



<https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-40516>


EDN: LEMPJL

Research article / Научная статья

## The evolution of pragmatic marker *zenzen* in Japanese: From objectivity to intersubjectivity

Jiyeon PARK  

*Matsuyama University, Ehime, Japan*

 [j.park@g.matsuyamau.ac.jp](mailto:j.park@g.matsuyamau.ac.jp)

### Abstract

This paper investigates the semantic-pragmatic functions of the Japanese adverb *zenzen* (全然) ‘completely, entirely, not at all’ highlighting its semantic and functional development from its initial borrowing from the Chinese etymon to its contemporary use. The goal of the study is to investigate how *zenzen* is used in spoken discourse and what functions it has from the perspective of cooptation, subjectification, and intersubjectification. The paper traces the historical trajectory of *zenzen* from the early Meiji Period to the present, analyzing quantitative data from six corpora. A total of 2,154 examples were analysed. The results showed that in contemporary Japanese, *zenzen* serves to accentuate a state of perfection and reassurance, reflecting the speaker’s attitude toward the interlocutor. The paper argues that *zenzen* has evolved as a pragmatic marker, indicating the speaker’s epistemic stance and viewpoint. The paper attempts to explain how *zenzen* has transitioned from a lexical item with objective meanings to a pragmatic marker with (inter)subjective functions. The findings of the paper indicate that, *zenzen* functions as an adjectival noun combined with copula *-da/-desu* ‘to be’, creating a new unique construction [*zenzen-da/desu*]. These constructions play a role in expressing (inter)subjective meanings. The findings of the paper will prove useful in expanding our understanding of how diachronic language changes occur from the perspectives of cooptation, subjectification, and intersubjectification.

**Keywords:** *pragmatic marker, cooption, subjectification, intersubjectification, spoken discourse, Japanese*

### For citation:

Park, Jiyeon. 2024. The evolution of pragmatic marker *zenzen* in Japanese: From objectivity to intersubjectivity. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 28 (4). 865–890. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-40516>

© Jiyeon Park, 2024




This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

# Эволюция прагматического маркера *zenzen* в японском языке: от объективности к интерсубъективности

Джиён ПАРК  

Университет Мацуяма, Эхимэ, Япония

 j.park@g.matsuyama.ac.jp

## Аннотация

В данной статье исследуются семантико-прагматические функции японского наречия *zenzen* (全然) «полностью, целиком, совсем нет», прослеживается его семантическое и функциональное развитие от первоначального заимствования из китайского этимона до современного использования. Целью исследования является изучение того, как *zenzen* используется в устной речи, выявление его функций с точки зрения кооптации, субъективации и интерсубъективации. На основе количественного анализа данных из шести корпусов в статье прослеживается историческая траектория *zenzen*, начиная с раннего периода Мэйдзи и до наших дней. Всего было проанализировано 2154 употребления. Результаты показали, что в современном японском языке *zenzen* служит для подчеркивания совершенства и уверенности, что отражает отношение говорящего к собеседнику. В статье показано, что *zenzen* развился как прагматический маркер, указывающий на эпистемическую позицию и точку зрения говорящего. Делается попытка объяснить, как *zenzen* перешел из лексической единицы с объективными значениями в прагматический маркер с (меж)субъективными функциями. Результаты исследования показывают, что *zenzen* может функционировать как адъективное существительное в сочетании со связкой *-da/-desu* «быть», создавая новую уникальную конструкцию [*zenzen-da/desu*]. Эти конструкции играют определенную роль в выражении (меж)субъективных значений. Результаты исследования расширяют понимание того, как происходят диахронические изменения языка с точки зрения кооптации, субъективации и интерсубъективации.

**Ключевые слова:** прагматический маркер, кооптация, субъективация, интерсубъективация, устный дискурс, японский язык

## Для цитирования:

Park J. The evolution of pragmatic marker *zenzen* in Japanese: From objectivity to intersubjectivity. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*. 2024. Vol. 28. № 4. P. 865–890. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-40516>

## 1. Introduction

Within the Japanese language lexicon, a significant portion comprises Sino-Japanese words of Chinese origin, accounting for 40 to 50 percent (Mizutani et al. 2017: 60–61), making the research of these words, such as *zenzen* (全然), crucial for understanding diachronic language change and development. The Japanese adverb *zenzen* stands out, having gained widespread use in both written and spoken registers. *Zenzen*, literally ‘completely thus’, is used in affirmative and negative sentences, representing ‘completely, totally, entirely’ or ‘not at all’, respectively. The word was initially borrowed from the Chinese noun *quánrán* (全然), meaning ‘completely, totally, entirely’ in the early 1800s from *báihuà xiǎoshuō* ‘vernacular

fiction’ which was written in colloquial texts. Initially, the word *zenzen* was often accompanied by *furigana*<sup>1</sup>, indicating a reading of *mattaku*, meaning ‘completely’ (*Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* ‘Unabridged Japanese Dictionary’ 1988). *Zenzen* gained popularity in the early 1900s (Sano 2012) and has since undergone significant changes in its meaning and usage over time. In contemporary Japanese, *zenzen* is usually used with verbs or adjectives that include plain negative forms such as *-nai* ‘not’ (e.g., *Kare-wa zenzen benkyoo shi-nai* ‘He does not study at all’) or co-occur with words that connote negativity.

To date, extensive research has been conducted on the meaning of *zenzen*, particularly lexical cooccurrence and historical semantic changes in Japanese linguistics. However, there has been insufficient focus on works evaluating the role of the semantic-pragmatic functions of *zenzen*. Indeed, earlier works have tended to be based on written texts such as literary works, and far too little attention has been paid to the use of *zenzen* in conversational contexts. For instance, in contemporary Japanese, *zenzen* is frequently found in the form of holophrases and is used as a response in spoken discourse (e.g., A: *Kore-wa oishii?* ‘Is this delicious?’ B: *Zenzen* ‘[No], not at all’). Furthermore, since the 2000s, a unique construction combined with copula *-da/desu* ‘to be’ has emerged (e.g., A: *Renraku-ga okure-te gomen-nasai* ‘I am sorry for the delay in contacting you’ B: *Zenzen-desu* ‘It is totally fine to me. Do not concern about it’).

This paper aims to investigate the use of *zenzen* in spoken discourse, specifically through the lenses of cooptation, subjectification, and intersubjectification (Heine et al. 2021, Traugott 2003). It focuses on the pragmatic functions and semantic features of *zenzen*, utilizing a range of historical and contemporary corpora for analysis. This paper argues that *zenzen* has evolved from an objective lexical item to a pragmatic marker (PM, hereafter) to represent a state of perfection and reassurance, reflecting the speaker’s attitude toward the interlocutor.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 summarizes previous works on *zenzen*, Section 3 explains the methodology, and Section 4 reports the results from quantitative analysis based on corpora data. Section 5 addresses the historical changes of *zenzen* in its semantic and syntactic shifts. Section 6 discusses the semantic and pragmatic functions, focusing on the adjectival noun construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] in spoken discourse, and indicates the development of *zenzen* as a PM. Finally, Section 7 concludes the paper.

---

<sup>1</sup> Furigana (振り仮名) in Japanese, is a reading aid that helps to indicate the pronunciation of Chinese characters. It consists of smaller kana, either hiragana or katakana. In horizontal writing, furigana is typically placed above the kanji, while in vertical writing, it is placed to the right of the kanji.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Previous studies

As mentioned in Section 1, it is known that Japanese *zenzen* was initially borrowed from the Chinese noun *quánrán* (全然), meaning ‘completely, totally, entirely’ in the early 1800s from *báihuà xiǎoshuō* ‘vernacular fiction’ (*Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* ‘Unabridged Japanese Dictionary’ 1988). In the originated source, the Chinese *quánrán* mostly co-occurred with negative expressions<sup>2</sup>. When the word was first adopted into the Japanese language, it was often accompanied by furigana indicating readings such as *suppari* ‘completely’ (Hashimoto 2010), *marude* ‘entirely, wholly’, *mattaku* ‘completely, thoroughly, not at all’ and *sukkari* ‘completely’ (Niino 2011:117). Those readings continued through the early and middle Meiji Period<sup>3</sup> and were often found in some literary works. The reading of *zenzen* became more widespread starting in the late 1890s (*Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* ‘Unabridged Japanese Dictionary’ 1988). Initially, *zenzen* was used in sentences with no apparent restrictions on its collocation within sentences. Over time, however, the meaning of *zenzen* and its usage with collocational elements in a sentence has changed.

