

The Explainers

Kara Da, Wake Da, No Da

Notwithstanding their reputation as lovers of silence, the Japanese do an awful lot of explaining. Sometimes it seems as if they try to explain *everything*. They certainly do a lot more explaining than we do in English, even to the point of explaining when there's almost nothing to explain, just to give the impression that they're explaining objective reality when in fact they're just stating their personal opinions like everybody else. Now, after having given you an opening paragraph like this, I've got an awful lot of explaining to do myself.

What I'm talking about are those little phrases that seem to pop up at the ends of sentences or clauses to tell

you that what you are reading is an explanation of what the author said in the sentence before, or that what you are hearing is an explanation of the real-world situation for those who are standing in it: *kara da*, *wake da*, and *no da*. (Of course, there are differences in nuance among these forms, but they all "explain" what came before. Note, too, that all *da*'s can be interchanged with *desu* or *de aru*—or even dropped—depending on style.) Let's start with an old standby: *Kore wa pen desu* / "And this: it's a pen." We have to get this basic building block straight before we start wrapping whole little sentences like this around bigger ones. Be sure to read "*Wa* and *Ga*" if you don't know why the translation isn't simply "This is a pen."

In *Kore wa pen desu*, the subject of *desu* is not *kore* but the zero pronoun that Japanese uses instead of "it." If we just want to say "It's a pen," we drop *Kore wa* and get the complete sentence, *Pen desu*. "It's a dog" = *Inu desu*, "It's a desk" = *Tsukue desu*. In other words, in the basic *A wa B desu* / *A = B* construction, the *A wa* part is often going to disappear, so when you see a sentence in the form of "Noun *desu*" (or "Noun *da*" or "Noun *de aru*"), that noun is the *B* part of an *A wa B desu* construction.

When you find a sentence ending with a final verb or adjective + *kara da* ("It's because") construction, the *kara* is acting just like the *B* noun in an "(*A wa*) *B da*" sentence.¹ Instead of *Nemui kara hayaku neru* / "Since I'm sleepy I'm going to bed early," you could have: *Hayaku neru. Nemui kara (da)* / "I'm going to bed early. That's because I'm sleepy," or *Hayaku neru. Naze nara, nemui kara da* / "I'm going to bed early. Why? Because I'm sleepy" or any number of variations in which the explanation follows the main statement. The subject of the *da* here is the zero pronoun "that" or "it"; i.e., the fact that I'm going to bed early. Here is a straightforward example

from a story by Murakami Haruki about the mysterious disappearance of an elephant:

Sono shōgakusei-tachi ga zō no saigo no mōkugeki-shū de, sono go zō no sugata o me ni shita mono wa inai—to shinbun kiji wa katatte ita. Naze nara rokuji no sairen ga naru to, shūku-gakari wa zō no hirōba no mon o shimete, hitobito ga naka ni hairanai yō ni shite shimau kara da.

These pupils were the last eyewitnesses, and no one had seen the elephant after that, according to the article. **This was because** the keeper always closed the gate to the elephant enclosure when the six o'clock siren blew, making it impossible for people to enter.²

Notice how *naze nara* and *kara da* work together as a pair ("Why is this? It's because . . ."). I've conflated this common construction in the phrase "this was because." For more on this pair and pairs in general, see the chapter "Warning: This Language Works Backwards." Notice, too, that these explanatory expressions, being comments upon something said earlier, powerfully imply the presence of a human mind doing the commenting. The construction shows up in situations in which someone is evaluating or judging or preaching, and in positive statements there is a strong presumption that the speaker or writer has a better grasp of objective reality than the listener: "Look, it's this, it's this, it's this, this is what you should do, I'm telling you the truth."

Here are a couple of examples of *kara da* from essays by the novelist Mishima Yukio, who was always convinced of his rightness and who used the form so frequently that he finally lost his head. The first concerns his feelings at the time he wrote his first "novel" (the irony is his).

... sukoshi net-iri ni jibun no shinpen o aratte mitai ki ga suru. **Naze nara** kono "shōsetsu" to, sore kara sainen-go no saisho no sekai-ryokō to de, watashi no henteki jidai wa hobo owatta to kangaeeruru **kara de aru.**

I would like to examine my private life here in some detail. **That is because** my years of wandering would seem to have come pretty much to an end with this "novel" and with the world tour I made a few years later.

