

Main Clause Ellipsis and Directive Expressions in Japanese Conditional Conjunctions -ba and -tara

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1. Introduction

High-Contextuality in Japanese

- Japanese frequently uses **structurally incomplete sentences**, omitting:
 - Pronouns
 - Particles
 - Even main clauses
- This reflects its nature as a **high-context culture**, where meaning is supplemented by:
 - Context
 - Intonation
 - Non-verbal cues

Research Focus

- This study focuses on **directive expressions** formed through **conditional clauses in which the main clause is omitted**.
- These expressions are shaped by the **high-contextuality** of Japanese communication.
- We refer to this phenomenon as “**high-contextuality**.”

Pronoun Omission

Example (1): Greeting with a New Acquaintance

Watashi wa Nara desu. → *I am Nara.*

(Watashi wa)Nihonjin desu. → *(I am) Japanese.*

- ➡ “Watashi wa” is omitted because it is clear from context.
- ➡ While grammatically correct, omission is more natural in everyday speech.

Particle Omission

Example (2): Formal Written Style

Kinō watashi wa Shinjuku e itte, udon o tabeta.

→ *Yesterday, I went to Shinjuku and ate udon.*

➡ Particles are retained for grammatical completeness.

Example (3): Casual Spoken Style

Kinō watashi (~~wa~~) Shinjuku (~~e~~) itte, udon (~~o~~) tabeta.

→ *Yesterday, I went to Shinjuku and ate udon.*

➡ Particles are omitted in casual speech.

Main Clause Omission 1

Example (4):

Sonna koto itte... → *Saying something like that...[and then what?]*

➡ Main clause is omitted.

➡ Could imply: “[What are you going to do] by saying that?”
or “Even if you say that, [it’s useless]”

Main Clause Omission 2

Example (5):

Ame da kedo... → *It's raining, but...*

- ➔ Could imply: [are you going?] or [is it okay?]
- ➔ Meaning is inferred from context.

Conditional Clause Omission 1

Example (6): Wishes

Kyūjitsu	no	hi	ni	chotto	kite	kurere<u>ba</u>	ne
Noun	particle	noun	particle (time)	adverb	verb	verb	particle
day off	of	day	on/at	just	come	if (you) do for me	right?

→ *If you could just come by on a day off...*

- ➡ Speaker gently expresses a wish.
- ➡ Main clause like “I’d be happy” is omitted.

Conditional Clause Omission 2

Example (7): Hypothetical Condition

A: *Ashita haretara, sanchō made ikimashō.*

→ *If it's sunny tomorrow, let's go to the summit.*

B: Ja, ame ga futtara...

Interjection noun particle verb

so rain if it rains

→ *Well then, what if it rains...?*

➡ Speaker leaves interpretation to listener.

➡ Main clause is omitted.

Conditional Clause Omission 3

Directive Expressions with -ba / -tara

Example (8):

Hayaku ikeba? / ittara?

Adverb verb (conditional)

Early if (you) go

→ What if you go early?

- ➡ Encourages listener to act.
- ➡ Agent is the listener.
- ➡ Main clause is omitted, but intent is clear.

2. Previous Research

Shirakawa (2009)

- Analyzed main clause omission in complex sentences (condition, reason, enumeration).
- Found that:
 - Without a listener → implies **desire**
 - With a listener → implies **suggestion**
- Proposed that such sentences are “**complete utterances**” consisting only of the conditional clause.

Maeda (2009)

- Interpreted directive expressions with omitted main clauses as derived from **evaluative expressions**.

Examples of Evaluative Usage:

Japanese Sentence	Translation	Structure
Ikeba ii	It would be good if you go.	verb + adjective
Ikeba daijōbu	If you go, it'll be okay.	verb + na-adjective
Ittara komaru	If you go, it'll be a problem.	verb + verb

- Speaker's evaluation appears in the main clause.

Presenter argues:

- Negative main clause cannot be expressed via omission.
- Used only in dialogue with a listener.
- Intonation rises like a question when the main clause is omitted.

Shima (1993)

Analyzed directive conditionals from the perspective of politeness.

Expressions like -tara? and -ba? are:

- Conventional forms of advice
- Often used by women or children
- Typically directed toward equals or superiors

Sweetser (1990)

- Discussed **speech-act conditionals**, e.g.:
If it's not rude to ask, what made you decide to leave IBM?
- Intended to perform a **request**.
- Corresponds to Japanese **preposed/postposed conditionals**.
- Allows room for the listener's response
→ aligns with Japanese **politeness strategies**.

3. Main Discussion

Focus of Analysis

- Japanese has four major conditional conjunctions: **ba**, **tara**, **nara**, and **to**.
- This study focuses on **ba** and **tara**, which frequently appear in directive expressions with omitted main clauses.
- Examples are drawn from the **Corpus of Everyday Japanese Conversation (CEJC)**.

<https://chunagon.ninjal.ac.jp/cejc/search>

Example (9) – Student Conversation

(Students discussing how to guide audience seating for a school play)

Student A : Kyōshitsu haridashitari toka, ato

mae no purojekutā ni utsushitokeba

noun	particle	noun	particle	verb (conditional)
front		projector	on / to	if (you) project it

→ Like posting it in the classroom, or maybe projecting it at the front... (female, 20–24 years old)

Student B : A, sore demo ii kamo na

→ Ah, that might work too. (male, 20–24 years old)

- The agent of “project” is the listener.
- The expression functions as a suggestion among peers.