Numerous studies in Japanese linguistics have investigated the diachronic changes in the meaning of *zenzen*. Notably, Niino (2011) categorizes sentences containing *zenzen* into six types based on their collocational elements. These types are divided mainly into two groups: [*zenzen* + affirmative<sup>4</sup>] and [*zenzen* + negative] groups. The form [*zenzen* + verb/adjective-*nai* ‘not’] is categorized as the [*zenzen* + negative] group. Other forms are categorized as [*zenzen* + affirmative] groups and further subdivided into five groups: (i) Sentences including Sino-Japanese nouns combined with prefixes or suffixes indicating negativity, such as *mu-* ‘none’ or *fu-* ‘not’ (e.g., *Zenzen fu-sansei-de aru* ‘[It is] totally *disapproval*’, Niino 2011: 118); (ii) Sentences with words representing a contrast or difference between more than two things (e.g., *Zenzen kotonaru* ‘[It is] completely *different*’, Niino 2011: 119); (iii) Sentences with words indicating negative meanings (e.g., *Zenzen uchikowasu* ‘[It] totally *demolishes*’, Niino 2011: 120); (iv) Sentences with words indicating the speaker’s negative evaluation (e.g., *Watashi-ga zenzen yoochi-na atama-de*, I have a totally *childish* mind’, Niino 2011: 120), which should be distinct from (iii). Niino (2011: 121) notes that although the words classified under (iii) represent negative meanings, they do not involve the speaker’s evaluation and instead denote a continued negative situation; (v) Sentences including words without negative

<sup>2</sup> This tendency that co-occurs with negative expressions remains in contemporary Chinese (Fei 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The history of Japan, which is mentioned in the current paper as follows: Edo Period (1600 to 1868), Meiji Period (1868 to 1912), Taishō Period (1912 to 1926), Shōwa Period (1926 to 1989), Heisei Period (1989 to 2019), and Reiwa Period (2019 to the present).

<sup>4</sup> In Niino’s (2011) categorization, “affirmative” in the [*zenzen* + affirmative] group does not imply that the sentences are affirmative statements semantically; it refers to sentences that do not have plain negative forms syntactically.

meanings and represent more neutrality (e.g., *Zenzen dooitsu-de aru* ‘[It is] totally identical’, Niino 2011: 122).

Extensive research has been conducted on classifying the meanings of *zenzen* based on the words it is often collocated with. However, there is much less knowledge about how *zenzen* is used in the context rather than just within a single phrase or sentence. Furthermore, in spoken discourse, functioning as holophrases (i.e., *Zenzen*) and adjectival noun (i.e., *Zenzen-desu*), typically used as a response, are not fully understood<sup>5</sup>.

## 2.2. Some controversial issues on the use of *zenzen*

There have been several controversial arguments on the usage of *zenzen*. Firstly, it has been believed that the original meaning of *zenzen* is ‘not at all’, which means *zenzen* should be used to represent negative statements. Thus, its use of affirmative expressions has been criticized as erroneous. However, research in Japanese linguistics has rediscovered that affirmative and negative expressions coexisted when *zenzen* was initially borrowed in Japanese (Matsui 1977, Koike 2001, Sano 2012). This argument will also be proven true from my observation in Sections 4 and 5 of the current paper.

Secondly, using *zenzen* as an intensifier of the speaker’s stance (e.g., *Kore-wa zenzen oishii* ‘It is extremely delicious’) has been criticized as a vulgar expression (Endo 1994, Endo & Yabe 1995)<sup>6</sup>. This usage was already observed in the late 1940s in a spoken register. Niino (2011, 2020) points out that this issue might be due to a lack of detailed examination of everyday language. In addition, Niino (2011: 134) argues that almost all these kinds of usage could be interpreted as ‘completely, entirely’, and should not be treated as adverbs of degree.

This paper fundamentally aligns with Niino’s perspective, which argues that ‘completely, entirely’ is considered emphatic. In the current paper, however, its intensified meaning is not the same as the meaning of *zenzen* in affirmative sentences. Instead, the paper suggests that the meanings of ‘completely, entirely’ remain and add intensified meanings by the speaker’s stance toward an event or hearer. In other words, this paper argues that *zenzen* retains its meaning of ‘completely’ and has evolved to represent a (inter)subjective stance-marking and functions as a PM through internal language change. Furthermore, the current paper will focus on examples where *zenzen* is used as a phrasal (i.e., an adjectival noun) as a response in spoken discourse and argues that some of them play a role in indicating (inter)subjective functions.

<sup>5</sup> Sano (2012) observes using *zenzen* in a spoken register using Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese (CSJ) offering by NINJAL (<https://clrd.ninjal.ac.jp/csj/>). However, the corpus data is limited to speeches at conferences and mock lectures, resulting in a more monologue-style rather than dialogue-style conversation.

<sup>6</sup> According to a recently updated version (April 2024 updated) of dictionaries, this meaning (i.e., intensifier) is defined as “slang” (*Dejitaru Daijirin* ‘Digital Daijirin’, Tokyo: Shōgakukan).

### 2.3. Pragmatic marker

In this paper, the term “pragmatic marker (PM)” is used to describe the function of *zenzen*. There is little consensus regarding the definitional and terminology issues of this marker. So far, many scholars have proposed definitions and tried to explain their functions (Fraser 1990, 2009, Östman 1981, Redeker 1991, Schiffrin 1987, and so on). In their works, several terms have been used to indicate the marker. For example, the term pragmatic marker was used by Brinton (1996). The other well-known terms are discourse marker (DM) (Jucker & Ziv 1998, Schiffrin 1987), discourse particle (Aijmer 2002, Hansen 1998), and pragmatic particle (Östman 1995). Fraser (2009) claims that discourse markers are a sub-type of pragmatic markers and classified pragmatic markers into four types: basic pragmatic markers (BPMs, e.g., *I promise, Please, My complaint*, Fraser 2009: 295), commentary pragmatic markers (CPMs, e.g., *Fortunately, Bluntly speaking, Certainly, Reportedly, Sir*, Fraser 2009: 296), discourse markers (DMs, e.g., *On the contrary, Anyway, So*, Fraser 2009: 296), and discourse structure markers (DSMs, e.g., *In summary, Now*, Fraser 2009: 297).

In the current paper, however, the terms PM and DM are treated as independent and separate: PM has “expressive functions”, both subjective (e.g., expressing evaluation, emphasis, focusing on the speaker) and interpersonal (e.g., evoking the hearer’s attention, expressing common knowledge, denoting negative or positive politeness, Brinton 1996: 36-40), while DM is a typically signal a relation between the discourse segment which hosts them and the prior discourse segment, perhaps produced by another speaker (Fraser 2009: 296, Traugott 2018: 27, e.g., *Mark, a good guy. On the contrary, he’s a jerk*, Fraser 2009: 296).

The term PM is employed in the paper to help us understand the semantic-pragmatic function of *zenzen*. As it will be discussed in the paper, *zenzen* serves “expressive functions” but does not have a function of “signaling some relationship between clauses, utterances, units of talk, or discourse segments” (Heine et al. 2021: 9).

### 2.4. Subjectification and Intersubjectification

The present paper employs the concepts of subjectification and intersubjectification to help understand how *zenzen* has developed into a PM, particularly in the construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] in Sections 5 and 6. Subjectification is the process through which linguistic elements gradually come to encode the speaker’s internal states and viewpoints over time. This concept, originally introduced by Benveniste (1971), Lyons (1982), and Langacker (1990), underscores the role of linguistic elements in expressing the speaker’s attitudes and beliefs. Traugott (1989) defines subjectification as the process of evolving meanings to reflect the speaker’s subjective beliefs or attitudes toward what is being communicated.

Intersubjectification builds on the concept of subjectification by highlighting the speaker’s focus on the interlocutor’s perspectives and social interaction needs.

According to Traugott (2010), intersubjectification involves the evolution of functions to express the speaker's attention to the interlocutor's self in both epistemic and social senses. Intersubjectification develops from subjectification, using its mechanisms to meet the communicative needs of the interlocutor. Traugott (2010) emphasizes the inherent connection between intersubjectification and subjectification, indicating that the former cannot occur without some degree of the latter. In short, while subjectification focuses more on the speaker, intersubjectification shifts this focus to the interlocutor.

*Zenzen* describes a speaker's perspective toward the interlocutor, and further enhancing interaction with the interlocutor could be considered suggestive of cooptation (Heinei et al. 2022). In the next section, the concept of cooptation is introduced.

## 2.5. Cooptation

Cooptation is defined as a cognitive-communicative operation which enables speakersto switch their perspective from the level of reasoning anchored in the meaning of sentences to a meta-level of reasoning immediately anchored in the situation of discourse (Heinei et al. 2021: 67). Grammatical effects typically associated with cooptation listed as (1).

