

Grammaticalization and lexicalization: the verb *suru* in Japanese

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Abstract

This paper discusses the meaning and function of one of the most general, and widely employed verbs in Japanese, *suru*. After a short overview of definitions of grammaticalization and lexicalization in general linguistics, some Japanese grammarians and their treatment of the verb *suru*, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, are described. The main part of the paper introduces the usages of the verb *suru* in the first years of learning Japanese as a second language. This verb *suru*, of which the first and the most representative meaning is “to do”, appears in various ways, grammaticalized or lexicalized. Finally, the uses of the verb are compared with similar verbs in some European languages and their related expressions.

Keywords: Japanese verb, *suru*, beginners' Japanese

Gramatikalizacija in leksikalizacija: glagol *suru* v japonščini

Članek obravnava pomen in funkcijo enega najsplošnejših in najpogosteje uporabljanih glagolov v japonščini, *suru*. Po kratkem pregledu definicij gramatikalizacije in leksikalizacije v splošnem jezikoslovju so opisani nekateri japonski slovničarji in njihova obravnava glagola *suru*, zlasti v prvi polovici 20. stoletja. V osrednjem delu prispevka so predstavljene rabe glagola *suru* v prvih letih učenja japonščine kot L2: glagol *suru*, katerega prvi in najbolj reprezentativni pomen je „delati“, se pojavlja na različne načine, gramatikalizirano ali leksikalizirano. Na koncu primerjamo rabo japonskega glagola *suru* z nekaterimi evropskimi jeziki in njihovimi izrazi.

Ključne besede: japonski glagol, *suru*, japonščina na začetniški ravni

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1 Introduction

It is usually accepted that words in a language may be divided into “content words” (or “lexical words”) and “function words” (or “grammatical words”). In English, for example, the former are nouns, verbs, and adjectives, the latter are prepositions, connectives, pronouns, particles, and demonstratives (Hopper & Traugott 1993, 4). Linguistic change not only affects the lexicon and the phonology of words, but also operates on the grammar of a language. Grammaticalization is concerned with the development of lexical items into markers of grammatical categories. A well-known example is the English verb *go* in its function of a future marker, as in *She is going to visit her friend* (Bisang, 2017).

Lexicalization, on the other hand, is a process of language change in a variety of ways, broadly defined as the adoption of words into the lexicon (Brinton & Traugott, 2005, ix). At the basis of lexicalization are word-formation processes such as affixation, compounding, or borrowing. It also involves multi-word expressions and set phrases, and a range of processes that follow the coinage of a new element (Hilpert, 2019).

This paper discusses the meaning and function of one of the most general, and widely employed verbs in Japanese, *suru*. The discussion is in the context of the first years of learning Japanese as a second language: the verb *suru* – of which the first and the most representative meaning is “to do” – appears in various ways in the most basic and important expressions in today’s Japanese. While the meanings and functions of the verb *suru* are examined below, the following points should be noted:

- various cases of lexicalization are observed in which the verb *suru* is combined with native Japanese words and originally Chinese words (and even neologisms formed using Chinese morphemes), with the latter being especially numerous (see 3.1);
- the grammaticalization of the verb *suru* is related to transitivity and aspect;
- the verb *suru* is widely grammaticalized and also expresses non-verb parts of speech.

In the conclusion, the characteristics of the Japanese verb *suru* are discussed in comparison with similar verbs in some European languages.

2 *Suru* in the history of Japanese linguistics – formal predicate, auxiliary, and functional verb

In the history of Japanese linguistics, the verb *suru* has been identified as *keishiki yōgen*¹ (formal predicate), sometimes *hojo yōgen* (auxiliary predicate), and further *kinō dōshi* (functional verb). All these terms were proposed based on observations and analyses by Japanese linguists from the end of the nineteenth century onward, when they eagerly studied grammars of European languages and started to describe the contemporary Japanese language, placing it side by side with the Indo-European languages.

