Descriptive Genre in Japanese Setting: An SFL Analysis of Text Structure and Language Features

Novia Hayati*, Susi Widianti, Jeni Putra, Muthi Afifah
Indonesia University of Education
*hayanovia@upi.edu

Abstract

This study investigates the generic structure and lexico-grammatical features of Japanese descriptive texts within the framework of Hasan's Generic Structure Potential (GSP) of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Using a qualitative case study, the research analyzed 40 authentic Japanese descriptive texts describing people, places, objects, and concepts. The texts were purposively selected from government websites, textbooks, magazines, brochures, advertisements, newspapers, and cultural websites. The findings reveal that Japanese descriptive texts are systematically organized through stable obligatory and flexible optional elements. Identification and Description consistently function as the core obligatory stages across all text types, while Concept descriptions additionally require Cultural Interpretation. Optional elements, including Historical Background, Visitor Information, Procedural Explanation, Evaluation, and Illustrative Examples, are incorporated according to the communicative purpose of individual texts. Lexico-grammatically, the texts are characterized by the predominance of relational processes, supported by material and mental processes, extensive nominalization, passive constructions, adjective constructions, noun modifiers, copular expressions, relative clauses, and culturally specific lexical items. These linguistic resources enable writers to produce objective descriptions while simultaneously conveying cultural knowledge and values. The study concludes that Japanese descriptive texts are best characterized as a descriptive-explanatory cultural genre rather than a purely descriptive genre because they integrate factual description with cultural interpretation. The findings extend Hasan's GSP to Japanese descriptive discourse, contribute to SFL-based genre studies, and provide pedagogical implications for Genre-Based Pedagogy and the development of authentic instructional materials for Japanese as a Foreign Language.

Keywords: *Japanese descriptive genre; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Generic Structure Potential; genre analysis; Japanese language education*.

1. Introduction

Describing is one of the most fundamental communicative functions in human language because it enables people to identify, classify, and represent entities, experiences, and phenomena in both everyday communication and academic discourse (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Across educational contexts, descriptive language is used in information reports, literary descriptions, descriptive recounts, explanatory texts, and narratives to organize observations into meaningful categories (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). As a result, describing is regarded as one of the earliest language functions acquired by learners. Although describing is universal, its realization differs across languages and cultures. Linguistic communities develop distinctive conventions for organizing descriptive information according to culturally shared

communicative practices (Martin, 1992). These conventions determine how descriptions are structured and which linguistic resources are employed to construct meaning (Droga & Humphrey, 2003). Consequently, describing can be understood as a genre, a staged, goal-oriented social process through which communicative purposes are achieved (Martin & Rose, 2008). Within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), genre explains how language users organize meanings to accomplish recurring social purposes (Martin & Rose, 2008). Rather than viewing language as isolated grammatical rules, SFL regards texts as socially organized units whose structures and linguistic choices reflect their contexts of use (Hyland, 2004, 2007; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Derewianka & Jones, 2016). Accordingly, each genre displays distinctive schematic structures and lexicogrammatical features that systematically realize its communicative purpose (Swales, 1990; Christie & Martin, 1997; Eggins, 2004).

Cross-linguistic studies demonstrate that descriptive genres differ considerably in their organization. English descriptive texts typically begin with a general classification followed by detailed descriptions (Gerot & Wignell, 1995; Anderson & Anderson, 1997; Feez & Joyce, 1998; Butt et al., 2000; Droga & Humphrey, 2003; Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Thai, 2009; Emilia, 2011, 2016; Joyce & Feez, 2012), whereas Indonesian descriptive texts often conclude with an evaluative statement and may present specific details before general information (Anshori & Damaianti, 2022). These variations indicate that descriptive genres are shaped by language-specific and culture-specific conventions, emphasizing the need to examine descriptive texts within individual linguistic traditions.

Japanese provides an important context for such investigation because descriptive texts are common in textbooks, tourism brochures, websites, advertisements, news features, and cultural introductions. Compared with English and Indonesian, Japanese descriptions exhibit distinctive linguistic characteristics, including extensive noun modification, frequent use of i- and na-adjectives, topic-prominent sentence organization, nominalization, and culturally influenced expressions (Kuno, 1973; Shibatani, 1990; Tsujimura, 2014). These features illustrate how Japanese organizes information differently from subject-prominent languages and constructs meaning through grammatical and discourse choices (Maynard, 1997; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). From an SFL perspective, such linguistic choices function as meaning-making resources shaped by social and cultural contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & Rose, 2008; Eggins, 2004).

SFL provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing these characteristics because it examines not only grammatical structures but also how language resources realize meanings through genre and register (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Hasan's (1989) Generic Structure Potential (GSP) further distinguishes the obligatory and optional stages of a genre, while lexicogrammatical analysis explains how language choices realize communicative purposes (Eggins, 2004). Together, these approaches offer a comprehensive account of descriptive discourse.