- (1) Common effects of cooptation (Heine et al. 2021: 68)
  - a Meaning: From meaning as part of the sentence to meaning outside the sentence.
  - b Function: From sentence-structuring function to metatextual function.
  - c Syntax: From syntactic constituent of the sentence to syntactically unattached status.
  - d Prosody: From prosodically integrated to unintegrated or less integrated status.
  - e Semantic-pragmatic scope: From more restricted to wider scope.
  - f Placement: From positionally constrained to less constrained placement.

In the original meanings, *zenzen* expresses the meanings 'completely, absolutely' or 'not at all', which can be classified as objective meanings. However, over time, *zenzen* further involves a speaker's positive attitude towards an interlocutor in discourse. In other words, *zenzen* uses a wider perspective by commenting on the hearer, and its function is determined by the situation of discourse. Moreover, in contemporary Japanese, *zenzen* functions as an adjectival noun combined with copula *-da/-desu* 'to be' and syntactically unattached status in a sentence, creating a new unique construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] in spoken discourse (we will discuss this construction in detail in Section 5 and 6).

## 3. Methodology

This paper uses qualitative and quantitative analyses to trace the development of *zenzen* using data extracted from six corpora, as listed in (2)<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, some

---

<sup>7</sup> Refer to the detailed information about each corpus in the References.

widely used Japanese dictionaries aid in this analysis. All corpora are available in the online search engine Chuunagon<sup>8</sup> and open to the public.

## (2) Corpora Sources

- a *The Corpus of Historical Japanese* (CHJ, from Nara to Taisho Period): The online search engine Chuunagon, contains approximately 17.6 million words.
- b *Showa Speech Corpus* (SSC, from 1950 to 1970): The online search engine Chuunagon, contains approximately 0.53 million words.
- c *Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese* (BCCWJ, 1971 to 2008): The online search engine Chuunagon, contains approximately 104.9 million words.
- d *Showa-Heisei Corpus of Written Japanese* (SHC, 1933 to 2013): The online search engine Chuunagon, contains approximately 33.40 million words.
- e *Nagoya University Conversation Corpus* (NUCC, 2001 to 2003): The online search engine Chuunagon, a total of 129 conversations, contains approximately 100 hours.
- f *Corpus of Everyday Japanese Conversation* (CEJC, 2016 to 2020): The online search engine Chuunagon, a total of 577 conversations, contains approximately 225 hours and 2.4 million words.

It has been demonstrated that PMs are usually used in spoken discourse (Östman 1982, Fraser 1990). For an expression to be considered a PM, markers have the interactional and argumentative function in the discourse (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg 2011: 225). As seen in (2), the current paper includes three conversation corpora to understand the semantic-pragmatic function of *zenzen* in spoken discourse. This extensive dataset allows for quantitative and qualitative analysis of *zenzen*'s development as a PM.

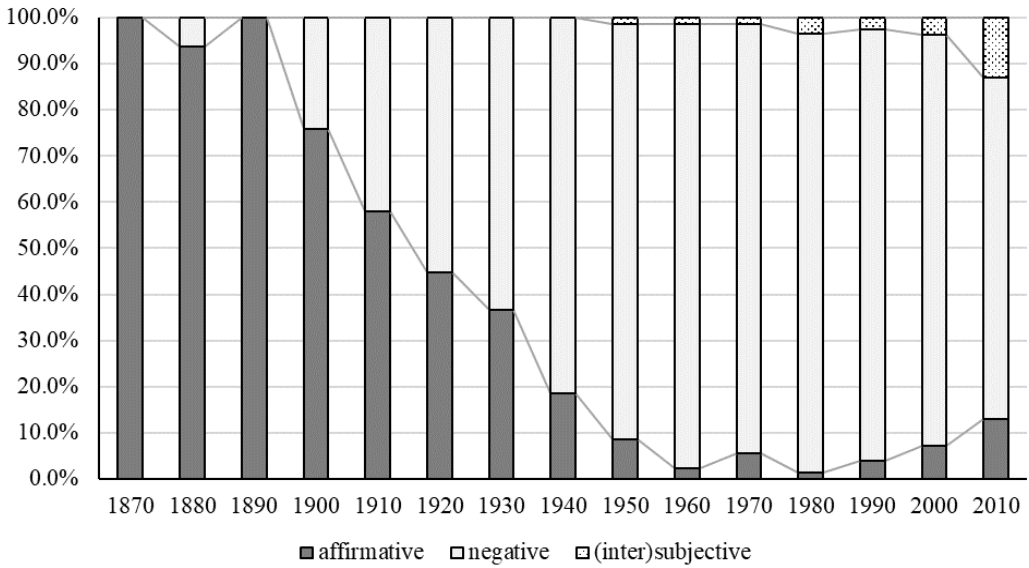
## 4. The corpora survey

Using six written and spoken corpora mentioned in Section 3, 2,154 example sentences were extracted, including *zenzen*. Figure 1 and Table 1 illustrate the progress of the development of *zenzen*. Figure 1 shows the changing trend every ten years from the 1870s to the present. In the Figure, I divided *zenzen*'s meanings into three groups: affirmative, negative, and (inter)subjective. The negative group contains three different sentence types: (i) Co-occurring with verbal phrases (e.g., *koto-ni-suru* 'make different') or verbs (e.g., *chigau* 'to differ') that describe differences between two more things; (ii) Co-occurring with Sino-Japanese nouns combined with prefixes or suffixes indicating negativity (e.g., *mu-imi* 'meaningless'); (iii) Co-occurring with verbs or adjectives that include plain negative forms such as *-nai* 'not' (e.g., *kawara-nai* 'no change'). The (inter)subjective group includes: (i) To intensify the speaker's perspective of something, i.e., subjectivity meaning; (ii) The speaker considers the addressee's

<sup>8</sup> Chunagon (version. 2.7.2, October 2022) is an open online reference tool for the Balanced Corpus of contemporary Written Japanese (BCCWJ), the Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese (CSJ), the Corpus of Historical Japanese (CHJ), and nine other corpora with spoken and written data. The tool is conducted by the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL, Tokyo) (<https://chunagon.ninjal.ac.jp/>).



stances, reflecting on how the conversation might affect the addressee’s feelings or attitudes, i.e., intersubjectivity meaning.



**Figure 1. The semantic development of *zenzen***

*Table 1. The sematic distribution of *zenzen**

	<b>Affirmative</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>(Inter)Subjective</b>
1870	100% (6/6)	0.0% (0/6)	0.0% (0/6)
1880	93.8% (15/16)	6.3% (1/16)	0.0% (0/16)
1890	100% (30/30)	0.0% (0/30)	0.0% (0/30)
1900	75.9% (85/117)	24.1% (32/117)	0.0% (0/117)
1910	58.0% (47/81)	42.0% (34/81)	0.0% (0/81)
1920	44.9% (35/78)	55.1% (43/78)	0.0% (0/78)
1930	36.6% (26/71)	63.4% (45/71)	0.0% (0/71)
1940	18.5% (27/146)	81.5% (119/146)	0.0% (0/146)
1950	8.5% (17/200)	90.0% (180/200)	1.5% (3/200)
1960	2.3% (2/87)	96.2% (5/87)	1.5% (0/87)
1970	5.6% (4/71)	93.0% (66/71)	1.4% (1/71)
1980	1.4% (2/144)	95.1% (137/144)	3/5% (5/144)
1990	3.9% (12/310)	93.5% (291/310)	2.6% (7/310)
2000	7.2% (25/347)	89.1% (309/347)	3.7% (13/347)
2010	13.1% (59/450)	74.0% (333/450)	12.9% (58/450)

Figure 1 shows how *zenzen* has evolved over time. This result aligns with those of previous studies reviewed in Section 2. This longitudinal and quantitative analysis of the current paper provides a comprehensive assessment of the usage of

*zenzen*, as one of the few attempts to investigate the development using large-scale written and spoken data (cf., Okazaki 2008).

Notably, subjective and intersubjective meanings are more frequently observed in spoken than written registers. For instance, when comparing data from spoken and written sources using corpora in the 2000s, there was a higher frequency of subjective and intersubjective meanings in spoken discourse. NUCC and CEJC ((2e) and (2f)) were used to analyze the spoken data, while BCCWJ (2c)) was used for analyzing the written data. The results show that in the spoken sources, subjective and intersubjective meanings accounted for 12.4% (65/524), whereas in the written sources, they were observed less frequently at 3.2% (8/247). This result corroborates the idea that PMs are specialized in their characteristic of *orality* (Brinton 1996: 33).

Figure 2 shows how the rate of *zenzen* accompanying negative forms has changed over time. The negative forms frequently followed by *zenzen* are *-nai* ‘not’, and *-zu* ‘without doing’, as mentioned in Section 2.