This next one doesn't use *naze nara* but sets up a *wa*-topic to be explained:

"Hanazakari no mori" shohan-bon no jobun nado o ima yonde mite iya na no wa, ... nan-wari ka no jibun ni, chiisa na chiisa na opochanisato no kage o hakken suru **kara de aru.**

That I feel sick now when I read such things as the preface to the first edition of [my] "Hanazakari no mori" . . . is because I discover in a certain part of myself the image of a petty opportunist.

One sentence in the old Hibbett and Itasaka textbook that always threw students for a loop was this one at the beginning of a paragraph written by Funahashi Seiichi:

jin no daibubun ga, Nihon-jin no seikatsu kara kanji o nakushite shimaō to iu kangae no hito bakari de atta kara da.

The majority of the committee members were made up

only of those who wanted to eliminate *kanji* from the life of the Japanese once and for all **kara da.**'

The problem was always what to do with that *kara da* hanging on the end. Well, if we see that *kara da* means "It's because," we have to start looking for the zero pronoun subject of the *da*. The antecedent of the "it," then, has to have been established somewhere before this sentence, but since this is the first sentence in the paragraph, that forces us into the previous paragraph. With a horrible wrenching in the gut, we come to realize that Funahashi Seiichi has purposely thrown a paragraph break in just where it can best disrupt the logical connection of his ideas. In the last sentence of the previous paragraph, he tells us that he was always viewed as something of a heretic on the committee, and he continues in the new paragraph, "That's because the majority of the committee members . . . etc."

This teaches us a couple of things. First, never trust Japanese paragraphing (or punctuation) to work as it does in English. Second, never ignore those *kara da*'s at the ends of sentences because these are the very things that are going to connect a sentence to what came before it. In fact, the *kara da* IS the sentence, and everything leading up to it is just a modifier. The main clause of *jin no daibubun ga, Nihon-jin no seikatsu kara kanji o nakushite shimaō to iu kangae no hito bakari de atta kara da* is nothing more nor less than *kara da*, which becomes, in English, "That is because," the main verb of the sentence being *da* and the subject of *da* being the zero pronoun pointing back to the previous sentence. Don't let this throw you, it's really very simple. When a long sentence ends with a "That's because," it means "That [i.e., what was just said in the previous sentence] is because of ev-

everything in this sentence that precedes the *kara da*."

All of these little explainers at the ends of sentences work this way. They are the main sentence, and everything else modifies them.

In one sense, *wake da* and *no da* are even easier to understand than *kara da* because *wake* and *no* are clearly nouns (as *kara* is not), and they are being modified by what precedes them just as surely as *fūsen* is modified by *akai* in the phrase *akai fūsen* / red balloon. *Akai fūsen da* / "It is a red balloon."

Unlike *no*, which is an element of grammatical structure (probably evolved from the noun *mono*, "thing"), *wake* is an independent noun, defined by Kenkyūsha with such terms as "meaning, sense; reason, cause, grounds." *Sore wa dō iu wake desu ka* / "What do you mean by that?" and *wake o hanasu* / "to tell the reason" = "to explain" are examples of this usage. Coming at the ends of sentences, both *wake da* and *no da* mean "the reason for that is" or, more simply, "it means" or "that means," or "it's that" or "it's not that" (in the sense of "It's not that I'm a big fan of Van Damme or anything; it's just that I like the music in his films") with the "it" or "that" being a zero pronoun pointing to what has been said in the sentence before or something in the objective situation observable by both speaker and listener. Kenkyūsha gives us some good examples of the negative usage:

Warui imi de itta no de wa nai / "It's not that I said it with a bad meaning" = "I meant no ill will."

Betsu-ni fukai imi ga atte sō itta wake de wa nai /

"It's not that I said so with a deep meaning" = "I didn't mean anything serious when I said so."

These, interestingly enough, are to be found under the

definition of *imi*, which means "meaning." Notice that these two sentences are basically saying the same thing, and that the *no* and *wake* are perfectly interchangeable. (It would be unnatural but understandable to replace either of them with the word *imi* itself, since both are commenting on the "meaning" or "significance" of what was, by implication, said before: "The meaning of what I just said is not that so-and-so but such-and-such.")