The term *keishiki yōgen* (formal predicate) was coined by Yamada Yoshio² (1873–1958), who recognized that some predicates³ “have little substantive meaning and are used solely to express the force of the statement”, and thus are a phenomena of grammaticalization. In the case of the verb *suru* (still in the classical form *su* in the first decades of the twentieth century), he recognized its ability to coin new words and to transform nouns into verbs (Ōtsuka 2012, 5), and thus engage in lexicalization. For example:

(1)

kokoro suru

heart do

‘to keep in mind; to pay attention’

(2)

oto ga suru

sound NOM do

‘there is some sound; some noise is heard’

Examples (1) and (2) were mentioned by Yamada side by side in terms of the same structure in the 1920s in Classical Japanese (*kokoro su*; *oto su*). In today’s Japanese, the first example (1) is lexicalized and found as an entry in dictionaries, but the second example (2) did not go under full lexicalization, so the expression requires the nominative particle *ga*, and shows a syntactically transparent construction. The verb *suru* here indicates that the sound (*oto*) “exists / is present”.

1 All Japanese words are transcribed using the Hepburn system.

2 All Japanese personal names are mentioned in the order of “surname – personal name”.

3 Besides the verb *suru*, Yamada mentions *ari* (the classical form for *aru*, verb of existence) and *gotoshi* (“as if”).

Another Japanese linguist, Hashimoto Shinkichi (1882–1945), was the major grammarian who laid the basis for the school grammar of modern Japanese. In his discussion about parts of speech, he came up with a new concept, *hojo yōgen* (auxiliary predicate). Among five kinds of auxiliaries,⁴ Hashimoto mentions the verb *suru* which is used after an adverbial particle such as *sae* (even) and *nado* (and the like) (Ōtsuka 2012, 3).

(3)

Iki sae sureba, sorede ii.
 go even do-COND that INST good
 ‘It is fine if we/just go.’

(4)

Dare ga nemuri nado suru mono ka.
 who NOM sleep and-the-like do thing Q
 ‘Who would ever go to sleep?’

In both of the above cases, there is the main lexical verb to express the action (to go, to sleep), and the verb *suru* is used only grammatically, in the former case to note that the action is conditional, and in the latter case to connect the phrase to the noun *mono* in the set phrase “who would do such a thing (like sleeping)?”

Further, the concept of a “functional verb” is used in the context of Japanese linguistics much later. Muraki Shinjirō writes that the first Japanese linguist who used the term *kinō dōshi* (functional verb) was Iwasaki Eijirō (1922-2017), a scholar of the German language, who in explaining the functional verbs that support the nominal writing style in German also mentions the functional character of the Japanese verb *suru* (Muraki 1980: 71). In 1974 Iwasaki discussed *Funktionsverben* (functional verbs) in German, among them the verb *machen* in comparison with the Japanese verb *suru*. According to Muraki, a functional verb (*kinō dōshi*) leaves its substantive meaning to the noun and exclusively performs its grammatical function (Muraki 1991: 203).

4 Besides the verb *suru*, Hashimoto mentions verbs of (non-)existence and identification, several verbs used in honorific expressions, verb forms to express state, giving and receiving verbs and other verbs with auxiliary functions (Ōtsuka 2012, 2–3).

(5)

Nani ka nioi ga suru.

what Q smell NOM do

‘Something smells.’

(6)

Nani ka niou.

what Q smell

‘Something smells.’

The term “functional word” is used in contrast with the concept of “content word”. In example sentence (5), the function verb *suru* accompanies the noun “smell” and merely gives the grammatical function of non-past, while in example (6), the content word, the verb *niou*, gives the same meaning as the expression in example (5), ‘to smell’. We see that the sentence structure of example (5) is the same as example (3) (*oto ga suru* = there is some sound), a syntactically transparent structure, yet the verb *suru* has partially lost its most basic meaning “to do”. This sentence structure is primarily used for sensory expressions.

3 The Japanese verb *suru* in the learning process of Japanese as a second language

Already at the beginners’ level of Japanese language learning, the verb *suru* (to do) appears not only in its main full meaning, but also in a wide variety of syntactic and auxiliary roles in expressions of simple, but communicatively meaningful expressions for basic learners.