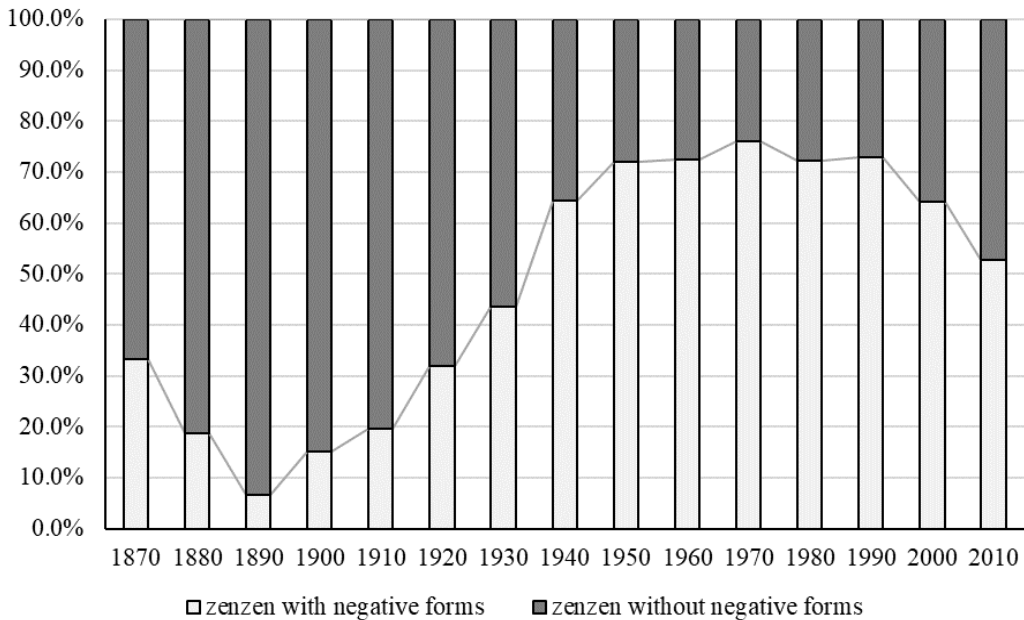


Figure 2. The rate of accompanying negative forms

In Figure 2, we can find a sharp increase in verbs and adjectives that include negative forms from the 1920s to a peak in the 1970s. The data in Figure 2 correlates with the shift in semantic development of the negative meaning of *zenzen* shown in Figure 1, supporting the idea that *zenzen* has experienced substantial semantic change.

## 5. Historical changes of *zenzen*

This section will provide an overview of the historical change in using *zenzen* from the Meiji Period to the present based on findings from earlier works and the data I collected from corpora.

### 5.1. From the Meiji to the early Shōwa Period (1868 to 1926)

It is known that *zenzen* was absorbed widely by the Japanese around the early 1900s (Niino 2011). In my data, even a few examples were observed, including *zenzen* in the 1870s to the 1880s, as in (3) to (4). In example (3), *zenzen* co-occurred with the verb describing negativity (i.e., *chigoo* ‘to differ: two or more things do not correspond or match, or the information is incorrect’), and in (4), it is used in the sentence describing naturalness (i.e., *nihon-no zokkoku-ni-shite* ‘be the vassal state of Japan’). *Zenzen*, in both, expresses ‘completely, totally, entirely’.

(3) ... 政をすると教を施すとは全然仕法の違ふた。

*sei-o suru-to kyoo-o hodokosu-to-wa zenzen shihoo-no*  
 politics-ACC do-and education-ACC perform-with-TOP completely way-GEN  
*chigoo-ta.*  
 differ-PST

“The way of doing politics is *completely* different from performing in education.”

(1874, *Hyakuichishinron*, CHJ, 60C 口語 1874\_06101, 30150)

(4) 沖縄の主権を確定し、沖縄は、全然日本の屬國にして、…

*Okinawa-no shuken-o kakutei-shi okinawa-wa zenzen nihon-no*  
 Okinawa-GEN sovereignty-ACC confirm-do Okinawa-TOP completely Japan-GEN  
*zokkoku-ni-shite, ...*  
 a.vassal.state-in-be

“Okinawa’s sovereignty is confirmed, and Okinawa [will] *completely* be the vassal state of Japan.”

(1888, *Kokuminnotomo*, CHJ, 60M 国民 1888\_14016, 2430)

In the initial stage, *zenzen* is used in sentences to indicate both affirmative and negative statements (Matsui 1977, Niino 2011, 2020). Notably, using affirmative statements was much more frequently found in my data from 1870 to 1910 in Figure 1. Syntactically, *zenzen* functions as an adverb and is usually positioned in the middle of the sentence.

From the early 1900s, there was a notable increase in the frequency of sentences conveying negative connotations, and this tendency has become increasingly prominent. It has become the main use of the word to date. Before the early 1900s, *zenzen* did not appear frequently combined with plain negative forms such as *-nai* ‘not’, *-zu* ‘without doing’, unlike its use in contemporary Japanese, as seen in Figure 2. Instead of combining plain negative forms, *zenzen* was much more used with general verbs or verbal phrases that convey negative meanings, such as *chigau* ‘to differ’, *koto-ni-suru* ‘make different’. My data also found that *zenzen* often co-occurred with Sino-Japanese nouns that combined with prefixes or suffixes

indicating negativity. These examples were first observed in the late 1890s, such as *mu-* ‘none’, *fu-* ‘not’, and *-botsu* ‘without’ (Wakatabe 1991). Example (5) is the earliest example in my data.

(5) 左様すると私は全然無関係だ。

*sayoo-suru-to watashi-wa zenzen mu-kankei-da.*  
 like.that-do-COND I-TOP not.at.all none-connection-COP  
 “If [it] likes to do that, I have no connection [with it] at all.”

(1909, *Taiyoo*, CHJ, 60M 太陽 1909\_02026, 179090)

In the early stages of *zenzen* adoption by Japanese, there seemed to be no strict restrictions on its meaning and collocational relationships. However, since the early 1900s, its meaning and collocational relationships have undergone drastic changes within the language (i.e., “internally motivated” change, Heine & Kuteva 2005).

## 5.2. From the Shōwa to the early Heisei Period (1927 to 1989)

Since the early 1900s, the number of examples combined with elements that indicate the negative meaning of *zenzen* has noticeably increased, as seen in Figures 1 and 2, and since the middle 1900s, the negative meaning overwhelmingly increased, taking over the mainstream in the use of *zenzen* (see also the survey by Sano 2012). In addition, collocation elements with *zenzen* also have changed: *zenzen* frequently collocates with verbs or adjectives, including plain negative forms such as *-nai* ‘not’, as in (6) and (7).

(6) あなたと結婚する意志はもう全然ないんですから。

*anata-to kekkon-suru ishi-wa moo zenzen nai-n-desu-kara.*  
 you-with marriage-do intention-TOP anymore at.all NEG-NOM-COP.POL-as  
 “As I have no intention of marrying you anymore at all.”

(1933, *Daiichi no Shussan*, SHC, 70B 女の 1933\_10913, 2160)

(7) 勿論、政治的なことは全然關與しないといふ前提のもとに …

*muron seiji-teki-na koto-wa zenzen kanyo-shi-nai-toiu*  
 of.course politics-like-ADJ thing-TOP at.all involvement-do-NEG-QUOT  
*zentei-no-moto-ni ...*  
 precondition-GEN-basis-in

“Of course, on the precondition that [we] have no involvement in political matters at all.”

(1944, *Chuookoron*, SHC, 70M 中公 1941\_02011, 94390)

In my data, cases where *zenzen* collocates with negative words are particularly from the early 1950s to the late 1990s, occupying up to 90%, as seen in Figure 1. Furthermore, from around the 1940s, we can attest to examples that intensify the

speaker’s epistemic stance, as in (8)<sup>9</sup> and (9). In (8), the speaker discusses an art exhibition hosted by the organization and expresses an opinion that the exhibition was subpar. In this sentence, *zenzen* functions emphasize the speaker’s judgment that the exhibition was *absolutely* not good.

(8) 一水會の若い人は全然駄目だ。

*issuikai*<sup>10</sup>-no *wakai hito-wa zenzen dame-da.*

issuikai-GEN young people-TOP at.all no.good-COP

“Young people at Issuikai are no good *at all*.”

(1941, *Chuookoron*, SHC, 70M 中公 1941\_01032, 27990)

In (9), the speaker thinks and says that the hearer probably dislikes a war *absolutely*. In this sentence, *zenzen* functions to add force to the emotional state, indicating that he/she *absolutely* hates a war.

(9) 戦争なんか全然嫌だと思っしょう。

*sensoo nanka zenzen iya-da-to omou-deshoo.*

war things.like absolutely dislike-COP-QUOT think-MOD

“Do you think [you] *absolutely* dislike a war, [right]?”

