

Playing with meaning: Pragmatic functions and semantic ambivalence of *gobi* in Japanese youth slang

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Abstract: The article examines the semantic ambivalence and pragmatic functions of the *gobi* postfix varieties in Japanese youth slang. Based on an analysis of informal online conversations, and spoken interactions in real-life situations, the study shows that the meaning of *gobi* is highly context-dependent, with positive or negative connotations shifting based on the speaker's intent, situational factors, and shared background knowledge. This flexibility allows *gobi* to play a dynamic role in shaping meaning, making them essential tools for pragmatic adaptability in youth communication. From the perspective of politeness theory, *gobi* serve dual roles. They contribute to positive politeness by fostering in-group identity and reducing social distance, while also acting as negative politeness mitigators. Ambiguous or emotionally exaggerated *gobi* soften potentially face-threatening acts, allowing speakers to manage delicate interactions more tactfully. This reflects the broader cultural norm of avoiding directness in Japanese communication to maintain social harmony. The dependence of *gobi* on context also leads to violations of Grice's Cooperative Principle, particularly the maxims of quantity and clarity. Rather than being accidental, these violations are strategic, supporting communicative subtlety and politeness. Additionally, *gobi* serve as markers of expressive speech acts, conveying emotional involvement and strengthening the speaker's connection with the audience. These functions align with both positive politeness strategies and expressive communication styles.

Keywords: *gobi* postfix, semantic-pragmatic ambivalence, context, politeness, cooperative maxims, expressives

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Introduction

The innovative character of Japanese *wakamono kotoba* (youth language), particularly in its online form, raises important questions about the relationship between linguistic form, social identity, and digital communication. Network communication occupies a central place in the everyday interactions of young people, as evidenced by a survey conducted by the research media company Tes Tee Lab in October 2022. Among 4,226 respondents, 97.3% of middle school students, 98.9% of high school students, and 97.9% of university students reported using social media in their daily communication (Corporation Tes Tee 2022).

One understudied feature of the youth sociolect is the use of semantically ambivalent linguistic units that, depending on contextual cues such as shared background knowledge and the local communicative context, can convey either positive or negative evaluative meanings. These units challenge traditional expectations of clarity in communication and introduce interpretive layers that rely heavily on social and contextual awareness.

Of particular interest are slang elements such as *gobi*, defined as “word or phrase endings” (Roni et al. 2023; Yoshida 2002) and functionally comparable to postfixes. Unlike standard affixes expressing modality or tense, *gobi* in youth sociolect primarily adds stylistic nuance and evaluative ambiguity, allowing meanings to shift according to conversational or textual context. This morphological flexibility enables playful and creative language use and often blurs the boundary between positive and negative evaluation.

Although *wakamono kotoba* has been widely examined (Kikuchi 2014; Koyano 2006; Tsujimoto 2017; Yonekawa 2016), the role of *gobi* in producing evaluative ambivalence, as well as the pragmatics of such semantically ambivalent slang units, remains largely unexplored.

Focusing on *gobi*’s capacity to alternate between positive and negative meanings depending on context, this article aims to address this gap by examining their pragmatic role in enhancing expressiveness, managing politeness, and negotiating between directness and indirectness, including the strategic violation of cooperative maxims in contemporary youth communication.

Literature review

The youth sociolect as a language of everyday communication among Japanese youth has been widely studied in scientific research from

various perspectives. In several works, it has been examined as a distinctive indicator of cultural stereotypes, developmental levels, values, and beliefs of a specific “youth culture” (Horiuchi 1989; Kudo 2022; Yonekawa 2022). From a linguistic standpoint, the Japanese youth sociolect has been studied in terms of its creativity (Kuroda 2021) and its word-formation, lexical, and morphosyntactic features (Kravets2023a; 2023b; Seraku and Akiha 2019; Li 2021).

