4.3. A ‘mitigation’ marker at the discourse level: Reducing degree of relevance

As for discourse-level usage of *kana*, I argue that by reducing the certainty of the preceding information, *kana* may also reduce the degree of relevance or importance claimed for that information. As a result, by using *kana*, the speaker can supplement with additional, “in some sense relevant,” information without losing the focus of the main story.

In Example 7, Speaker L is explaining how he caused a traffic accident and lost four of his front teeth. At the moment of the accident, he was riding a small motorbike and heading to a place where he held a part-time job. According to him, the roads were very congested, and he was not moving fast. Yet, since he could weave through the traffic on his motorcycle, he was going faster than the cars around him. Thus, when the car next to him stopped in order to let another car pass across a street, he simply thought that the car next to him had stopped due to traffic. He failed to see the other car passing through the intersection and crashed into its back door (see Figure 1).

In order to understand the unique circumstances of the accident, it is crucial for the interlocutor to know the traffic situation on a particular road at a particular time of day. Previously, speaker L had been talking in detail about where he got in the accident, and this had been acknowledged by his interlocutor. Then, in Example 7, he states the time of the accident so he can explain the traffic situation. In the same turn, speaker L also mentions the time at which he had to be at work.

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15 Adachi (2002: 196-197) claims that *kana* can be used to express the speaker’s distrust (‘fushin no hyoomei’). One of his examples expresses the speaker’s distrust of the interlocutor’s proposition; hence, circumstantially, it seems to express the speaker’s disagreement.

16 In Japan, most companies finish their day at 5:30, and workers generally leave for home around 6:00. As a result, the traffic situation at either 5:30 or 6:30 and the traffic situation around 6:00 are quite different, with the roads being very congested at 6:00. Therefore, knowing the accident happened at around 6:00 on a particular road is an indispensable key to understanding the situation.
Figure 1: Situation at An Accident

Example 7:
1 L: ... de, then
L: ... Then,

2 ... rokuji gurai, about six-o’clock,

3→ ... han ni tsukeba ii no kana, I needed to get there by six thirty kana.

4 de mata rokuji goro ga hijoo ni, Then, and around six, it’s very
   six-o’clock around PR T very PRT

5 ... juuji shite masu yone, ... congested, right?
   traffic do-GER COP PRT

Gurai (about) in line 2, goro (around) in line 4, and kana in line 3 all reduce the specificity and certainty of the content. However, the distinct usage of these words seems logical, if we understand that gurai (about) and goro (around) only reduce its specificity, but kana reduces its importance and relevance to the main story. In this conversation, the time of the accident, which is marked by gurai or goro, is a crucial aspect, but the time by which he has to be at work is not. In other words, the interlocutor may have no problem understanding the circumstance without the utterance with kana, but it would be more difficult without the utterances with gurai and goro. Here, the kana-phrase neatly interpolates additional information in the narration without causing any confusion.

It has been claimed that speakers provide necessary information in a particular order to allow their interlocutors to understand them. During this process, it would be more efficient for interlocutors to know which information is more important and which is less so, if there is a continuum of relevance in the information. Labov and Waletzky (1967) discuss the fact that only particular kinds of clauses can function as narrative clauses – that is, as utterances used to tell the main story in narratives. In other words, there is a way in which speakers syntactically mark important information to make their narratives clearer. Likewise, kana may be able to syntactically mark less-important information. If so, kana in Example 7 could signal to the interlocutor that the utterance is not the main part of the on-going narration, but is nonetheless in some sense relevant.

Although further study with more data is necessary, kana in a phrase such as ‘sonna toko kana (something like that)’ may reduce the degree of relevance or importance of the preceding narrative. In other words, a speaker may be able to signal the end of his/her narrative by lowering the narrative’s relevance or importance in an on-going conversation. It should be also noted that lengthening of the final vowel of kana was rarely seen with this usage of kana.
5. Conclusion
We have observed how the sentence-final particle *kana* is used in naturally occurring conversation and looked some cases which cannot be explained as questions or as expressions of a speaker’s doubt. In those cases, speakers of the Japanese language seem to use *kana* to mitigate various aspects of their talk.