The various usages of the verb *suru* in today’s Japanese are presented below from the viewpoint of learning Japanese as a second language. They are presented in the order of their appearance in widely used Japanese language textbooks.⁵

5 Among them are textbooks used at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana (see references).

3.1 Expressions of basic activities

When the verb *suru* is used as a transitive verb, its most basic sentence structure is

(7)
N wo suru

in which the noun phrase with the accusative case marker *wo* precedes the verb:

(8)
shukudai wo suru
homework ACC do
'to do homework'

(9)
sentaku wo suru
laundry ACC do
'to do laundry'

Besides this apparently transitive use of the verb, there is the very frequent sentence structure

(10)
N suru

In this structure, no accusative particle is used and the verb *suru* is directly attached to the (verbal) noun, most frequently of Chinese origin, but also to native Japanese nouns, as well as borrowings from European languages.

(11)
sentaku suru
laundry do
'to wash (clothes) / to do laundry'

(12) = (1)
kokoro suru
heart do
'to keep in mind; to pay attention'

(13)

supīchi *suru*
 speech do
 ‘to have a speech’

Example (11) has the same meaning as example (9), but the verb *suru* is grammaticalized and functions as a part of the verb “to do laundry / to wash”. Example (12) was mentioned earlier, (1): the noun’s original meaning is “heart” or “mind”, but in this lexicalized collocation for the meaning “to keep in mind”, it is ungrammatical to use the accusative case particle *wo* (**kokoro wo suru*). Example (13) is a case in which a borrowed word from English “speech” is used as a noun together with the verb *suru*.

The Chinese language influenced the Japanese language throughout the long history of exchanges between these neighbouring nations in East Asia. The introduction of Chinese words in the history of the Japanese language has compensated for the lack of Japanese vocabulary in terms of both quality and quantity (Morita 1994, 253). There was an explosive increase in the number of Chinese words used in Japan in the modern era, especially during the Meiji period (1868–1912), after the country ended its long isolation of the Edo period (1603–1867). In response to the introduction of new things and concepts related to industrialization, the (re-)introduction of Chinese words and newly coined words composed of Chinese morphemes contributed greatly to the development of the Japanese language in terms of vocabulary (ibid.). The relatively free method of coining words based on the meanings of Chinese characters led to a rapid increase in the number of new “Chinese” words.⁶ Among the newly coined words using Chinese characters (*kango*) in the Meiji period are *shakai* “society”, *kojin* “individual person”, *kindai* “modern era”, *ren’ai* “love (romantic, and usually between man and woman)”, and others (Yanabu 1982, ii).

Already in the beginners’ lessons, learners encounter, even before learning the abstract nouns mentioned above, many verbal nouns⁷ which originate in the Chinese language, such as *benkyō* 勉強 “study”, *sentaku* 洗濯 “laundry”, *ryōri* 料理 “cooking”, *kenkyū* 研究 “research”, *dokusho* 読書 “reading”, etc. As illustrated here, these nouns are typically composed of two Chinese characters and their phonetic

6 In modern Japanese, there are three classes of words according to their etymology and orthography: native Japanese words *wago*, words borrowed from Chinese *kango* (typically written with Chinese characters and most of them in two or more Chinese characters), and borrowed words of western origin *gairaigo*.

7 The term “verbal noun” is used for *dōmeishi*, nouns that designate actions. The term is broader than “gerund” in English.

representation (pronunciation) is the *on'yomi*, the Sino-Japanese reading.⁸ In Modern Japanese, these verbal nouns are used with the addition of the verb *suru*, which is a process of lexicalization, and thus they can be used as individual verbs. Below, the same verbal noun is used as a noun in (14), and as a verb in (15) and (16).

(14)

Shumi wa ryōri da.
 hobby TOPIC cooking copula
 ‘(My) hobby is cooking.’

(15)

Mainichi uchi de ryōri suru.
 every day home LOC cooking do
 ‘I cook every day at home.’

(16)

Kinō wa uchi de ryōri shita.
 yesterday TOPIC home LOC cooking do-PAST
 ‘Yesterday, I cooked at home.’

The first encounter of second-language learners with the verb *suru* in such vocabulary is already a case of grammaticalization: the verb *suru* is used as an auxiliary, in the sense that it does not carry the full meaning, but helps in its conjugated form to show the grammatical part of the predicate, e.g. *ryōri suru* in the non-past tense, *ryōri shita* in the past tense, and so on. It is interesting to observe when the verb *suru* demands an accusative object, and when it becomes functional, i.e. a part of the whole verb.