In particular, Horio (2022) explored the Japanese youth sociolect in online spaces and its impact on changes in standard Japanese; Tanaka (2014, 2021) and Kuroda (2011, 2021) focused on the written form of youth internet communication; Inoue (2006) examined the paralinguistic elements of youth online communication; and Kuroda (2021) traced the influence of conversion systems on the textualization of Japanese youth vocabulary. The impact of globalization processes on youth language was studied by Coleman, Silverstein, Lambert, Inoue, Matsuda, and others.

Regarding *gobi*, or sentence / word endings, which are the focus of this article, one of the most thoroughly studied words in this context is *yabai*, which has been predominantly analyzed from a sociolinguistic perspective (Sano 2012; Kumagai 2014). In the pragmatic aspect, there are limited studies on *gobi* – for example, addressing the issue of double interpretation conveyed by the adjective function of *yabai*. In particular, Takeuchi (2007) applied, in this regard, a cognitive-pragmatic approach, based on Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory.

At the same time, certain features of the youth dialect in general, and the semantically ambivalent postfixes studied in this research in particular, directly intersect with the interests of pragmatics. An important differential characteristic of the youth sociolect is its expressiveness, emotionality, and evaluativeness. In this regard, Yonekawa Akihiko (2009) notes, “for young people, it’s not only important what they say, but also how they say it”. This feature correlates with both positive politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987) and the illocutionary force of direct and indirect expressive speech acts (Searle 1969; Norrick 1978; Weigand 2010).

Another equally important feature is the ambiguity of expressions. This characteristic aligns with the traditional Japanese linguistic culture’s tendency to avoid vocabulary and speech acts that threaten the interlocutor’s “face.” To this end, Japanese people use euphemisms to avoid definitive or categorical responses. Youth slang also meets

such criteria but in an even more refined and playful manner. In their communication, which serves as a form of entertainment and enjoyment, young people strive to “smooth things over” in any way possible, which manifests in the euphemistic nature of the youth sociolect. For example, the expression *omoshiroi kamocan* be translated as “It might be interesting” or “It could be fun”. *Kamo* in this phrase is a casual, softened version of *kamoshirenai*, which means “might” or “could be,” expressing uncertainty or possibility. This expression is often used to avoid making a firm and a categorical statement and to sound more tentative or non-committal, allowing the speaker to veil their feelings so as not to offend the interlocutor. From this perspective, semantically ambivalent postfixes correlate with negative politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987, 131) – politeness of non-imposition and tactfulness aimed at avoiding or mitigating face-threatening acts – and can also be examined through the lens of violating certain cooperative maxims (Grice 1975). The purpose of this article is to analyze semantically ambivalent slang postfixes, demonstrating the level of their contextual dependence and substantiating them from a pragmatic perspective, respectively their pragmatic functions in youth communication.

Material and methods

The material for this study consists of a corpus of Japanese youth slang expressions containing postfix varieties of *gobi*. The data were collected from social media, informal online communication, and spoken interactions, covering a range of communicative contexts in order to capture the pragmatic and semantic variability of *gobi* in contemporary youth discourse.

The study employs a qualitative methodological framework combining several complementary approaches. First, descriptive analysis was used to identify instances of *gobi* and to examine shifts in evaluative connotation (positive vs. negative) depending on context. Second, pragmatic analysis was applied to assess how *gobi* interacts with Grice’s conversational maxims, particularly those of quantity and manner, as well as with politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987), including the mitigation of face-threatening acts and the management of directness, indirectness, and expressiveness. The analysis also considers the role of *gobi* in expressive speech acts, extending beyond Searle’s original framework, and partially draws on the concept of multifaceted pragmatics (Kravchenko 2017;

Kravchenko and Zhykharieva 2020). Finally, contextual analysis was conducted to demonstrate how the pragmatic effects of *gobi* are locally determined and used to soften or intensify utterances.

By integrating these methods, the study aims to provide a systematic account of the semantic and pragmatic versatility of *gobi* in Japanese youth slang.