(1952, *N-ke Zatsudan*, SSC, C52\_03\_CT, 23640)

The widespread use of *zenzen* combined with elements with negative meanings has led to the idea that using *zenzen* with positive or neutral meanings in a sentence is grammatically incorrect. As mentioned in Section 2.2, this idea is still partially accepted in contemporary Japanese.

In this stage, the use of *zenzen* underwent a significant change, shifting towards a more negative connotation. Additionally, examples that included morphological elements (e.g., *-nai* ‘not’) to express negativity became prevalent. Moreover, since around the 1940s, it has appeared that *zenzen* emphasized the speaker’s stance at events. However, it is important to note that the meaning of ‘completely, entirely, totally’ has not disappeared; instead, in addition to these meanings, it has acquired a meaning of the subjective stance of a speaker<sup>11</sup>.

### 5.3. From the Heisei Period to the present (1990 to the present)

Although the change was slight, negative expressions with *zenzen* began to decrease gradually, and examples of combining with affirmative ones increased, as seen in Figure 1. However, it should be noted that they are not the same as the

<sup>9</sup> The word *dame* does not always convey the speaker’s negative stance; the word has various meanings, such as ‘useless’, ‘cannot’, and ‘must not’ (e.g., *Kore-ni sawat-tara dame-desu* ‘You should not touch this’).

<sup>10</sup> It is the name of a Japanese art organization founded in 1936.

<sup>11</sup> Niino (1997: 278) points out that the meaning of *zenzen* has not changed when used in both affirmative and negative sentences. It essentially means ‘completely, entirely, totally’. However, using *zenzen* in a sentence affirms something at 100%, not just 50% or 60%. This unique usage of *zenzen* has led to an emphasis on the meaning of the words and phrases modified by it. Consequently, some *zenzen* in sentences could be interpreted as meaning ‘very, extremely’.

examples we have looked at in 5.1. The examples seen in the very early stage had more objective meaning; however, in many of the examples found in this Period, *zenzen* functions as an intensifier of the speaker’s subjective stance and expressing ‘completely, entirely, totally’ in spoken discourse.

In the following example (10), the speaker talks about the plant he bought at a store, which looks better than the one he did not buy. In (10), *zenzen* intensifies the niceness of the appearance.

- (10) こっちのほうが全然見栄えがいいやと思って。  
*kotchi-no hoo-ga zenzen mibae-ga ii-ya-to omot-te.*  
 this-GEN one-NOM absolutely look-NOM nice-SFP-QUOT think-CVB  
 “I thought this one looks *absolutely* nicer.”  
 (2016, *Zatsudan*, CEJC, T007\_005a, 31580)

Morphosyntactically, *zenzen* is typically positioned in the medial of the sentence and modifies the following verbs or adjectives, as we have seen above. However, in spoken discourse, it has also emerged that stand-alone forms like holophrases were used as a response, as in (11). This use of *zenzen* is considered syntactically unattached status, one of the common effects of cooption. In (11), speakers A and B talk about the progress of speaker B’s studies, and speaker B intensifies the lack of progress in studies. It uses an elliptic form (i.e., stand-alone form) without repeating the previous proposition, resulting in a compelling focus of negation (see also Lee 2018).

- (11) A: ちょっと読んでたんだよ。  
*chotto yon-de ta-n-da-yo.*  
 little read-CVB PST-NMZ-COP-SF  
 “[I] read the book a little.”  
 B: あ、そうなんだ。  
*a, soo-na-n-da.*  
 oh that-COP-NMZ-COP  
 “Oh, I see.”  
 A: うん。  
*un.*  
 yeah  
 “Yeah.”  
 B: はかどった？  
*hakadot-ta?*  
 make.a.progress-PST  
 “Did you make any progress on your studies?”  
 A: 全然。  
*zenzen.*  
 not.at.all  
 “[I could not make any progress in my studies] *at all*.”  
 (2001, NUCC, data003, 118160)

It is important to note that in this context, *zenzen* is used to respond in interactive conversation using stand-alone form, always to convey negativity. It is attributed to the fact that *zenzen* has predominantly been associated with negativity for nearly a century, except for the initial stage when it was borrowed from Chinese. Niino (2011: 154) examines the use of holophrases in *zenzen* and argues that the latter part of the negative expression can be dropped. Niino (2011) explains that *zenzen* is usually used with negative expressions, making it unnecessary to explicitly state the negative part in a sentence, with the other part of *zenzen* being omitted as a result (also see Koike 2001). Therefore, the latter part of the sentence might be redundant.

In spoken discourse, *zenzen* is often found at the end of the sentence, as in (12) to (13). Its position at the end of the sentence suggests that the word's (inter)subjectivity may be related to its position in the discourse context (Beeching & Detges 2014: 11).

The following example (12) is interesting, as we can see and identify that *zenzen* has different meanings and functions in the second and third sentences, respectively.

- (12) A: 言葉が知りたいってゆうことになったら、  
*kotoba-ga shiri-tai-tte yuu-koto-ninat-tara,*  
 language-NOM know-want-QUOT say-thing-become-COND  
 “If you want to know the language.”  
 あ、なんでもいいよ、全然。  
*a, nan-demo ii-yo, zenzen.*  
 INJ what-even fine-SFP totally  
 “Oh, anything is fine, *totally*.”  
 絶対これってゆうものは全然ないので。  
*zettai kore-tte yuu-mono-wa zenzen nai-node.*  
 absolutely this-QUOT say-thing-TOP not.at.all not-as  
 “As [there is] absolutely nothing like this *at all*.”  
 (2019, *Jugyoo and Resson*, CEJC, W003\_001, 31000)

In (12), in the case of the speaker speaking to the audience, the speaker is open to any choice, emphasizing flexibility or indifference. In the second sentence of (12), *zenzen* intensifies the speaker's subjective attitude. From the perspective of the interactional aspect, *zenzen* functions to acknowledge the addressee's potential concern, and the sentence-ending position of *zenzen* may strengthen the speaker's reassurance to the addressee that any option is entirely acceptable. On the other hand, in the third sentence, *zenzen* represents objective meaning rather than the speaker's epistemic stance that emphasizes that there are no such things as good questions *at all*.

In (13), speaker B discusses the name chosen by the hearer and describes it as outdated. The word *zenzen*, positioned at the end of the sentence, emphasizes the speaker's attitude that the name of the selection sounds extremely old-fashioned and undesirable. Therefore, the speaker is requesting the name change.

- (13) A: … セレクションみたいなやつ作って。  
*serekushon-mitai-na yatsu tsukut-te.*  
 selection-like.to-ADJ thing make-CVB  
 “[I] made things like as a selection.”
- B: うん。  
*un.*  
 ah  
 “Ah.”
- A: 駿介セレクション。  
*Sunsuke serekushon.*  
 PSN selection  
 “[The name of the selection is] *Sunsuke* selection.”
- B: や、それはださいじゃん、全然。  
*ya, sore-wa dasai-jan, zenzen.*  
 INJ that-TOP outdated-surely absolutely  
 “Oh, that is *absolutely* outdated.”  
 もう俺にはなんも関係ないぽい名前付けて。  
*moo ore-ni-wa nanmo kankei-nai poi namae-tsuke-te.*  
 anymore me-to-TOP anything relation-not ish name-make-CVB  
 “To make a name that does not seem to have anything to do with me anymore.”  
 (2018, *Shokuji and Kyuusoku*, CEJC, K011\_015, 196140)
- In the second utterance of speaker B, *zenzen* not only emphasizes the outdatedness of the name but also serves a function expected to convince the addressee to change it.
- Since the 2000s, it has been observed that in an adjectival noun combined with copula, the construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] emerges and functions as phrasal.
- (14) A: 見て、中が、全然まだ、中がちょっと。  
*mi-te, naka-ga, zenzen mada, naka-ga chotto.*  
 look-CVB inside-NOM not.at.all yet inside-NOM bit  
 “Look. Inside, [it is] still *not at all* [cooked] *at all*, [it is not cooked] a bit inside.”
- B: あ、あれ。  
*a, are.*  
 INJ oh  
 “Ah, oh.”
- A: 全然だよ。  
*zenzen-da-yo.*  
 not.at.all-COP-SFP  
 “[It is] *not* [cooked] *at all*.”
- B: うそ。  
*uso.*  
 joke  
 “[You must be] joking.”



A: ほら、全然だね。  
*hora, zenzen-da-ne.*  
 look not.at.all-COP-SFP  
 “Look. [It is] *not* [cooked] *at all*.”

B: じゃ、もっ回揚げるわ。  
*ja, mukkai ageru-wa.*  
 well again fry-SFP  
 “Well, I will fry it again.”

