# A Syntactical Analysis of the Potential Form (*Kanoukei*) in the Japanese Language

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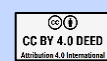
| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| <br> | This study presents a comprehensive syntactical analysis of the potential form (*Kanoukei*) in Japanese, examining its structural patterns and pedagogical implications. The research employed a qualitative, library-based methodology to systematically analyze conjugation rules and syntactic structures across different verb groups and sentence types. The findings reveal that *Kanoukei* follows predictable patterns: *godan doushi* undergoes phonological changes (*-u* to *-eru*), *ichidan doushi* adds *-rareru*, and *fukisoku doushi* demonstrates irregular but consistent forms. Crucially, the study identifies the obligatory particle shift from を (o) to が (ga) as a fundamental syntactical restructuring that signifies a cognitive shift from action-oriented to capability-focused expressions. The analysis supports Shibatani's (1990) theoretical framework regarding the historical evolution of *Kanoukei* from passive constructions, explaining its unique grammatical position that bridges voice modification and modality expression. The research demonstrates *Kanoukei*'s consistent implementation across affirmative, negative, and interrogative sentence structures, confirming its grammatical stability in Japanese syntax. From a pedagogical perspective, the study provides a structured framework for teaching *Kanoukei*, which is particularly beneficial for Indonesian learners who face challenges due to linguistic differences between Japanese and their native language. The findings provide educators with evidence-based strategies for transforming *Kanoukei* instruction from rote memorization to conceptual understanding, potentially reducing common errors and enhancing learning outcomes. This research makes a significant contribution to Japanese language pedagogy while establishing a replicable methodology for analyzing other complex grammatical structures. |
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## 1. Introduction

The Japanese language is renowned for its complex and nuanced grammatical structure, which often reflects deeper cultural values and modes of thinking. Among its many grammatical features, the verb conjugation system is particularly intricate, allowing speakers to express subtle differences in politeness, tense, aspect, and voice. A mastery of these conjugations is not merely an academic exercise but a fundamental requirement for achieving fluency and engaging in natural, context-appropriate communication (Gapur, 2024; Gapur et al., 2022; Gapur & Taulia, 2023; Pujiono et al.,

2022; Taulia & Gapur, 2022). This study focuses on one such critical grammatical construct: the potential form, also known as *Kanoukei* (可能形) (Nelson, 2011; Noorsanti, 2017).

The *Kanoukei* is a verb form primarily used to express ability, possibility, or permission to act (Makino & Tsutsui, 1989). It transforms a standard verb of action into a statement of potential, such as changing *hanasu* (to speak) to *hanaseru* (to be able to talk). This form is ubiquitous in daily communication, appearing in contexts ranging from stating one's skills to asking for consent. Its correct application is essential for conveying whether an action can be, could be, or is allowed to be performed, making it a cornerstone of functional Japanese.

Despite its foundational role, the *Kanoukei* presents significant syntactical challenges for learners, especially non-native speakers. The primary difficulty lies in its conjugation rules, which vary systematically across the three verb groups: *Godan-doushi* (Group I), *Ichidan-doushi* (Group II), and *Fukisoku-doushi* (irregular verbs) (Gapur & Mulyadi, 2018; Pujiono et al., 2023; Sutedi, 2011). Furthermore, a common syntactic pitfall involves the shift of the object marker from the particle を (o) to が (ga) in potential constructions—a rule frequently overlooked by beginners (Masayoshi Shibatani, 2018). These complexities often lead to errors that can hinder both comprehension and production.

The importance of mastering the *Kanoukei* extends beyond casual conversation into formal assessments and professional settings. It is a key component tested in standardized proficiency exams, such as the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), particularly at the intermediate N4 and N3 levels (Tomomatsu et al., 2014). A firm grasp of this form is therefore indispensable for learners aiming to validate their skills and for anyone seeking to engage with written Japanese materials, such as articles and literature, where expressions of possibility and capability are common.

While resources like Minna *no Nihongo* provide foundational knowledge, there is a scarcity of focused linguistic studies that systematically analyze the *Kanoukei* from a syntactical perspective, particularly for Indonesian learners. Many existing materials list the rules but offer limited insight into common error patterns and the structural logic behind the conjugations. This gap necessitates a dedicated inquiry that provides a clear and structured syntactical analysis of this form.

This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive syntactical analysis of the *Kanoukei*. The specific objectives are threefold: first, to systematically delineate the conjugation mechanisms for each verb group; second, to describe its application and structural changes across different sentence types (affirmative, negative, and interrogative); and third, to identify standard syntactical exceptions and frequent errors made by learners.