Example (10) – Mother and Son

Mom : Kikkun, ashita honya-san iku toki Nanka kau n dattara nisen-en gurai motteikeba

noun particle verb(conditional)
2000 yen about if you take (it) with you

→ Kikkun, if you're going to the bookstore tomorrow and plan to buy something, you should take about 2000 yen with you. (female, 40–44 years old)

Son : Un

→ Yeah (male, 10–14 years old)

- The agent of “take 2000 yen” is the listener (the son).
- Unlike the previous example, no alternative options are implied.
- The expression is a strong recommendation rather than a suggestion.

- Directive expressions include:
 - **Suggestions**
 - **Recommendations**
 - **Warnings**
- These exist on a **continuum**.
- Influenced by:
 - Presence or absence of **alternatives**
 - Context** of the utterance
 - Intonation** used

Example (11) – Mother and Young Son

(After the mother's friend sang a drawing song while sketching a chef.)

Mom : Jaa Ryokun mo kaitara, kono yoko ni.

Conjunction proper noun particle verb (conditional)

well then Ryo-kun also if (he) draws

→ Well then, if Ryo-kun draws too, (put it) next to this.

(female, 40–44 years old)

- The speaker is a mother talking to her 0–4-year-old son.
- The child's speech is limited; the mother speaks alone.
- Use of tara? shows that conditional suggestions can be used from higher to lower status in close relationships.
- This contradicts Shima (1993).

Example (12) – Married Couple

(Discussing travel plans)

Husband : De nijikan kakaru n datte

→ So, I heard it takes two hours. (male, 45–49 years old)

Wife : Nijikan, jaa, jūni-ji ni ittara

Noun	conjunction	noun	particle	verb (conditional)
two hours	then	twelve o'clock	at	if (you) go

→ Two hours... then, what if you go at twelve?
(female, 50–54 years old)

- The agents are the husband and son, though the wife may also join.
- Reflects collaborative planning in family context

Example (13) – Mother and Daughter

(The mother is speaking to her daughter, who is distracted by her phone.)

Mom : Mō yametara

Adverb verb (conditional)

Already if you stop / why not stop

→ Why don't you stop already? (female, 50–24 years old)

Daughter: Un

→ Yeah (female, 20–24 years old)

Mom : Keitai wa

→ Your phone.

- **The daughter is distracted by her phone.**
- **The mother's tone is slightly strict.**
- **The expression is closer to a command or prohibition, though still allows room for response.**
- **Context and tone determine directive strength.**

Example (14) – Indirect Speech

(Talking about the time when mushrooms were added to soba noodles)

A : Ano ato Shun ga sa ano sukunakunai taseba tte yu yutta ato sa

Quoted conditional verb

“If you add (them)?”

→ After that, when Shun was like, “Aren’t there quite a few? If you add (them)?” I thought, “Yeah, maybe he’s right.” (female, 20–24 years old)

B: Un

→ Yeah (male, 20–24 years old)

- **Directive expressions with omitted main clauses also appear in indirect speech.**
- **The conditional clause taseba is quoted without a main clause.**
- **Shows how suggestions are recalled and reinterpreted**

Example (15) – Resignation / Sarcasm

**A : Nanka ikanai kamo yo tte yuttan dakedo, iku tte yuu kara,
ja ikeba tte.**

Conjunction	Verb (conditional)	Quotative particle
well then	if you're going	I said

→ I said something like “I might not go,” but then they said they were going, so I was like, “Well then, go ahead.” (female, 40–44 years old)

B: Un

→ Yeah (female, 45–49 years old)

- The speaker quotes herself using ikeba sarcastically.
- Not a genuine suggestion, but a form of resignation and sarcasm.
- Reflects emotional nuance in directive expressions

4. Conclusion

When Conditional Clauses Function as Directives

Sentences with omitted main clauses can still function as complete utterances and convey directive meaning under the following conditions:

- **These expressions are used only within close interpersonal relationships.**
- **They can only be used by the speaker in direct interaction with the listener (excluding indirect speech).**
- **Since they are directive, the listener's action must precede *ba* or *tara*.**
- **The distinction between suggestion, recommendation, and warning is determined by context and intonation, and the boundaries are fluid.**
- **Intonation helps distinguish whether the conditional clause is a complete directive or a clause with an omitted main clause.**
(Complete directives tend to rise in pitch, similar to questions.)

Alignment with High-Context Japanese

- This usage aligns well with the high-context nature of Japanese.
- By omitting the main clause, the speaker allows room for the listener's response and avoids directness—reflecting a broader communicative tendency in Japanese.
- While high-context communication has been widely discussed in intercultural studies, as shown in this presentation, it is also deeply connected to grammatical form.

Future Directions

The following points outline future challenges:

- As a Japanese language teacher instructing learners of Japanese as a second language,

I would like to develop a teaching approach that actively incorporates the perspective of high-context communication in Japanese language education.

References

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