(17)

[sentence structures (7) → (10)]
N wo suru → *N suru*

(18)

Nihongo no kenkyū wo suru. → *Nihongo wo kenkyū suru.*
 Japanese GEN research ACC do Japanese ACC research do
 ‘to do research on the Japanese language’

8 In Japanese, many Chinese characters have more than one phonetic representation. They are either Sino-Japanese readings (*on'yomi*), or native Japanese readings (*kun'yomi*).

(19)

Shitagi no sentaku wo suru. → *Shitagi wo sentaku suru.*
 underwear GEN washing ACC do underwear ACC washing do
 ‘to wash some underwear’

When the verbal noun is a kind of sports activity, e.g. tennis, skiing, or skating, and they are all typical borrowings from English, it is more natural to use the sentence structure with the accusative particle:

(20)

Fuyu wa sukī wo suru.
 winter TOP ski ACC do
 ‘I/We ski in winter.’

Particularly in the written form or also in formal speech, the accusative particle is generally kept, but in colloquial speech the particle may be dropped before the verb *suru*. There are also recent colloquial expressions such as:

(21)

ocha suru
 tea do
 ‘to have tea together’

This expression has been included as an entry in monolingual dictionaries as a verb since 1990s (an example of lexicalization) and used in informal casual situations (Digital Daijisen, Contemporary Words). We can also find a variant (22) for the same meaning (Weblio):

(22)

ocha wo suru
 tea ACC do
 ‘to have tea together’

3.2 Basic question sentences

As soon as the first activity verbs are introduced (e.g. to eat, to drink, to read), learners also want to ask questions. The full lexical meaning of the verb *suru*, “to do”, is manifested in a variety of basic question sentences for beginners (Shigemori 2002, 84-85).

(23)

Nani wo shimasu ka?

what ACC do-FORMAL Q

‘What do you do?/What will you do?’

(24)

Dō shimashita ka?

how do-PAST-FORMAL Q

‘What happened?/Is anything wrong?’

(25)

Ame no toki, dō shimasu ka?

rain GEN time how do-FORMAL Q

‘What do you do when it rains?’

(26)

Densha ga konai toki dō shitara iidesu ka?

train NOM come-NEG time how do-COND good-FORMAL Q

‘What should we do when the train doesn’t come?’

(27)

Dō shita no desu ka?

how do-PAST nom. copula-FORMAL Q

‘What is wrong? / What happened?’

If we observe closely, when asking for the content of some activity the verb *suru* may be used in both possible tenses, non-past and past form, but if the state is to be asked for, the verb form is the past, or more precisely the perfect, *shita*. The questions (24) and (27) are actually asking for a state – the result state of an event – and therefore some of the answers may be as adjectives that describe the state.

Answers to the above questions would be formulated with various individual verbs of full lexical meaning, and in case of question (27), also with a verb in the passive form or an adjective, cf. examples (32) and (33):

Q (23): What do you do?/What will you do?

(28)

Machi e dekakemasu.
 town ALL go out-FORMAL
 ‘I go out into town.’

Q (24): What happened?/Is anything wrong?

(29)

Jiko ni aimashita.
 accident DAT encounter-FORMAL-PAST
 ‘I was involved in an accident.’

Q (25): What do you do when it rains?

(30)

Kasa wo sashimasu.
 umbrella ACC open-FORMAL
 ‘I use the umbrella.’

Q (26): What should we do when the train doesn’t come?

(31)

Ekin ni kikeba ii desu.
 station worker DAT ask-COND good copula-FORMAL
 ‘It is advised to ask the station worker.’

Q (27): What is wrong? / What happened? (*Dō shita no desu ka?*)

(32)

Ame ni furareta no desu.
 rain DAT fall-PASS-PAST nom. copula-FORMAL
 ‘I was caught in rain.’

Q (27): What is wrong? / What happened? (*Dō shita no desu ka?*)

(33)

Guai ga warui no desu.
 condition NOM bad nom. copula-FORMAL
 ‘I don’t feel well.’