To achieve these objectives, this paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, a literature review will establish the theoretical foundation regarding Japanese verbs and their potential form. The methodology section will detail the descriptive, library-based approach used for data collection and analysis. The core findings will then present a detailed syntactical analysis, breaking down the conjugation patterns and sentence structures. The paper will conclude by synthesizing the insights and offering practical recommendations for both learners and educators.

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing a descriptive library research method. The primary approach was a systematic syntactical analysis of the

Japanese potential form (*Kanoukei*), focusing on its structural patterns and application in various sentence constructions. This methodological choice was deemed appropriate as it allows for an in-depth examination of grammatical rules and linguistic patterns without requiring empirical data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The research was conducted through a comprehensive document analysis of existing academic resources, textbooks, and digital learning platforms to build a coherent understanding of *Kanoukei* usage.

Data collection was carried out through an exhaustive review of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included authoritative Japanese language textbooks such as the Minna no Nihongo series (A Corporation, 2016; Gapur & Pujiono, 2018) and Shin Kanzen Master preparation materials (Tomomatsu et al., 2014). Secondary sources encompassed academic journals, linguistic studies, and reputable online Japanese learning platforms. The data collection process followed a systematic procedure: first, identifying relevant materials; second, extracting information about *Kanoukei* conjugation rules; third, collecting example sentences demonstrating proper usage; and fourth, documenting common errors and exceptions noted in the literature.

The collected data were analyzed using content analysis and comparative analysis techniques. The analytical process involved three main phases. First, conjugation patterns were categorized according to verb groups (*godan, ichidan*, and *fukisoku doushi*) and systematically compared across different sources to identify consistent rules (Makino & Tsutsui, 1989). Second, syntactic structures were examined by analyzing sentence examples to understand how *Kanoukei* affects particle usage, particularly the shift from を (o) to が (ga) as object markers. Third, exception patterns and common learner errors were identified through cross-referencing multiple sources to distinguish between standard rules and special cases.

To ensure the validity and reliability of findings, several verification measures were implemented. Triangulation of sources was employed by comparing information from multiple authoritative references, including Makino and Tsutsui's (1986) grammatical dictionary, Shibatani's (1990) linguistic analysis, and Sutedi's (2011) foundation in Japanese linguistics. This cross-verification helped minimize individual source bias and enhanced the credibility of the study. Additionally, example sentences were carefully selected from established textbooks and verified through multiple sources to ensure grammatical accuracy and contextual appropriateness.

This research adhered to academic integrity standards by properly citing all sources and acknowledging original authors. While the library research method provided comprehensive coverage of existing knowledge, it recognizes certain limitations. The study relied exclusively on documented materials rather than primary data from Japanese learners, which might limit insights into contemporary learning challenges. Future research could complement these findings with empirical studies involving Indonesian learners of Japanese to examine practical difficulties in acquiring the *Kanoukei* form.

## 3. Results & Discussion
### 3.1. Syntactical Structure and Implementation of Kanoukei in Japanese Sentences

The analysis reveals systematic conjugation patterns in the formation of *Kanoukei* across different verb groups. For *godan doushi* (Group I verbs), the phonological transformation involves changing the final -u sound to *-eru*, while *ichidan doushi* (Group II verbs) follows a pattern of adding *-rareru* after removing the final *-ru*. The *fukisoku*

*doushi* (irregular verbs) demonstrate unique memorization-based patterns. These consistent conjugation rules provide a predictable framework for learners to master the potential form, as systematically shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Kanoukei* Conjugation Patterns by Verb Group

| Verb Group | Dictionary Form | *Kanoukei* Form | English Meaning |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Godan Doushi* | 書く (*kaku*) | 書ける (*kakeru*) | can write |
| *Godan Doushi* | 飲む (*nomu*) | 飲める (*nomeru*) | can drink |
| *Ichidan Doushi* | 食べる (*taberu*) | 食べられる (*taberareru*) | can eat |
| *Ichidan Doushi* | 見る (*miru*) | 見られる (*mirareru*) | can see |
| *Fukisoku Doushi* | する (*suru*) | できる (*dekiru*) | can do |
| *Fukisoku Doushi* | 来る (*kuru*) | 来られる (*korareru*) | can come |

A significant syntactical finding concerns the obligatory particle shift in *Kanoukei* constructions. The object marker particle を (o) consistently changes to が (ga) when using the potential form, indicating a fundamental syntactical rule that distinguishes potential constructions from ordinary sentences. This particle transformation reflects the grammatical emphasis shifting from the action itself to the capability of acting, as evidenced in the transformation from 本を読む (*hon o yomu* - read a book) to 本が読める (hon ga *yomeru* - can read a book) and from 日本語を話す (*nihongo* o *hanasu* - *speak Japanese*) to 日本語が話せる (*nihongo ga hanaseru* - can talk to Japanese).