Diagram 2: Functions of *kana* in Naturally Occurring Conversation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-addressed question: doubt</td>
<td>6 cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-addressed question: doubt</td>
<td>34 cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other cases which receive response</td>
<td>20 cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence-level: reduce certainty</td>
<td>98-123 c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactional-level: reduce assertiveness</td>
<td>76-101 c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse-level: reduce relevance</td>
<td>17-32 c.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Diagram 2 displays, *kana* can reduce the certainty and assertiveness of the information preceding *kana* in the sentence level. By using this function, furthermore, speakers can downplay their previous statements or express disagreement implicitly. That is, *kana* functions as a mitigation marker not only at the sentence level, but also at the interactional level. Finally, I discussed how speakers use *kana* to reduce the degree of relevance or importance at the discourse level. Along this process, some positional and prosodic characteristics are also discussed. These discussions suggest that traditional descriptions of the syntactic occurrence of SFP *kana* – its position in a sentence and restrictions on what parts of speech can precede it – are not always substantiated by how *kana* is used in naturally occurring conversation. Yet, the various uses of *kana* are quite systematic in terms of its semantic and pragmatic aspects. Although further study with more data is necessary, the use of SPF *kana* as a mitigation marker may be a part of a larger tendency in the spoken Japanese language. Starting from the mid-1990s, many anecdotal reports suggest that Japanese youths overuse vague expressions such as *mitai na* (look like), *toka* (something like), and *hoo* (a direction) (Gendai Yoogo no Kisochishiki 1994; The Ministry of Education 2000). Suzuki (1995) gives a detailed analysis of *mitai na* (look like) and reports on the development of its “non-canonical” usage and a new function: Distancing the speaker from the content of the utterance. Since the use of *kana* in my data is increasing in number, it may be interesting to see if and how its use as a mitigation marker has developed through time. These findings suggest that in studying Japanese sentence-final particles, it is important to study naturally occurring conversations rather than merely speculating about their functions.

Although the nature of the conversations (degree of formality, type of topics, age and gender of participants, and their relationship) seems to be comparable, the frequency of *kana* occurrence between my data sets from the earliest three years and the latest three years is quite different. There are 49 occurrences of *kana* in 20 conversations (105 minutes; approximately 5,430 intonation units) which were recorded in 1988, 1989, or 1990 (the earliest three years in my data set). This makes the average frequency of *kana* in data from 1988 to 1990 approximately once every 2 minutes (128 seconds). On the other hand, the average frequency of *kana* in data from 1999 to 2001 (the latest three years in my data) is once every 71 seconds (16 conversations; 245 minutes; approximately 12,370 intonation units; 207 incidents of *kana*).
References


Nitta, Yoshio (1994) <Utagai> o arawasu keishiki no toikaketeki shiyo – ‘kana’ o chushin to shita oboegaki – [How forms to express <doubt> is used as if they are questions – memo focus on ‘kana’]. In Osaka Daigaku Bungakubu Nihongakaku Gendainihongogaku Koza (ed.), *Gendai nihongo kenkyu 1*. 6-14. Toyonaka, Japan: Osaka Daigaku Bungakubu.


Tokieda, Motoki (1951) Taijin kankei o koosei suru joshi, jodoshi [Particles and auxiliary verbs that construct interpersonal relationship]. *Kokugo kokubun no kenkyu* 29.9: 1-10.
APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPT CONVENTIONS  (BASED ON DU BOIS, ET AL. 1993)

TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS

Units:
- Intonation unit {carriage return}

Transitional Continuity:
- Final .
- Continuing ,
- Appeal (question/confirmation) ?
- Lengthening =

Pause:
- Middle …
- Short ..

SYMBOLS

CON  Condition
COP  Copula
GER  Gerund
NEG  Negative
NOM  Nominative marker
PAST  Past tense
PRT  Particles
QUO  Quotation marker

TRANSLATION

Parenthesis  English translation, which is not explicitly mentioned in an original utterance.