

An Immediate Grammar Analysis of “...te, hai,” as a Chain-Maintenance Device in Japanese

Hirofumi Yamamoto
Institute of Science Tokyo

Last updated: January 12, 2026

1 Introduction

This paper explains the immediate grammatical features of the expression “...te, hai,” which promotes chain maintenance in Japanese conversation. Immediate grammar is a framework that treats incomplete sentences and trailing expressions as grammatical elements in the speech process. The purpose is to provide clues for systematically understanding this expression, which is often understood through intuition or atmosphere. Properly incorporating this expression into teaching materials, especially since learners often encounter it early in their studies, can reduce confusion and contribute to improving their natural Japanese language proficiency(Yamamoto 2025).

2 Expression: “...te, hai,”

Example 1: Usage of the Chain Maintenance Expression “...te, hai,”
in Japanese Conversation

- A: “Kino, paatii, dou datta?”
- B: “Maa, tabete nonde, hai,”
- A: “Itsumo to onaji kaa”

in English:

- A: “How was the party yesterday?”
- B: “Well, I ate and drank, hai,”
- A: “Same as always, huh?”

2.1 Difficult Points in Acquisition

2.1.1 “...te,” is Left Incomplete and Passed to the Next Turn

The issue is that learners are taught that the “te-form” connects sentences, but in this example, it is not clear what is being connected. Moreover, the conclusion is not explicitly stated. For instance, in the above example:

- Japanese: “tabete, nonde, (sorede?)”
- English: “Eating, drinking, (and then?)”

However, in reality, the judgment is made based on the timing that “by the time the enumeration is done, there is nothing more to say.”(Chafe 1994) A stumbling block is the assumption that “something must be said after the te-form,” leading learners to search for grammatical completeness.

2.1.2 “hai” is not a Response but a Lubricant for Conversation

The issue is that many textbooks teach “hai = yes/response.” However, in this context, it is neither an affirmation nor a response. Its actual function is to indicate that the speaker still retains the right to speak while confirming with the listener, “Isn’t that enough (in terms of content)?” This facilitates the smooth transfer of speaking rights to the listener. This is a typical feature of immediate grammar, where the word serves as a timing cue rather than conveying meaning (Du Bois, 2007). (Du Bois 2007) Timing cues are not only difficult for learners to understand but are also often overlooked by educators when creating teaching materials.

2.1.3 Prioritizing “Flow” over Information Transmission

The purpose of this utterance is not to convey content in detail or to express impressions, but to smoothly conclude the conversation and entrust the continuation to the listener. (Clark 1996) From one perspective, it can be seen as an expression for relinquishing one’s speaking rights. If used intentionally, it allows the speaker to signal the transfer of speaking rights to the listener, enabling them to supplement their own lack of vocabulary.

When learners hear this trailing expression, they may fail to understand “what is being said,” but the challenge is to sense “where the breath is being passed,” or in other words, to recognize “it is their turn to speak,” and to continue and succeed in communication. Once they sense this, any content, backchannel, reaction, or expression will suffice. Success is achieved when the response flows smoothly. This is what it means to be a “good listener.”

2.1.4 No Equivalent Expression in Adjustive Grammar

This expression is not represented in traditional grammar. (Levinson 1983) Without the temporal constraint of immediacy, such interactions become unnecessary. When there is temporal leeway and information transmission is prioritized, somewhat polite expressions are chosen while gauging the distance with the interlocutor. For example:

- Immediate: ...te-form verb, hai(yes),
- Adjustive: ...te-form verb, sou desu ne(well), (some evaluative phrase, e.g., “oishii desu ne”, meaning “it’s delicious, isn’t it?”)

Thus, in adjustive grammar, explicit evaluative phrases and polite interjections are necessary. Learners may be confused about “why Japanese speakers can get by with such brevity,” but it is because sufficient shared understanding is established through the immediate interaction that is happening right here and now.