3.3 Transitivity

A major characteristic of Japanese verbs is the opposition of transitive and intransitive variants. The verb *suru* is in pair with another verb *naru*, of which the basic lexical meaning is “to become”. While the verb *suru* is the transitive, i.e. the active counterpart, the other verb *naru* is the intransitive. Therefore:

(34)

Heya wo hiroku suru.
 room ACC widely do
 ‘(We) make the room broad.’

(35)

Heya ga hiroku naru.
 room NOM widely become
 ‘The room becomes broad.’

The usage of the verb *suru* in the above case (34) is still quite close to the full lexical meaning, the transitive active exertion of influence upon something. This dichotomy of transitive and intransitive expressions in combination with the adverbial form of adjectives is also introduced at the beginners’ level. Together with the typically transitive syntax presented in 3.1 (*N wo suru*), it may emphasize the transitivity of the verb *suru*. However, there is also the intransitive use of the verb *suru* with the structure *N ga suru*, e.g. example (2) and (5) for perceptual expressions (cf. pp. 405, 407).

3.4 Honorific humble expressions

With further roles of the Japanese verb *suru* the grammaticalization phenomena are even more obvious. It plays a very formal grammaticalized role in honorific humble expressions, and is added to the verb base of the actual action (in the case of (36), "to hold").

- (36)
O-kaban wo o-mochi shimasu.
 pref. bag ACC pref. hold do-FORMAL
 'I will hold the bag (for you).'

3.5 Adverbial descriptions

There are various adverbial expressions that also require the verb *suru* in the sentence structure *N (wo) suru*, which we have seen in section 3.1. As can be seen in the English translations below, though they are morphologically verb constructions and can be put in past as well as non-past forms, they do not express actions, but instead a state or change of state. Here, the verb *suru* does not have any transitive actional meaning. The subject's will to be in that state is felt in some cases (as in examples 38 and 39).

- (37)
muri (wo) suru
 unreasonableness (ACC) do
 'to overwork, strain oneself'

- (38)
doryoku (wo) suru
 effort (ACC) do
 'to make effort'

- (39)
yukkuri suru
 slowly/leisurely do
 'to be leisurely, without haste'

(40)

hotto *suru*

(drawing) a breath do

‘to feel relieved’

(41)

bikkuri *suru*

surprise/wonder do

‘to be surprised/startled’

3.6 Collocation

The verb *suru* also appears in certain collocations, and here we can speak about the lexicalization of multi-word expressions.

(42)

Nihon e iku koto ni suru.

Japan ALL go matter ILL do

‘(We) decide to go to Japan.’

(43)

Nani ni shimasu ka?

what ILL do-FORMAL Q

‘For what do you decide? / What would you like?’

(44)

Kōhī ni shimasu.

coffee ILL do-FORMAL

‘I would take coffee.’

The sentence structure *N ni suru* expresses the decision made by the subject. It does not express any transitive action, but an active decision willingly made by the subject.

3.7 Description of outer appearance

The description of outer appearance is one of the typical expressions learners must acquire at the beginners' level. The following examples show some short, simple sentences describing a person's appearance, and also the taste of some food in the same sentence pattern with the verb *suru* in the continuous aspect with the auxiliary *iru*, *-te iru*:⁹

(45)

Tanaka-san ga masuku wo shite iru.
 Tanaka Mx NOM mask ACC do-CONT
 Mx Tanaka is wearing a mask.

(46)

Josei ga hossori shite iru.
 lady NOM slender do-CONT
 The lady is slender.

(47)

Aji ga sappari shite iru.
 taste NOM plain/simple do-CONT
 The taste is plain.

Example (45) is the resultant state of Tanaka's action, *masuku wo suru* (to wear a mask), in the syntactically transparent sentence construction *N wo suru*, as we have seen in 3.1. On the other hand, no case particle is present in examples (46) and (47), and the verb *suru* in its *-te iru* form is combined with an adverb. Various adverbial words may be used together with the verb *suru* in this form to describe the outer appearance, as well as other observations of sensations such as taste (47).