In speech, *no da* (contracted to *n da* or *n desu* or simply *no* in feminine speech) endings often refer not to anything that has been said but to the objective situation, there for both speaker and listener to observe. Anthony Alfonso illustrates this vividly with the following contrasting pair, both members of which could be translated "Is it interesting?" *Omoshiroi desu ka* is a question you would ask a person about a book he owns. *Omoshiroi n desu ka* is a question you would "ask of someone [reading a book] whose attention is visibly absorbed, or who has broken into a smile or a laugh."

N desu ka is a question—a complete, self-contained sentence implying "Does our shared experience mean . . . ?" In texts, the "shared experience" is the context that has been established to that point, usually in the preceding sentence. Everything preceding the *n* or *no* is a dependent clause modifying the noun *no*. It is a mistake to call *no da* an "extended predicate," as if it were an extension to the predicate, just a little more information about the subject with which the sentence started. By the time you get into the *no da*, the subject has changed. For example:

Sono toki mo, watashi wa tabun kokoro no naka de sono ki to hanashi o shite ita no darō to omou. / "I think I must have been conversing with the tree in my heart that time, too."

Much more literally: "That time, too, as for me, (I) probably in my heart was doing a conversation with that tree (it) probably is, (I) think." Whether or not you agree with me about zero pronouns, "I" is clearly the subject of *shite ita* ("I was doing a conversation") but that is where the predicate about "I" ends, and we enter a whole new sentence. "It is," following which the *wa*-topic re-emerges to comment, "(I) think."

The main verb of a sentence ending *no da* is *da*, and the subject of the *da* is not the subject of the clause that modifies *no*. The subject of *da* is the zero pronoun referring to the established context, whether the context is a statement or a real-world situation shared by speaker and listener, or an earlier statement shared by writer and reader.

This is true even of so brief an utterance as *Omoshiroi n desu ka* / "[Is it [your laughing, snorting, drooling] that it [the book] is interesting?" *Omoshiroi*, which modifies *n*, has its own subject, the zero pronoun standing for the book, while the subject of *desu* is all those unseemly actions noted in the brackets, equally unverbalized. (Lest there be some confusion, note that the *desu* in *Omoshiroi desu ka* is simply a polite lengthener after the adjective, while the one after the *n* is the copula, "Does A = B?") When we take away politeness, *Omoshiroi?* and *Omoshiroi ka* are as blunt as we can make the question *Omoshiroi desu ka*. *Omoshiroi no ka* and *Omoshiroi no?* are blunt or familiar versions of *Omoshiroi n desu ka*. Here, the copula is routinely dropped, but it shows up again in macho positive statements: *Omoshiroi n da.*)

I recently came across the following forbidding, *no da*-studded passage in a list of rules for Japanese high school students studying in America:

Moshi, mina-san ga Amerika de wa oi-ni asobimakutte yarō to iu kangae dake de kita no deshitara. Amerika ni ite wa narimasen. Amerika e wa Eigo no henkyō, Amerika-jin no kurashibun, Amerika to iu kuni no bunka o manabu tame ni kita no de atte, asobi ni kita no de wa arimasen kara.

If it [the meaning of your being here] is that you have come to America only to have a good time, then you should not be here. Because it's that you are here to study English and learn about American culture, it's not that you are here to play.

Interestingly, this was translated into Japanese from an English original that had no such overtly explanatory or didactic elements but which were felt to be necessary by the Japanese translator. The English original read simply: "If you have come here only to have a good time, then you should not be here. You are here to study English and learn about American culture, not to play." In the Japanese text, the authoritarian writer is there, judging, explaining, and wagging her (yes, "her"!) finger at the hapless high school kids who probably do want to study English but ought to be able to have a little fun, too.