The implementation of *Kanoukei* across various sentence types demonstrates consistent structural patterns. In affirmative sentences, the potential form maintains standard Japanese sentence structure while incorporating the conjugated verb and particle transformation. Negative sentences follow regular negation patterns applied to the *Kanoukei* base, and interrogative sentences utilize the standard question particle ka. The systematic application across different sentence types, as illustrated in Table 2, confirms the grammatical stability of *Kanoukei* constructions in Japanese syntax.

**Table 2.** *Kanoukei* Implementation in Different Sentence Types

| Sentence Type | Japanese Example | English Translation |
|---|---|---|
| Affirmative | 私は日本語が話せます。(*Watashi wa nihongo ga hanasemasu.*) | I can speak Japanese. |

| Sentence Type | Japanese Example | English Translation |
|---|---|---|
| Affirmative | 彼は車が運転できる。 (*Kare wa kuruma ga unten dekiru*.) | He can drive a car. |
| Negative | 私は漢字が書けません。 (*Watashi wa kanji ga kakemasen*.) | I cannot write kanji. |
| Negative | 彼は刺身が食べられない。 (*Kare wa sashimi ga taberarenai*.) | He cannot eat sashimi. |
| Interrogative | 日本語が話せますか。 (*Nihongo ga hanasemasu ka?*) | Can you speak Japanese? |
| Interrogative | この機械が使えますか。 (*Kono kikai ga tsukaemasu ka?*) | Can this machine be used? |

The comprehensive analysis of *Kanoukei* demonstrates its systematic nature in Japanese grammar, with predictable conjugation patterns, consistent particle usage, and stable implementation across various sentence structures. These findings provide valuable insights for Japanese language pedagogy, particularly in developing effective teaching methodologies for the potential form. The clear patterns identified in this research provide learners with a structured approach to mastering this essential grammatical construction, while the systematic rules identified contribute to a better understanding of Japanese syntactical structures in general.

*3.2. Syntactical Implications of Kanoukei Construction*

The findings of this study provide substantial evidence in support of Shibatani's (1990) theoretical framework regarding the evolutionary development of the potential form from passive constructions. The structural parallels between passive and potential forms in Japanese, particularly in the conjugation patterns of *ichidan* verbs with the -*rareru* suffix, suggest a shared historical development that has significant implications for understanding the evolution of Japanese syntax. This diachronic perspective helps explain why the potential form carries subtle nuances of receptivity and possibility rather than pure active capability, reflecting its grammatical journey from passive to potential expressions in modern Japanese usage.

The obligatory particle shift from を (*o*) to が (*ga*) represents a fundamental syntactical restructuring that transcends mere grammatical convention. This transformation signifies a significant cognitive shift in sentence perspective, shifting the focus from the object of an action to the subject's inherent capability. In traditional Japanese sentence structure, the を particle marks the direct object receiving the action, creating a verb-centered construction. However, in *Kanoukei* constructions, the が particle establishes the object as the focus of capability, creating what linguistically functions as a subject-complement relationship where the grammatical object becomes the subject of potentiality. This syntactical reorganization fundamentally alters the conceptualization of relationships between actors and actions in Japanese.

The implications of this particle shift extend to theoretical linguistics, particularly in understanding the interface between syntax and semantics in Japanese. The *Kanoukei* construction challenges straightforward categorization within traditional grammatical frameworks, displaying characteristics of both voice modification and modal expression. While syntactically resembling a voice transformation similar to passive or causative forms, semantically it functions as a modality marker expressing ability and possibility. This dual nature suggests that *Kanoukei* occupies a unique position in Japanese grammar, serving as a syntactic bridge between voice and modality systems, thus contributing to our understanding of how grammatical categories can intersect and evolve in natural languages.

From a pedagogical perspective, these syntactical implications necessitate a reconceptualization of how *Kanoukei* is taught to Japanese language learners. Rather than presenting it as merely another verb conjugation, instructors should emphasize the fundamental perspective shift that occurs in *Kanoukei* constructions. Understanding the historical development from passive structures and the consequent particle transformation can help learners grasp the subtle semantic nuances that distinguish sentences like 本を読む (*hon o yomu*) from 本が読める (*hon ga yomeru*). This approach moves beyond rote memorization toward genuine syntactic comprehension, potentially reducing common errors in particle usage and enabling more natural language production among learners of Japanese as a foreign language.