(2018, *Kaji Zatsudan*, CEJC, K013\_009, 86550)

In (14), speaker A comments that the inside of fried food is not cooked. In the following discourse, speaker A uttered twice the construction [*zenzen-da*] that contains a negative statement: ‘The food is not cooked at all’. On the other hand, in the first sentence of A, the part *zenzen mada* seems partially omitted in the latter part of the sentence, such as a verb (e.g., *deki-te i-nai* ‘not done’). Thus, this sentence should not be treated like speaker A’s second and third utterances: the fixed construction [*zenzen-da*], which functions as an independent sentence per se.

In addition, the construction [*zenzen-desu*], which conveys intersubjective meanings, is often found in spoken discourse, as shown in (15). Speaker A is a customer at speaker B’s shop and visits the shop on a holiday. Speaker A apologizes for visiting on a holiday. However, in the second utterance of speaker B, speaker B reassures speaker A that it is completely acceptable and attempts to alleviate the customer’s guilt and concern.

(15) A: 今日お休みですか。  
*kyoo oyasumi-desu-ka.*  
 today holiday-COP.POL-Q  
 “Is it a holiday today?”

B: 休みです。はい。  
*yasumi-desu. hai.*  
 holiday-COP.POL yes  
 “[Today is] a holiday. It is.”

A: すみませんね。そんな貴重なお休みに。  
*sumimasen-ne. sonna-kichoo-na oyasumi-ni.*  
 I.am.sorry-SFP such-precious-ADJ holiday-on  
 “I am sorry. [As visiting your shop] on [your] such precious holiday.”

B: あっ、いえ、全然です。  
*atsu, ie, zenzen-desu.*  
 INJ no perfectly-COP.POL  
 “Oh, no, [I am] *perfectly* (*fine*) [with it].”

(2017, *Yoodan and Zatsudan*, CEJC, T014\_012, 1110)

In speaker B’s second utterance, the construction [*zenzen-desu*] could be replaced with the expression *Daijoobu-desu* (fine-COP.POL), which means ‘It is okay’. Interestingly, since the 2000s, *zenzen* has often been used with *Daijoobu-desu* and functions as an intensifier in spoken language. In my corpora data, I found

six examples of **Zenzen daijobu-desu** ‘[It is] *perfectly* fine’. It is interesting to note that *zenzen* is used as an emphatic adverb, forming the construction itself.

To sum up, when *zenzen* was initially borrowed from the Chinese, it described the objective meaning of ‘completely, entirely, totally’ or ‘not at all’ and could occur within both affirmative and negative sentences. In my corpora survey, it was used much more often with affirmative sentences when it was first introduced in Japanese. Since the early 1900s, there has been a sharp increase in the use of the word *zenzen* in negative sentences to convey the meaning of ‘not at all’. Consequently, using *zenzen* to express negativity became standard in the 1900s. On the other hand, in spoken language, there has been a gradual increase in using *zenzen* within affirmative sentences since the middle of the 1900s, and a few of them represent the speaker’s subjective meanings. From the 2000s onwards, significant changes have been observed in the morphosyntactic and semantic use of *zenzen*, particularly in spoken discourse. *Zenzen* represents subjective meanings to intensify the speaker’s attitude and viewpoint. All these expressions have coexisted in contemporary Japanese.

In Section 6, we will discuss the morphosyntactic and semantic-pragmatic change, focusing on the construction [*zenzen-da/desu*].

## 6. Discussion

In this section, we will discuss how the PM function of *zenzen* emerged from the perspective of cooption (Kaltenböck, Heine & Kuteva 2011, Heine et al. 2021), subjectification (Lyons 1982, Traugott & Dasher 2001, Traugott 2010), and intersubjectification (Traugott 2003) focusing on the construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] and its morphosyntactic and semantic-pragmatic change.

In the investigation into the common effects of cooption, as seen in Section 2.5., *zenzen* has undergone cooption progress in its semantic-pragmatic manipulation and syntactic features. In contemporary Japanese, *zenzen* typically functions as an adverbial, often standing alone (i.e., as a holophrase), especially as a response to the hearer in spoken discourse, as shown in (16). Example (16) below is a repetition of example (11) above. In (16), speaker A asked about the progress of speaker B’s studies. Speaker B commented that he has not made remarkable progress *at all*.

- (16) A: ちょっと読んでたんだよ。  
*chotto yon-de ta-n-da-yo.*  
 little read-CVB PST-NMZ-COP-SF  
 “[I] read the book a little.”  
 B: あ、そうなんだ。  
*a, soo-na-n-da.*  
 oh that-COP-NMZ-COP  
 “Oh, I see.”

A: うん。

*un.*

yeah

“Yeah.”

B: はかどった？

*hakadot-ta?*

make.a.progress-PST

“Did you make any progress on your studies?”

A: 全然。

*zenzen.*

not.at.all

“[I could not make any progress in my studies] *at all.*”

(2001, NUCC, data003, 118160)

This use of *zenzen* is syntactically unattached, which is one of the common effects of cooptation. Interestingly, *zenzen* stands alone as a response in interactive conversation, and it is always used to express negativity. This use of *zenzen* has often been founded in spoken discourse since the late 1990s. A possible explanation for this could be linked to the economy principle of language. As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, *zenzen* has remained predominantly associated with negativity for nearly a century except for its initial stage when borrowed from Chinese, fostering a strong collocational relationship between *zenzen* and negative meanings (Niino 2011). In a longitudinal study of early Modern English texts, Vicentini (2003: 55) concludes that due to the human tendency to reduce physical and mental efforts, the economy principle has maintained a balance between characteristics that ensure efficient and direct communication on the one hand and the natural need for least effort on the other. This finding could help us understand those examples of *zenzen* (16).

On the other hand, since the 2010s<sup>12</sup>, a new unique construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] emerged and functioned as a phrasal (i.e., an adjectival noun), a fixed expression representing the subjective stance and intersubjective markings well. This shift from adverbial modifying verbs or adjectives to an adjectival noun involved syntactic and functional reanalysis. It was found that largely three meanings have the construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] in my data: (i) Negation ((17)); (ii) Completeness or perfection ((18)); and (iii) Affirmation and reassurance to address ((19)). The first and second ones express subjectivity, while the third one expresses intersubjectivity. It is worth noting that although the three meanings demonstrate different functions regarding (inter)subjectivity, they all share a common semantic feature of denying the contextual background proposition (Arimitsu 2008).

<sup>12</sup> To add reliability, I searched blog postings through a major online search engine (<https://www.yahoo.co.jp/>, accessed 7 July 2024); this usage has more frequently appeared since 2020.

In (17), speaker B explains how it takes time to reach the destination (i.e., Hakata), emphasizes the distance to the destination as undemanding, and denies any difficulties in his/her journey.

- (17) A: 博多行きてあんの。  
*hakata yuki-tte a-n-no.*  
 hakata go-QUOT exist-NMZ-Q  
 “Is there [a train] going to Hakata?”
- B: ある。  
*aru.*  
 exist.NPST  
 “There is.”
- A: あ、そう。  
*a, sou.*  
 INJ I.see  
 “Oh, I see.”
- B: うん。四時間。  
*un, yo-jikan.*  
 yes four-hour  
 “Yes, it takes four hours.”
- A: え、大したことないじゃん。  
*e, taishita-koto nai-jan.*  
 INJ big.deal NEG-isn’t.it  
 “Oh, it is not a big deal. Isn’t it?”
- B: うん、大したことないよ。全然大したことない。  
*un, taishita-koto nai-yo. zenzen taishita-koto nai.*  
 yes big.deal NEG-SFP not.at.all big.deal NEG  
 “Yes, it is not a big deal. it is not a big deal at all.”
- ...
- 四時間、四時間半か、四時間。全然だ。  
*yo-jikan, yo-jikan-han-ka, yo-jikan. zenzen-da.*  
 four-hour four-hour-half-Q four-hour not.at.all-COP  
 “[It takes] four hours, four hours and a half, four hours.  
 [It is not a big deal] *at all*.”

(2016, *Shokuji*, CEJC, T014\_001b, 12470)

In (17), speaker B uses *zenzen* twice in its third utterance, in the first and final sentences. Both instances of *zenzen* convey negative meanings. However, these two uses differ syntactically: the first is used with a plain negative form *-nai* ‘not’, which is the most widely used; the second is regarded as a newly emerged construction [*zenzen-da*]. The construction of that simpler structure can be fully carried out to express the same meaning the first complete sentence conveys, assisting the previous utterance and contextual background.

The construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] also emphatically represents a speaker’s belief in the completeness and perfection of a situation. In (18), speakers A and B

talk about a cold, and speaker B says if he/she catches a cold, he/she will only have a runny nose while his/her eyes are completely fine, and there will be no problem.