Results and discussion

In contemporary Japanese youth communication, a number of slang expressions typical of youth sociolects function as context-dependent markers of emotion, including *ngo*, *pien*, *katan*, *maji-manji*, *myon*, *tanien*, and others. A defining feature of these units is their pragmatic ambivalence: the same form may convey contrasting emotions, and without access to shared contextual knowledge it is often impossible to determine whether the evaluation is positive or negative. From a grammatical perspective, these units are indeclinable and occur in a fixed final position, which allows them to be classified as *gobi*, or postfixes. Unlike normative suffixes, *gobi* do not encode modal meanings but instead add stylistic, expressive, and evaluative nuances, often introducing ambiguity.

This property makes *gobi* particularly relevant from a pragmatic perspective. Their use enables speakers to modulate emotional stance while relying heavily on contextual cues and shared assumptions. A representative example is the postfix *pien*, which, as noted by Kudo (2022), can express a wide range of emotions, from sadness or disappointment to playful or emotionally exaggerated reactions.

Compare the expressions: If you say that, it's *pien*!, and If you say that, it makes me sad. While both convey sadness, *pien* adds a layer of youthful, spontaneous expressiveness, often perceived as playful or exaggerated. Its interpretation depends entirely on speaker intent and situational context, unlike the more neutral and unambiguous expression of sadness. As a result, *pien* can soften negative emotions or render them emotionally ambivalent.

This effect is illustrated in the utterance *Ie kara tookute totemo sabishikute, shinitai kibun (pien)* / I feel so lonely far from home that I want to die (*pien*). Although the propositional content expresses despair, the addition of *pien* introduces phonological softness and reduces the seriousness of the statement, transforming a clearly negative emotion into an ambivalent one. Thus, *pien* demonstrates how

semantically ambivalent postfixes function as pragmatic devices that reframe emotional evaluation through contextualization.

A clearly positive emotion can also be conveyed by the same postfix, as in *Kyou no neiru kawaii sugiru muri pien* / Today's manicure is too cute to handle (*pien*), where *pien* expresses joy and admiration. In both positive and negative contexts, *pien* functions as an emotional modifier that either softens negative affect or intensifies positive evaluation.

The context-dependent semantics of *pien* is further evident in its grammaticalized derivatives, including verb, adjectival, and nominal forms, which retain the core emotional meaning while expanding its functional range. These forms illustrate the creative morphological adaptation typical of youth sociolect, allowing emotional states to be expressed through multiple grammatical structures.

Another productive *gobi* variant is *maji-manji*, which signals a high degree of emotional involvement and can express both positive and negative evaluations. As noted by Kudo (2021), *maji-manji* functions as a sensory term whose interpretation depends entirely on context, ranging from admiration to irritation. For example, it may convey enthusiasm in reactions to food, or frustration in response to technical failure. Thus, the same expression can encode opposite emotional stances.

The frequency of *maji-manji* in youth language is confirmed by its prominence in popular usage over recent years, including its ranking among the top youth expressions in 2017. Grammatically, it exhibits properties of evaluative adjectives or emotional predicates.

Another postfix *yabai* (meaning Oh no!) is a versatile and commonly used term in Japanese youth language and informal speech. Originally, it meant “dangerous” or “risky,” but over time, it has evolved into a slang expression with a wide range of meanings depending on the context. Due to its prevalence, it is also used by older generations, for example, *Houkoku wasureta. Kyou shimekiri da yo – . Yabai!* / Terrible! I forgot about the report. *Yabai* can be used to convey both positive and negative emotions depending on the situation, ranging from excitement and admiration to concern or regret. Some of its most common interpretations include:

1. “Awesome” or “Incredible” – When used in a positive context, it can express amazement or excitement. For example, if something is extremely impressive or exciting, you might say *Yabai!* to mean “That’s amazing!” or “That’s awesome!” For example: *Omae, kyō*

yabaina!, meaning ‘You look amazing today!’ In this case, *yabai* has a positive connotation, meaning something impressive or outstanding. *Yabai! Kyō sugoku yokudekita!*, meaning ‘Wow! I did really well today!’. *Yabai* here conveys excitement and positive emotion, emphasizing the speaker’s surprise or satisfaction.