Previous studies have applied SFL to various Japanese genres, including narrative, explanation, procedural, conversational, and academic texts, investigating discourse organization, cohesion, transitivity, thematic progression, appraisal, and genre pedagogy (White, 1997, 2003; Thomson & Sano, 2006; White & Sano, 2006; Sano, 2006, 2008, 2017; Mizusawa, 2009; Sano & Thomson, 2013; Sato & Barnard, 2013; Thomson & Armour, 2013; Kato, 2017; Thomson, 2017; Thomson et al., 2017; Washitake, 2017). These studies demonstrate the value of SFL for Japanese discourse analysis. However, research specifically examining Japanese descriptive genres remains limited. Existing studies generally focus on isolated grammatical features, such as adjective usage and noun modification, or on discourse organization without systematically integrating schematic structure and lexicogrammatical

realization. Moreover, many rely on textbook or simplified materials rather than authentic texts, leaving limited understanding of how Japanese descriptive genres are organized in naturally occurring communication.

Therefore, a significant gap remains in SFL-based research integrating generic structure and lexicogrammatical analysis of authentic Japanese descriptive texts. Addressing this gap will contribute to both Japanese genre studies and SFL by providing empirical evidence of how descriptive meanings are constructed in Japanese discourse. The findings are also expected to support genre-based Japanese language teaching, curriculum development, and the design of authentic instructional materials. Accordingly, this study investigates Japanese descriptive texts within the SFL framework by (1) identifying their schematic structure and (2) analyzing the lexicogrammatical features that realize descriptive meanings. Unlike previous studies, it integrates Hasan's (1989) Generic Structure Potential with Hallidayan functional analysis to provide a more comprehensive account of authentic Japanese descriptive discourse.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the organizational and linguistic characteristics of Japanese descriptive texts. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to provide an in-depth understanding of how descriptive meanings are constructed in authentic texts rather than to quantify linguistic phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). The study aimed to (1) identify the schematic structure of Japanese descriptive texts and (2) analyze the lexico-grammatical features that realize descriptive meanings. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of model texts for reading instruction within Genre-Based Pedagogy (GBP) in Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL). Data were collected through document analysis of a corpus of 40 authentic Japanese descriptive texts, comprising 10 texts each describing people, places, objects, and concepts. The texts were purposively selected from government websites, Japanese language textbooks, magazines, brochures, cultural websites, advertisements, and newspaper feature articles to represent descriptive discourse across diverse communicative contexts.

Data analysis integrated three complementary frameworks. First, Hasan's Generic Structure Potential (GSP) framework (Hasan, 1984; Halliday & Hasan, 1985) was used to identify obligatory and optional structural elements, their sequencing, and recurring patterns. Second, the lexico-grammatical features were analyzed using the Japanese Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework (Teruya, 2006a, 2006b), focusing on participant types, process types, and circumstantial elements. Third, Japanese grammatical patterns characteristic of descriptive discourse, such as adjective constructions, noun modifiers, copular expressions, and relative clauses, were examined using standard Japanese grammar references (Koichi, 2000; Yoshiko & Mitsuru, 2002). To ensure trustworthiness, the study followed Lincoln & Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability through the use of multiple authentic sources, systematic coding, audit trails, and evidence-based interpretation. The analysis proceeded by coding each text (TW1–TW40), analyzing it using the three frameworks, and synthesizing the structural and linguistic findings to explain how they jointly realize the communicative purpose of Japanese descriptive texts. The results are presented in the Results section and interpreted in relation to relevant genre, SFL, and Japanese language education literature.

3. Result

As earlier stated, the data are composed of people, places, objects, and concepts descriptions. The results of the analysis of all data are presented in separate sections as follows.

Descriptive Genre of People

The analysis of ten authentic Japanese profile texts representing diverse professions, such as a television announcer, football player, ceramic artist, elementary school teacher, and community volunteer leader, revealed a highly consistent generic structure and linguistic realization. Despite differences in profession and context, the texts follow a stable organizational pattern that emphasizes professional competence, social contribution, and interpersonal values rather than personal promotion.

The analysis identified two obligatory elements and two optional elements. Identification introduces the individual through basic information such as name, occupation, affiliation, or social role, providing the contextual foundation for the profile. Description of Attributes, the core stage, presents educational background, career history, expertise, achievements, and contributions to society through concrete evidence rather than subjective evaluation. For example, broadcaster profiles emphasize journalism experience, athlete profiles highlight leadership, teacher profiles focus on learner-centered pedagogy, artist profiles explain artistic philosophy, and volunteer profiles describe community engagement. Two optional elements also occur: Personal Life/Miscellaneous Information, which includes hobbies or interests that humanize the profile, and Evaluation, which is typically conveyed indirectly through comments from colleagues, students, or community members rather than explicit self-praise. Overall, Japanese descriptive texts about people follow the sequence of Identification, Description of Attributes, with optional Personal Life/Miscellaneous Information and Evaluation.