9 The verb *iru* when it is used lexically means "to be, to exist", but it functions as an auxiliary when attached to the continuative form (*-te*) of the main lexical verb. In this sentence pattern, it conveys a variety of aspectual meanings. In our context, it is the resultative (resultant state) and simple state (Kiryu 2018, 589-591).

4 Comparison with some European languages

We have seen that the Japanese verb *suru* with the basic lexical meaning of “to do” (3.1) functions further in various question sentences (3.2), and adverbial and adjectival descriptions of (temporal) states (3.5 and 3.7). The verb also appears in certain collocations (one example in 3.6). The most grammaticalized use of the verb is in the honorific dimension of the Japanese language, in the humble sentence structure (3.4).

According to contrastive research with regard to the German verb *machen* by Sakata (2006, 152), the Japanese and German verbs overlap well in the function of “to do” with an accompanying accusative noun (e.g. *einen Spaziergang machen* and *sanpo (wo) suru* ‘to take a walk’). However, while the German *machen* is often used in the meaning of “to create”, there is another basic verb in Japanese *tsukuru* which is used for the meaning of creation. On the other hand, the Japanese *suru* is used to describe the change of state (e.g. to put on a mask) and sometimes even a permanent state (3.7 (46) and (47)).

As we have already seen in the English translations of the example sentences, the Japanese verb *suru* may be compared with *to do*, *to be*, *to have* and *to make* according to each case.

Since Slavic languages have the opposition of perfective/imperfective, the verb *suru* may seem comparable with the Slovene *delati* and *narediti*, but both of these verbs have a strong connotation of creation, particularly the perfective *narediti*. The entry for *delati* in the SSKJ² dictionary lists seven semantic categories of the verb, and they are all related to actions of the subject (to work, to work with some goal or for some achievement, to produce, to create, etc.). A comparable meaning in a similar structure with our case is found under the fourth meaning, with the explanation that the verb is used with a weakened meaning (an approximate English meaning and a corresponding Japanese expression are added to each example):

| | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|--------|-------------------------|
| <i>delati kompromise</i> | (to compromise) | 妥協する | <i>dakyō suru</i> |
| <i>delati napake</i> | (to make mistakes) | 間違いをする | <i>machigai wo suru</i> |
| <i>delati kupčije</i> | (to make deals) | 取引をする | <i>torihiki wo suru</i> |

In Slovene, the verbal noun is in the accusative case, and therefore the syntax is transparent, but the verb *delati* has a weaker connotation of “to work” or “to produce”. The parallel examples in Japanese are in the structure *N (wo) suru*, and the noun is in the accusative.

In case of the grammaticalized use of *suru* with numerous Chinese verbal nouns, the Slovene verb ending *-irati* is similar and comparable, since this is used with many borrowed words and is aspectually neutral (Žele 2011, 227). For example:

| | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|----------|-----------------------|
| <i>telefonirati</i> | (to phone, to call) | 電話する | <i>denwa suru</i> |
| <i>nominirati</i> | (to nominate) | 指名する | <i>shimei suru</i> |
| <i>skicirati</i> | (to sketch) | スケッチする | <i>suketchi suru</i> |
| <i>kontrolirati</i> | (to control) | コントロールする | <i>kontorōru suru</i> |

The corresponding Japanese expressions for the latter two examples are with a noun borrowed from English (see also example (13) in 3.1). Both means of lexicalization in Slovene and Japanese are highly productive.

We looked at how the various meanings and usages of a single verb *suru* appear at the elementary level of Japanese language education. When it is used as a transitive verb in opposition to an intransitive one, it has the meaning of action or change, but on the other hand, it is also used to express qualities or states that are normally left to adjectives. Further, in expressions using adverbs, we saw that the verb *suru* is a mere functional word. For latter cases, it is difficult to find parallels in European languages.

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Abbreviations

| | | | |
|------|--------------|-------|-------------------|
| ACC | accusative | N | noun |
| ALL | allative | NEG | negative |
| COND | conditional | NOM | nominative |
| CONT | continuative | nom. | nominalization |
| DAT | dativ | pref. | prefix |
| GEN | genitive | TOP | topic |
| ILL | illative | Q | question particle |
| INST | instrumental | | |