2. “Bad” or “Terrible” – On the flip side, *yabai* can also indicate something negative or problematic. It can be used to express that a situation is “bad,” “dangerous,” or “out of control.” Examples: *Yabai, chikokusuru!*, meaning ‘Oh no, I’m going to be late!’ or ‘This is bad!’ *Yabai* here expresses a negative connotation of being in trouble or having a problematic situation. *Tanni sukunakute maji de yabai*, meaning ‘I have really low credits... this is really bad.’

3. “Extreme” or “Over the top” – It can be used to emphasize that something is extreme in either a good or bad way, often with a tone of exaggeration. For example, *Yabai kore oishii* means ‘It’s ridiculously delicious.’ Examples: *Totemo atama ga itai toki, Yabai kurai atama ga itai...*, meaning ‘When the headache is very strong, My head hurts so much... it’s crazy...’. *Yabai* expresses here a strong negative feeling, indicating that the pain is intense or overwhelming. (*Shinjirarenai hodo yoi toki*) *Kono ryōri yabaihodo oishii*, meaning ‘(When the food tastes amazing), This food is unbelievably delicious!’ *Yabai* here has a positive nuance, describing something as being so good that it’s almost unbelievable.

Recently, there has been a clear trend where young people use *yabai* with a highly positive connotation, for example: *Nihongo no sensei... yabai...* / The Japanese teacher is really awesome!

Thus, with the use of *yabai*, young people express a wide range of emotions, and thanks to this the word became a very flexible expression in modern Japanese. At the same time, it can be understood only through the context of the conversation, the tone of voice, and the speaker’s facial expressions. In a sentence, this word acts as an attributive adjective, which not only gives an idea of the situation, but also evaluates it, giving the phrase expressiveness and increasing the intensity of negative or positive evaluative meanings.

The pragmatic rationale for different types of *gobi* attracts, at the very least, three pragmatic perspectives: Politeness Theory, Grice’s Cooperative Principle, and Speech Act Theory. From the perspective of Politeness Theory, any slang expressions, regardless of whether they have positive or negative connotations, realize positive politeness, particularly the strategy of “Use in-group identity markers.” By using

slang, youth minimize distance, demonstrate complete equality, and eliminate interpersonal boundaries. However, along with the general function of positive politeness, the functioning of *gobi* or sentence endings with context-dependent semantics solves a number of other pragmatic tasks also related to politeness.

Thus, unlike words from the standard lexicon, which in similar situations would be unambiguously associated with negative emotions capable of damaging the face of both the speaker and the interlocutor, *gobi*, which express negative emotions, always impart an exaggeratedly playful, lighthearted connotation to the utterance, thereby reducing the threat to the interlocutor's face.

For example, *Jeonyeoseok, nae bimil-eul binmagaya haetda! Jinjja seoul neunga ssuku!*, meaning 'He revealed my secret! I feel really disgusted!', expresses intense negative emotions while simultaneously serving as a means of mitigating them.

Respectively, in the context of politeness, *gobi* can be classified as a kind of pragmatic mitigators that soften the effect of negatively connoted information. In this case, like other mitigators, they become tools of not positive politeness (solidarity), but negative politeness of tact, non-imposition, and distancing, aimed at compensating for potential face damage.

From the perspective of Grice's Cooperative Principle, the high dependency of the interpretation of semantically ambivalent slang *gobi* on the context of background knowledge and local context of the message, where they can take on either positive or negative connotations, suggests that they violate the maxims of clarity and quantity of information. Specifically, this observation is supported by some Japanese researchers who point out that the communicative and pragmatic properties of slang *gobi* violate the maxim of quantity, according to which, in Grice's terms, "one should provide as much information as needed for easy comprehension" (Kudo 2022), considering the specific communicant and the situational context. Simultaneously, the violation of such maxims may indicate, as noted by researchers in the field of multifaceted pragmatics (Kravchenko and Pasternak 2018; Kravchenko and Zhykharieva 2020), the use of negative politeness as politeness of tact and non-imposition.