One highly explanatory paragraph from Murakami Haruki's story about the disappearing elephant provides us with some fine examples of these usages (and a couple of *tame*'s for good measure; see "Taming *Tame*" for more). The passage is a little long, but it demonstrates the structures in a developing context:

Zō ga machi (tsumari boku no sunde iru machi da) ni hikitorareru koto ni natta no mo, sono rorei no tame datta. Machi no kōgai ni atta chiisa na dōbutsu-eri ga

keiei-nan o riyū ni heisa sareta toki, dōbutsu-tachi wa dōbutsu-torihiki chūkai-gyōsha no te o iōshite zenkoku no dōbutsu-en ni hikitorarete itta **no da** ga, sono zō dake wa toshi o torisugite iru tame ni, hikiuke-te o mitsukeru koto ga dekinakatta. Dono dōbutsu-en mo sude ni jūbun na dake no kazu no zō o shoyū shite ita shi, ima ni mo shinzō-hossa o okoshite shinde shi-maisō na yoboyobo no zō o hikitoru yō na monozuki de yoyū no aru dōbutsu-en nante hitotsu mo nakatta **no da**. Sonna **wake** de, sono zō wa nakama no dōbutsu-tachi ga minna ippiki-nokorazu sugata o keshite shimatta haikyo no gotoki dōbutsu-en ni, nani o suru to mo naku—to itte mo motomoto toku ni nanika o shite ita to iu **wake** de wa nai **no da** keredo—sankagetsu ka yonkagetsu no aida tatta hitori de inokorisuzukete ita.

The elephant's advanced age is what led to its being adopted by the town (the town I live in). *That is to say that*, when the little zoo in the suburbs suffered the closing of its doors due to financial problems, the animals were taken in by zoos throughout the country through the mediation of an animal dealer, but because that one elephant was too old, it was impossible to find anyone to take it in. *That is to say that* the zoos all had plenty of elephants, and there was not one single zoo that had the wherewithal to take in, on a whim, a feeble, old elephant that looked as if it might die of a heart attack at any moment. *For that reason*, the elephant stayed alone for nearly four months in the de-caying zoo from which all of its companions had without exception disappeared, with nothing to do—though saying this, *it is not that I mean that* it especially had anything to do before.*

This is a grammatical translation that not only forgoes any sense of style in the English but also raises the question of what all those explanations are doing there—some of them sounding rather forced. To be sure, a stylistically smoother English version is probably not going to leave much sign of the explanatory phraseology. For example:

The elephant's age is what led to its being adopted by our town. When financial problems caused the little zoo in the suburbs to close its doors, an animal dealer found places for the animals with zoos throughout the country, but no one wanted to take such an old elephant. The zoos all had plenty of elephants, apparently, and not one of them was willing to take in a feeble old thing that looked as if it might die of a heart attack at any moment. And so, after all of its companions had disappeared, the elephant stayed alone in the decaying zoo for nearly four months with nothing to do—not that it had anything to do before.

Granted, I may have smoothed over more than I had a right to, but what has happened to those overt verbalizations of explanation? Well, often, we just don't say such things in normal English. Who needs 'em? Remember that I said before that both *Omoshiroi desu ka* and *Omoshiroi n desu ka* could be translated, "Is it interesting?" Typically, in English, we don't distinguish verbally between the two situations, at least not by such a subtle shift in phraseology. *Omoshiroi n desu ka* might come out "Interesting, huh?" or "Hey, I see you like it" or "Jeez, Frank, you're making a mess of that shirt," but Japanese is routinely going to both ask for and offer explanations of contexts far more often than English does.

No da or *no de aru* shows up frequently in texts, especially expository texts in which the writer is trying to convince you he has a handle on the truth. Some writers will bombard you with them, telling you at the end of virtually every sentence, "The objectively true explanation of what I just said is . . ." *No da* is not functioning in such cases as some kind of amorphous emphatic additive but always with its explanatory function, whether there is really anything to explain or not. I.e., it is functioning as a rhetorical device. Thus, when a writer of fiction gives us a narrator who speaks as an essayist or anthologizer or clipper of newspaper columns, such as the narrator of Murakami's story of the vanishing elephant, we get a lot more *no da*'s than in a descriptive piece by the same author—or a descriptive passage in the same piece—in which, say, a little, green monster burrows its way to the surface of the heroine's garden. The *no da*'s are constant reminders of the presence of the narrator: observing, questioning, judging, and often subtly hinting to us that he or she knows more than we do. So watch it.