(18) A: だから鼻ってそうですね。風邪引いた時のその鼻水ぐらいで。  
*dakara hana-tte soo-desu-ne. kaze hii-ta toki-no sono*  
 so nose-QUOT that-COP.POL-SFP cold catch-PST when-GEN that  
*hanamizu gurai-de.*  
 snot just-COP  
 “So, the nose is like that. It is just that runny nose when you catch a cold.”

B: あっ、そのぐらいですね。はい。全然ですね、目は。  
*atsu, sono gurai-desu-ne. haai. zenzen-desu-ne, me-wa.*  
 INJ that just.like-COP.POL-SFP yes completely-COP.POL-SFP eye-TOP  
 “Yeah, [my nose is] just like that. Okay, my eye is *completely [fine].*”  
 (2017, *Shokuji & Tsukiai*, CEJC, T014\_012, 57110)

The construction [*zenzen-desu*] in (18) conveys the meaning of the safety and troubledness of his/her eye condition. This example is interpreted as speaker B expressing the speaker’s subjective belief and emphasizing what is being said.

Furthermore, the construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] indicates intersubjective function. In this usage, it was found that many constructions in my data include *-desu*<sup>13</sup>, which is a form to express more formality and politeness than a form *-da*. This intriguing finding may reflect the differences in characteristics between subjectification and intersubjectification. Subjectification occurs when meanings become more centered on the speaker, while intersubjectification occurs when meanings become more centered on the addressee (Traugott 2003). Thus, using a more polite form *-desu* might be appropriate to indicate intersubjective function.

In my data, intersubjectification is prominent in developing the interlocutor’s affirmations and reassurances. In (19), [*zenzen-desu*] indicates reassuring and mitigating concerns or apologies by the interlocutor.

(19) A: 一時間経った。  
*ichi-jikan tat-ta.*  
 one-hour pass-PST  
 “[It] passed one hour.”  
 B: いいえ、全然ですよ。全然なの。  
*ie, zenzen-desu-yo. zenzen-na-no.*  
 no absolutely-COP.POL-SFP absolutely-COP-SFP  
 “No, it is *absolutely [fine].* It is *absolutely [fine].*”  
 そんな気にせず普通に話してだいじょぶだから。  
*sonna ki-ni se-zu futsuuni hanashi-te daijoobu-da-kara.*  
 such concerned.about-NEG normally talk-CVB fine-COP-as  
 “Do not worry [about it]; [it is] as fine to talk normally.”

(2016, *Shigoto & Mi-no Mawari-no Yooji*, CEJC, T011\_007, 111180)

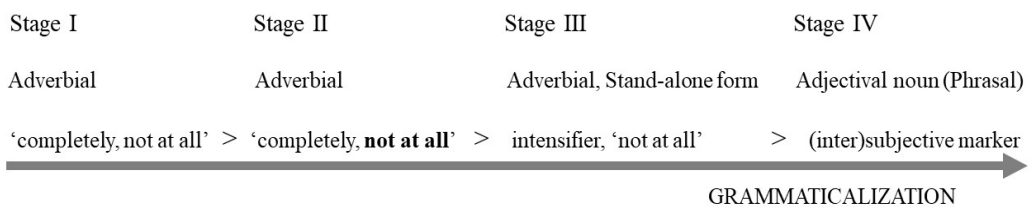
<sup>13</sup> The construction [*zenzen-da + yo/ne*] as in (14) would indicate intersubjective function as well. Speaker A uses this construction to point out that the food is not cooking well, implying an urging for speaker B to cook (i.e., to fry) the food again.

In the above (19), [*zenzen-desu*] conveys the meaning of reassuring the interlocutor, indicating no worries, and showcasing its use in providing positive affirmation. The example (19) supports evidence from previous findings: intersubjective stance is based on alignment with the interlocutor (Du Bois 2007, Kaltenböck et al. 2011).

The examples reported in the paper above indicate that the construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] deployed by speakers to capture what they characterize as their interlocutor stances or attitudes can be used in subjective and intersubjective functions. The contemporary use of the construction [*zenzen-da/desu*] in various contexts represents a significant departure from historical changes. This transformation can be attributed to a broader cooptation process (Heine et al. 2021), where the construction indicates negativity, completeness, and reassuring the interlocutor in spoken discourse.

Based on the grammatical effects by Heine et. al (2021), as seen in 2.5, we can conclude that the conditions of the parameters support the construction [*zenzen-da/desu*]. Examples (17) to (19) above show that the meaning of the construction is non-restrictive, varies with context has a wider scope (i.e., negativity, completeness, and offering reassurance), and depends on the contextual situation. This construction is favored in spoken discourse that involves high interactions and assumes the presence of interlocutors. Moreover, *zenzen* is initially used as an adverb and modifies verbs or adjectives, but it is found in a specific construction that combines with copula, leading to syntactical independence from the sentence.

The development from the Meiji Period to the present can be diagrammed in Figure 3. In Stage 1, when it was initially adopted in the Japanese language, there were no significant differences in the frequency between the meanings ‘completely’ and ‘not at all’, while in Stage 2, the meaning ‘not at all (the bold one)’ was much more predominant.



**Figure 3. The development of *zenzen***

It is important to note that the semantic-pragmatic functions accumulate and co-occur. Therefore, acquiring subjective and intersubjective functions does not entail relinquishing objective meanings; ‘completely, not at all’. It is a matter of embracing both, not exclusively one or the other.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper investigated the evolution of the Japanese PM *zenzen* (全然) from its historical origins to its contemporary usage, revealing its transition from an adverb with objective meanings to a PM with (inter)subjective functions in spoken discourse from the perspective of cooption and (inter)subjectification. The paper traced its development from the Meiji Period to the present and highlighted significant semantic-pragmatic functions and morphosyntactic shifts.

Taken together, the findings of the current paper add to the growing body of study on historical language change in terms of cooption, subjectification, and intersubjectification.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation for the assistance and support received throughout the completion of this paper. First of all, I would like to thank Seongha Rhee for allowing me to participate in the project. I want to express my heartfelt thanks to Wenjiang Yang and Yuko Higashiizumi for their constructive feedback, which strengthened the clarity and consistency of the paper.

## Abbreviations

ACC = accusative case; ADJ = adjectivizer; COND = conditional mood; COP = copula; CVB=converb; GEN = genitive case; INJ = interjection; MOD = modal; NEG = negation; NMZ = nominalizer; NOM = nominative case; NPST = non-past tense; PASS = passive voice; POL = polite; PSN = personal name; PST = past tense; Q = question particle; QUOT = quotative; SFP = sentence-final particle; TOP = topic marker

## References

- Aijmer, Karin. 2002. *English Discourse Particles: Evidence from a Corpus*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/scl.10>
- Aijmer, Karin & Anne-Marie Simon-Vandenberg. 2011. Pragmatic markers. In Jan Zienkowski, Jan-Ola Östman & Jef Verschueren (eds.), *Discursive pragmatics*, 223–247. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1075/hoph.8>
- Arimitsu, Nami. 2008. Nichi, Eigo-no taihi hyoogen-ni mirareru hi-meiji-teki hitei-sei-to ryoo•shitsu•taido-ni kansuru henka-no mekanizumu [Non-explicit negativity in Japanese-English contrastive expressions and mechanisms of change regarding quantity, quality, and attitude]. In Kazuhiro Komada & Tetsuharu Koyama (eds.), *Kotoba-to Ninchi-no Mekanizumu: Yamanashi, Masa-aki kyooju Kanreki Kinen Rombun-shuu [Linguistic and Cognitive Mechanism: Festschrift for Professor Yamanashi, Masa-aki on The Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday]*. 247–269. Tokyo: Shōgakukan.
- Beeching, Kate & Ulrich Detges. 2014. *Discourse Functions at the Left and Right Periphery: Crosslinguistic Investigations of Language Use and Language Change*. Vol. 12. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004274822>
- Benveniste, Emile. 1971. Subjectivity in language. *Problems in General Linguistics* 1. 223–230.