Finally, *gobi*, which implies a somewhat hyperbolic positive or negative evaluation, is, in our view, associated with the category of expressive speech acts. Expressiveness refers to the property of certain vocabulary to convey the speaker's subjective attitude toward the

conversation content, the addressee, or specific phenomena as vividly as possible. In the language of youth, expressiveness is determined by the pragmatic nature of the evaluative component, i.e., its ability to express positive and negative emotions. In this sense, expressive acts are not limited to “social-etiquette” expressives defined by Searle (1969), but are related to other definitions of such acts that broaden the scope of expressives with acts associated with the speaker’s “concern with desire” or “the predominance of desire” (Weigand 2010), as well as with all acts underlying emotions (Norrick 1978, 282–290).

The presence of expressive illocutionary force in utterances ending with *gobi* is supported by the correlation of expressive illocutionary force with politeness strategies, which, as mentioned earlier, are realized both by all youth slang expressions and by slang sentence endings. In particular, linguists have noted that the connection between expressive acts and the devices that index them and positive politeness is due to the fact that both groups of pragmatic devices create an emotional bond between the speaker and the audience, ensuring emotional engagement (Kravchenko et al. 2024). Emotional engagement, in turn, correlates with two strategies of positive politeness: involving both the speaker and the audience in the activity, and the assumption or assertion of reciprocity.

Conclusion

The analysis of the semantic ambivalence of *wakamono kotoba* slang postfixes (*gobi*) and their pragmatic functions leads to several important conclusions:

The semantic ambivalence reveals significant reliance of these slang elements on the local context of speech and the communicative situation. The positive or negative connotations of the entire phrase in which these postfixes are included can shift depending on the immediate circumstances of the conversation, the speaker’s intent, and the background knowledge shared by the interlocutors. This fluidity demonstrates that *gobi* play a dynamic role in constructing meaning, making them powerful tools for pragmatic flexibility in youth communication.

From the perspective of politeness theory, youth slang *gobi* fulfil dual functions. On the one hand, they realize positive politeness strategies by minimizing social distance and fostering in-group identity through shared slang, thus promoting interpersonal closeness and solidarity. On the other hand, slang *gobi*, particularly those with

ambiguous or exaggerated emotional connotations, act as pragmatic negative politeness mitigators by softening the impact of potentially face-threatening acts, allowing speakers to navigate delicate or emotionally charged interactions with tact and discretion. By incorporating playful or exaggerated tones, these postfixes reduce the intensity of negative emotions or criticisms, making the utterance less confrontational or harsh. This dual function enhances the speaker's ability to manage social relationships and protect both their own and the interlocutor's face in communication. This mitigatory function aligns with the broader cultural tendency in Japanese linguistic culture to avoid directness and maintain social harmony, further supporting the role of *gobi* in mitigating face threats.

The high dependence of *gobi* on contextual interpretation suggests that they often violate the Cooperative Principle as proposed by Grice, specifically the maxims of quantity and clarity (unambiguity). Their semantic flexibility can lead to the provision of less explicit information than what is required for straightforward interpretation, forcing the listener to infer meaning based on contextual clues. This violation, however, is not accidental but rather a strategic choice that aligns with the goals of politeness and communicative subtlety, especially within informal or youth contexts.

Gobi in youth slang also function as markers of expressive speech acts, allowing speakers to convey their subjective emotional stance towards the content of the conversation, the interlocutor, or the situation itself. These expressive elements enhance the emotional connection between speaker and audience, fostering engagement and participation. The expressive illocutionary force of *gobi* underscores their capacity to evoke and manage emotions, aligning with both positive politeness strategies (emphasizing solidarity and emotional involvement) and expressive communication styles that prioritize the speaker's emotional state.

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