### 3.3. Contribution to Japanese Language Pedagogy

The systematic analysis of *Kanoukei* presented in this study offers a revolutionary framework for Japanese language instruction, particularly for learners of Indonesian. The identified conjugation patterns provide a transparent and predictable structure that can significantly reduce the cognitive load traditionally associated with mastering the potential forms. For Indonesian learners, who come from a linguistic background with minimal verb conjugation, this structured approach bridges the grammatical gap between their native language and Japanese. By presenting *Kanoukei* as a series of consistent patterns rather than irregular exceptions, educators can transform what is often perceived as one of the most challenging aspects of Japanese grammar into a manageable and accessible learning unit. This research thus addresses a critical pedagogical need by offering a methodological approach specifically designed for speakers of isolating languages, such as Indonesian.

The comprehensive breakdown of verb group transformations serves as an invaluable resource for curriculum development and textbook organization. Current teaching materials often present *Kanoukei* as part of a broader grammatical landscape, but this research demonstrates the effectiveness of treating it as a dedicated learning module with its own internal logic and progression. The clear categorization of *godan*, *ichidan*, and *fukisoku doushi* transformations provides textbook authors with an evidence-based structure for sequencing content, moving from regular patterns to irregular exceptions. Furthermore, the identification of common error patterns, particularly the persistent misuse of particles, enables the creation of targeted exercises that address specific learning challenges faced by Indonesian students, thereby increasing instructional efficiency and learning outcomes.

This research makes a significant contribution to cross-linguistic pedagogy by highlighting the crucial role of particle transformation in *Kanoukei* mastery. The findings indicate that the shift from を (o) to が (ga) represents not merely a grammatical rule to be memorized, but a fundamental reconceptualization of sentence structure that

requires dedicated instructional attention. For Indonesian learners, whose native language uses different syntactic strategies to express ability and possibility, this aspect of *Kanoukei* presents a particular challenge. The study provides pedagogical tools to help learners internalize this syntactical shift through contrastive analysis and structured practice, ultimately leading to more natural and accurate language production.

Beyond immediate classroom applications, this research contributes to the broader field of Japanese language education by establishing a replicable methodology for analyzing other complex grammatical structures. The approach demonstrated here—combining systematic pattern identification with error analysis and pedagogical recommendations—can be applied to other challenging aspects of Japanese grammar, creating a more coherent and effective overall curriculum. Additionally, the focus on Indonesian learners addresses a significant gap in the literature, as most Japanese pedagogy research has historically focused on English-speaking or Chinese-speaking learners. This study thus not only improves *Kanoukei* instruction but also advances the development of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching methodologies for diverse learner populations worldwide.

## 4. Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the Japanese potential form (*Kanoukei*), revealing its systematic and predictable nature despite its apparent complexity. The research demonstrates that *Kanoukei* follows consistent conjugation patterns across all verb groups: *godan doushi* transforms through phonological changes (-*u* to -*eru*), *ichidan doushi* through suffixation (-*rareru*), and *fukisoku doushi* through memorization-based irregular forms. More significantly, the study identifies the obligatory particle shift from を (o) to が (ga) as a fundamental syntactical restructuring that represents a cognitive shift from action-oriented to capability-focused expressions.

The findings substantially support Shibatani's (1990) theoretical framework regarding the historical evolution of *Kanoukei* from passive constructions, explaining its unique position in Japanese grammar as bridging voice modification and modality expression. This dual nature accounts for the subtle semantic nuances that distinguish *Kanoukei* from other verb forms and clarifies why it presents particular challenges for learners. The systematic analysis of its implementation across affirmative, negative, and interrogative sentence types further confirms its grammatical stability and consistency in Japanese syntax.

From a pedagogical perspective, this research offers transformative insights for Japanese language instruction, particularly for Indonesian learners. The structured approach to teaching *Kanoukei* as a series of predictable patterns rather than irregular exceptions significantly reduces the cognitive load associated with mastering this grammatical form. The emphasis on understanding the historical development and syntactical implications of the particle shift provides learners with a conceptual framework that moves beyond rote memorization toward genuine syntactic comprehension.

This study not only advances our understanding of Japanese grammatical structures but also establishes a replicable methodology for analyzing other complex linguistic features. Future research should build upon these findings through empirical studies with Indonesian learners and extend the analytical approach to other challenging aspects of Japanese grammar. The insights gained from this investigation ultimately contribute to more effective, culturally responsive Japanese language pedagogy that addresses the specific needs of diverse learner populations worldwide.

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