- Brinton, Laurel J. 1996. Attitudes toward increasing segmentalization: Complex and phrasal verbs in English. *Journal of English Linguistics* 24 (3). 186–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00754242960240030>
- Diewald, Gabriele. 2011. Pragmaticalization (defined) as grammaticalization of discourse functions. *Linguistics* 49 (2). 365–390. <https://doi.org/10.1515/LING.2011.011>
- Du Bois, John W. 2007. The stance triangle. In Robert Englebretson (ed.), *Stancetaking in discourse: Subjectivity, evaluation, interaction*, 139–182. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.164.07du>
- Endo, Ori. 1994. Shiyoo goshu-to, atarashii kotoba-no yoohoo [A use of word class and usage of new words]. *Kotoba* 15. 114–134.
- Endo, Ori & Hiroko Yabe. 1995. Hanashi kotoba-ni tokuchoo-teki-na go-no atarashii yoohoo-to sedai-sa: ‘Sugoi’, ‘toka’, ‘zenzen’, ‘kekko’ ni-tsuite [A new usage of words characteristic of spoken language and generational differences: ‘Sugoi’, ‘toka’, ‘zenzen’, ‘kekko’]. *Kotoba* 16. 114–127.
- Fei, Gao. 2012. *Nihongo-to Chuugokugo-no Hitei-to Koou-suru Fukushi-no Hikaku Koosatsu [A comparative study of negation and corresponded adverbs in Japanese and Chinese]*. Master Thesis. Aichi University of Education.
- Fraser, Bruce. 1990. An approach to discourse markers. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14 (3). 383–398. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(90\)90096-V](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(90)90096-V)
- Fraser, Bruce. 2009. An account of discourse markers. *International Review of Pragmatics* 1 (2). 293–320. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187730909X12538045489818>
- Hansen, Maj-Britt Mosegaard. 1998. *The Function of Discourse Particles: A Study with Special Reference to Spoken Standard French. Vol. 53*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.53>
- Heine, Bernd & Tania Kuteva. 2005. *Language Contact and Grammatical Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511614132>
- Heine, Bernd, Gunther Kaltenböck, Tania Kuteva & Haiping Long. 2021. Chapter 2. Concepts of analysis. *The Rise of Discourse Markers*. 56–90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108982856>
- Jucker, Andreas H. & Yael Ziv. 1998. *Discourse Markers: Descriptions and Theory*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.57>
- Kaltenböck, Gunther, Bernd Heine & Tania Kuteva. 2011. On thetical grammar. *Studies in Language. International Journal sponsored by the Foundation “Foundations of Language”* 35 (4). 852–897. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1075/sl.35.4.03kal>
- Koike, Seiji. 2001. “Zenzen” sai-sai kou [A re-note “zenzen”]. *Udai Kokugo Ronkyuu* 12. 1–11.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 1990. Subjectification. *Cognitive Linguistics* 1 (1). 5–38. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cogl.1990.1.1.5>
- Lyons, John. 1982. Deixis and subjectivity: Loquor, ergo sum? In Robert J. Jarvella & Wolfgang Klein (eds.), *Speech, place, and action: Studies in deixis and related topics*. New York: Wiley.
- Matsui, Shigekazu. 1977. Kindai koogo-bun-ni okeru teido fukushi-no shoochoo: Teido-no hadashisa-o arawasu baai [The rise and fall of adverbs of degree in Modern colloquial texts: The case of degree of extremeness]. *Kokugo-gaku to Kokugo-shi: Matsumura Akira Kyooju Kanreki Kinen [Japanese Linguistics and History of the Japanese Language in Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of Professor Akira Matsumura]*. 737–758. Tokyo: Meiji Shoten.
- Mizutani, Shizuo, Toshio Ishiwata & Tastuo Miyajima. 2017. Chapter 2. Go-no ryoo-teki-na koozoo [The quantitative structure of words]. *Gendai Zasshi Kyujusshu-no Yoogo Yooji*,



- Dai Sambun Satsu: Bunseki [Vocabulary and Chinese Characters in Ninety Magazines of Today, Vol. III: Analysis of The Results]*. Tokyo: Shueishobo Co., Ltd.
- Niino, Naoya. 2011. Chapter 2. “Zenzen” + *kotei-o meguru kenkyuu* [A study of “zenzen” + affirmative], *Gendai Nihongo-ni okeru Shinkoo-chuu-no Henka-no Kenkyuu: Goyoo, Kizukanai Henka-o Chuushin-ni [A Study of Ongoing Changes in Modern Japanese: Focusing on Misuse and Unnoticed Changes]*. Tokyo: Hituzi Shoboo.
- Niino, Naoya. 2020. *Kingendai Nihongo-no Goyoo-to Gengo Kihan Ishiki-no Kenkyuu [A Study of Misuse and Norm Consciousness in Modern Japanese]*. Tokyo: Hituzi Shoboo.
- Okazaki, Koichi. 2008. “Zenzen” kou [A note “zenzen”]. *Shinwa Kokubun* 43. 1–21.
- Östman, Jan-Ola. 1981. A functional approach to English tags. *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 13. 3–16.
- Östman, Jan-Ola. 1995. Pragmatic particles twenty years after. *Anglicana Turkuensia* 14. 95–108.
- Redeker, Gisela. 1991. Linguistic markers of discourse structure. *Linguistics* 29. 1139–1172. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling.1991.29.6.1139>
- Sano, Shin-ichiro. 2012. Nihongo hanashi kotoba koopaasu-o mochiita zenzen-no henka-no shoosai-ka [Anatomy of the change of zenzen using the corpus of spontaneous Japanese]. *Dai Ik-kai Koopaasu Nihongo-gaku Waakushoppu Yokooshuu*. 32–42.
- Schiffrin, Deborah. 1987. *Discourse Markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511611841>
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs. 1989. On the rise of epistemic meanings in English: An example of subjectification in semantic change. *Language* 65 (1). 31–55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/414841>
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs. 2003. From subjectification to intersubjectification. In Raymond Hickey (ed.), *Motives for language change*, 124–139. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486937.009>
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs. 2010. (Inter)subjectivity and (inter)subjectification: A reassessment. In Kristin Davidse, Lieven Vandelanotte, Hubert Cuyckens (eds.), *Subjectification, intersubjectification and grammaticalization*, 29–71. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110226102.1.29>
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs. 2018. Modeling language change with constructional networks. In Bordería, Salvador Pons & Óscar Loureda Lamas (eds.), *Beyond grammaticalization and discourse markers*, 17–50. Leiden: Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004375420\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004375420_003)
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs & Richard B. Dasher. 2001. *Regularity in Semantic Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486500>
- Vicentini, Alessandra. 2003. The economy principle in language. *Notes and Observations from Early Modern English Grammars. Mots, Palabras, Words* 3. 37–57.
- Wakatabe, Akira. 1991. “Zenzen” no goshi-teki kenkyuu: Meiji kara gendai made [A study of the evolution of the usage “zenzen”: From Meiji to Modern Period]. *Kaishaku* 37 (11). 24–29.

### Corpora

- NINJAL (2024). *The Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese* (BCCWJ). <https://clrd.ninjal.ac.jp/bccwj/index.html> (accessed 22 August 2024).
- NINJAL (2024). *Corpus of Everyday Japanese Conversation* (CEJC). <https://www2.ninjal.ac.jp/conversation/cejc.html> (accessed 22 August 2024).
- NINJAL (2024). *Showa Speech Corpus* (SSC). <https://www2.ninjal.ac.jp/conversation/showaCorpus/> (accessed 22 August 2024).
- NINJAL (2024). *Nagoya University Conversation Corpus* (NUCC). <https://mmsrv.ninjal.ac.jp/nucc/> (accessed 22 August 2024).

NINJAL (2024). *The Corpus of Historical Japanese* (CHJ). <https://clrd.ninjal.ac.jp/chj/> (accessed 22 August 2024).

NINJAL (2024). *Showa-Heisei Corpus of written Japanese* (SHC). <https://clrd.ninjal.ac.jp/shc/> (accessed 22 August 2024).

### Dictionaries

*Dejitaru Daijirin* [Digital Daijirin]. Tokyo: Shōgakukan.

*Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* [Unabridged Japanese Dictionary]. 1988. Tokyo: Shōgakukan.

### Article history:

Received: 27 August 2024

Accepted: 25 October 2024

### Bionote:

**Jiyeon PARK** is a Lecturer of the Korean language at the Department of Humanities, Matsuyama University, Japan. She received her PhD in linguistics from Nagoya University, Aichi, Japan in 2019. Her main research interest is to investigate how Korean and Japanese ideophones are used in everyday language and which language factors make those to be used.

*e-mail*: [j.park@g.matsuyama-u.ac.jp](mailto:j.park@g.matsuyama-u.ac.jp)

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1267-0573>

### Сведения об авторе:

**Джиён ПАРК** – преподаватель корейского языка кафедры гуманитарных наук Университета Мацуяма, Япония. Она получила степень PhD по лингвистике в Университете Нагоя, Айти, Япония, в 2019 г. Ее основной научный интерес – изучение языковых причин и особенностей употребления корейских и японских идеофонов в повседневном языке.

*e-mail*: [j.park@g.matsuyama-u.ac.jp](mailto:j.park@g.matsuyama-u.ac.jp)

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1267-0573>