ORIGINAL ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

ISSN: 2692-515-x, Impact Factor: 9.23

American Academic publishers, volume 6, issue 01,2026

Journal: https://www.academicpublishers.org/journals/index.php/ijai

SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC PROPERTIES OF THE LEXICAL ITEM YABAI AS AN ADJECTIVE

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Annotation

This article is devoted to the topic “Semantic and Pragmatic Characteristics of the Lexical Unit Yabai in the Adjective Category” and analyzes the functional and pragmatic features of the adjectival lexical unit yabai in Japanese as they emerge in contextual usage. Language is a living system in constant motion, and its lexical units continuously change under the influence of social needs, socio-cultural factors, and communicative environments. In particular, units that are actively used in spoken discourse can develop new semantic and pragmatic layers within a relatively short period of time. The adjective yabai (やばい), which is widely used in modern Japanese, represents one of such dynamically evolving lexical units. Although this word was originally used with a negative connotation, its semantic range has significantly expanded in contemporary usage.

Keywords

Japanese language, adjectives, yabai, semantics, communicative function, semantic ambiguity, linguistics, emotional evaluation, youth language, semantic extension

Introduction

According to lexical sources, the word yabai first appeared during the Edo period and was used to denote meanings such as “dangerous,” “bad condition,” or “unfavorable situation.” It was often employed to describe crimes, problems, or socially inappropriate circumstances. For a long time, especially in formal and literary discourse, yabai was regarded as a negatively evaluative adjective. This usage is also documented in dictionaries, where the word conveyed meanings such as “something to be avoided” or “hazardous” [1]. At this stage, yabai belonged exclusively to lexical items with negative semantic connotations.

In Japanese, yabai is classified as an i-adjective (い形容詞) and, grammatically, it conjugates in the same way as other i-adjectives. It can appear in present, past, negative, and intensified forms, for example:

やばいです (yabai desu) — present tense

やばかったです (yabakatta desu) — past tense

やばくないです (yabakunai desu) — negative form

Literature Review and Methodology

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In modern Japanese, particularly in spoken discourse, the meaning of yabai has expanded and begun to express positive evaluation as well. For instance, in expressions such as yabai oishii ("extremely delicious") and yabai kakkoii ("really cool"), the word functions as an intensifier [2]. This phenomenon is referred to in linguistics as semantic extension.

Furthermore, in certain contexts, yabai is used without conveying a clear evaluative meaning and instead functions as a lexical unit expressing emotional attitude alone. For example:

このケーキはやばいです。(Kono kēki wa yabai desu.)

This cake is amazing.

あの映画はやばいです。(Ano eiga wa yabai desu.)

That movie is impressive.

In these examples, yabai conveys meanings such as "very good" or "remarkable." In such cases, the word performs not only an adjectival function but also acts as an intensifier. In addition, yabai is sometimes used solely as an emotional reaction without a precise evaluative meaning, indicating that it is semantically vague yet carries a strong emotional load.

Like many lexical items with pragmatic meaning, the pragmatic characteristics of yabai lie in the fact that its specific interpretation depends directly on context, the relationship between interlocutors, and intonation. For learners of Japanese, understanding the meaning of yabai across different situations can be particularly challenging. Even when the exact semantic meaning of an utterance is unclear, it can often be inferred through facial expressions, tone of voice, and the communicative situation. For example, when pronounced with excitement, yabai conveys a positive meaning; when uttered in a low tone, it may express concern or negative evaluation; and when accompanied by laughter, it can indicate irony or humor. This adjectival lexical unit is also widely used among young people. In youth speech, yabai functions as a universal evaluative expression that saves time, livens up conversation, and allows emotions to be conveyed quickly and efficiently. As linguist David Crystal notes, such units enhance communicative convenience in contemporary spoken discourse [3].

Studies conducted by the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics and the Lago Language Institute have examined the usage characteristics of the lexical unit "yabai" (ヤバい). The findings indicate that its most frequently occurring forms account for 94% of overall usage.

According to the research results, the word "yabai" is most commonly used in the following grammatical functions:

- 49% as an adjective;
- 34% as a modifier of a noun;
- 11% as an adverb.

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If the multifunctional usage of "yabai" appears difficult to memorize, this should not be a cause for concern. The aforementioned studies demonstrate that the majority of its usage is confined to a limited set of familiar and recurring grammatical patterns[4].

The lexical unit "yabai" also appears in speech in various shortened and modified forms. The most widespread variants include:

やべー (yabē) — with the final e vowel lengthened;

やばっ (yaba) — with the final a sound shortened;

やべっ (yabe) — with the final e pronounced briefly.

It should be emphasized that the range of communicative situations in which the lexical unit "yabai" can be appropriately used is quite limited. It is primarily characteristic of informal communication among close acquaintances. In contexts that require formal speech, particularly those involving keigo (honorific language), the use of "yabai" is considered inappropriate. For example, in part-time workplaces, job interviews, business settings, as well as interactions with older individuals or those of higher social status, the use of "yabai" is generally discouraged.

Moreover, the use of "yabai" by a speaker may not always be clear or easily interpretable for the listener, as its meaning is highly context-dependent and can vary significantly.[5] In some cases, the speaker may receive negative evaluations such as "you are still speaking like a student," "you are not serious enough," or "you are being disrespectful." Consequently, such usage may lead to the formation of an unfavorable impression of the speaker [6].

Therefore, it is essential to approach speech with caution, consciously select lexical units that are appropriate to the communicative context, and use linguistic resources purposefully in each communicative situation.

In conclusion, the lexical unit "yabai" is one of the most dynamic adjectival items in the Japanese language. Its expansion from an originally negative meaning to positive and emotionally neutral meanings represents a vivid example of semantic development. From a pragmatic perspective, "yabai" is strongly dependent on speech context, intonation, and social relationships, and is primarily used in informal communication. Although the study of this lexical unit holds significant scholarly value for understanding lexical change in modern Japanese, its use in actual communication requires careful consideration.

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ISSN: 2692-515-x, Impact Factor: 9.23
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