2.2 Why This Expression is Clearly “Immediate Grammar”

TABLE 1: Features of Immediate Grammar

Element	Immediacy
Te-form	Does not state result
Hai	Neither response nor agreement
Sentence End	Intentionally left open
Function	Information < Timing

Table 1 is a good example of how incomplete sentences advance interaction. There is no node in the grammatical structure that indicates a final conclusion. This indicates that the utterance is incomplete. “I ate, drank,” indicates an enumeration of actions and is not a complete sentence in itself. “Hai,” does not indicate a typical response or agreement but functions as an interjection to maintain the flow of conversation. By using “hai,” the speaker indicates their intention to retain their speaking rights while delegating the opportunity to speak to the listener. These are features that cannot be explained by

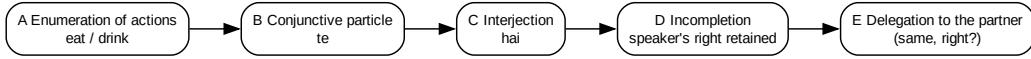


FIG. 1: Immediate Grammar Structure of the Chain Maintenance Device “...te, hai.”. The key point is that there is no “conclusion node” anywhere.

traditional grammatical systems that assume complete sentences.

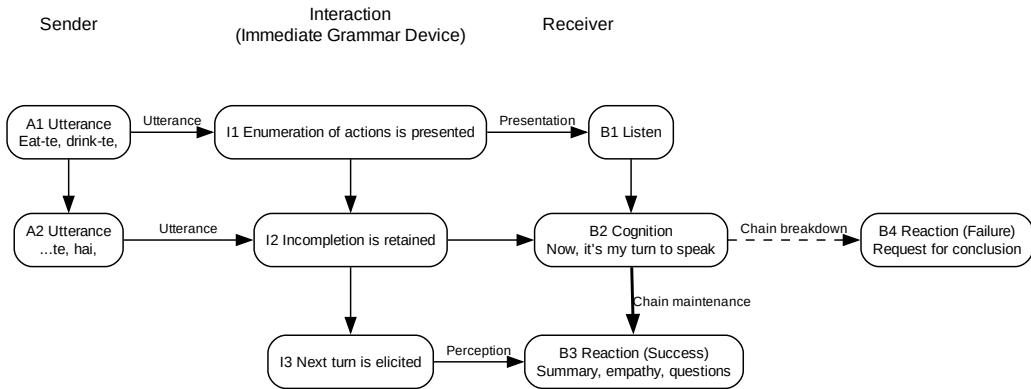


FIG. 2: Immediate Interaction Model of the Chain Maintenance Device “...te, hai.”. The speaker presents an enumeration of actions and maintains an incomplete state, thereby inducing the listener to take the next speaking turn.(Schegloff 2007)

3 Points for Teaching Materials

When creating teaching materials, it is important to focus on the timing of speech rather than its meaning. Providing meaning may lead learners to believe they must produce a correct answer. Additionally, it is crucial not to provide a “correct” sentence. Instead, allow learners to sense the timing of their speech on their own. Indicate only where the expression is used, enabling learners to make their own judgments. Present this in conjunction with preceding and following utterances. Evaluation should be based on whether the speech flows smoothly, rather than the accuracy of the content.

4 Conclusion

The expression “...te, hai,” may seem broken from the perspective of traditional descriptive grammar, but it accurately reflects the realities of spoken interaction and can be described as a pattern. It prioritizes the flow of conversation over mere information transmission, aligning well with actual communication practices. Notably, this expression is registered under AEAD number 627 (2025.12.28).

References

Chafe, Wallace L. (1994). *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time*. University of Chicago Press.

- Clark, Herbert H. (1996). *Using Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Du Bois, John W. (2007). "The Stance Triangle". In: *Stancetaking in Discourse: Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction*. Ed. by Robert Englebretson. Vol. 164. Pragmatics & Beyond New Series. John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 139–182.
- Levinson, Stephen C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schegloff, Emanuel A. (2007). *Sequence Organization in Interaction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yamamoto, Hiroyuki (2025). *Process Grammar Model*. Version v1.0.11. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15613134.
URL: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15613134>.