The texts also display recurring linguistic features. Relational processes dominate the Identification stage through constructions such as ～です and ～である, defining identity and occupation. Extensive nominalization (e.g., 判断力, 表現力, 発信力) enables professional qualities to be expressed objectively and concisely. Material processes highlight observable achievements, while mental processes, particularly in teacher and artist profiles, express beliefs and professional philosophies without sacrificing objectivity. Profession-specific lexical fields further enhance authenticity by using terminology related to education, sports, arts, media, and community service.

Descriptive Genre of Places

Ten authentic Japanese descriptive texts representing shrines, gardens, restaurants, tourist attractions, and commercial venues were analyzed. Despite describing different types of places, the texts display a highly consistent schematic structure and linguistic realization, communicating not only physical characteristics but also historical, cultural, and experiential meanings.

The analysis identified two obligatory elements and one optional element. Identification introduces and classifies the place (e.g., *Meiji Jingu* as a Shinto shrine, Tokyo Tower as a broadcasting landmark, and *Kenrokuen* as one of Japan's Three Great Gardens). Description elaborates the place's physical features, facilities, historical background, cultural significance, visitor experiences, and distinctive characteristics. An optional stage provides supplementary information, such as historical background, cultural meaning, visitor information, technical instructions, interesting facts, or promotional comments, depending on the communicative purpose. Overall, Japanese descriptive texts about places follow the sequence of Identification, Description, and optional supplementary information tailored to the text's purpose.

The texts also exhibit consistent linguistic features. Relational processes dominate the Identification stage through constructions such as ～は～です and ～である, establishing the identity of each place. Frequent nominalization (e.g., 創建, 建立, 作庭, 植栽) reflects the

objective style of institutional and tourism discourse. Descriptive adjectives such as 広大な, 静寂な, 多彩な, and 独特の create vivid representations, while passive constructions (e.g., 創建されました, 建立されました) emphasize historical events rather than human actors. Temporal expressions and specialized vocabulary related to religion, architecture, tourism, and traditional culture further reinforce the texts' cultural identity.

Descriptive Genre of Objects

The analysis of ten authentic Japanese descriptive texts about traditional cultural objects, including *Hagoita, Tokoname Maneki-neko, Daruma, Furoshiki*, and *Futon*, revealed a stable descriptive structure that integrates physical description with historical, symbolic, and functional explanations. Beyond describing objects, the texts preserve and transmit cultural heritage.

The analysis identified two obligatory elements and one optional element. Identification introduces the object's name, classification, origin, or cultural significance, while Description of Attributes explains its physical characteristics, materials, functions, methods of use, symbolic meanings, and distinctive features. Rather than simply listing physical properties, the descriptions consistently connect observable characteristics with cultural symbolism, such as the *Maneki-neko* representing prosperity and the *Daruma* symbolizing perseverance. An optional Historical/Functional Background provides information about historical development, cultural origins, practical applications, or contemporary relevance. Overall, Japanese descriptive texts about cultural objects follow the sequence of Identification, Description of Attributes, and an optional Historical/Functional Background.

The texts also display recurring linguistic features. Relational processes dominate the Identification stage through constructions such as ～は～である, ～とは, and ～に由来する, defining and classifying cultural objects. Material processes describe production, use, and historical development through verbs such as 作られる, 包む, 運ぶ, and 発達する. Frequent nominalization (e.g., 発達, 信仰, 普及, 役割) contributes to an objective style, while culture-specific vocabulary, including 押絵, 七転び八起き, 小判, 畳, 敷き布団, and 掛け布団, together with references to the *Muromachi, Edo*, and *Meiji* periods, reinforces the cultural authenticity of the texts.

Descriptive Genre of Concepts

Unlike descriptive texts about concrete entities, the ten concept texts explain abstract cultural and philosophical ideas such as *omotenashi, kaizen, Zen, uchi–soto*, and *shikata ga nai*. The analysis shows that these texts differ structurally because their primary purpose is not only to describe concepts but also to interpret Japanese cultural values.

The analysis identified three obligatory elements and several optional elements. Identification introduces and defines the concept, Description explains its defining characteristics, principles, or functions, and Cultural Interpretation relates the concept to broader Japanese cultural values. For example, o*motenashi* represents sincerity and mutual respect, *kaizen* reflects continuous improvement, *Zen* emphasizes mindfulness, *uchi–soto* explains social relationships, and *shikata ga nai* conveys resilience and acceptance. Optional elements, including Historical Background, Procedural Explanation, Cultural Comparison, and Illustrative Examples, provide additional context without altering the overall structure. Overall, Japanese descriptive texts about concepts follow the sequence of Identification, Description, Cultural Interpretation, with optional explanatory elements depending on the communicative purpose.

The texts also display distinctive linguistic features. Conceptual nominalization (e.g., おもてなし, 改善, 精神性, 茶道, 仕方がない) enables abstract meanings to be expressed concisely, while relational processes dominate because the texts primarily define and explain concepts. Mental and behavioral processes describe values and philosophical orientations, and passive constructions (e.g., 記される, 知られていた) contribute to an objective tone when discussing historical development. Evaluative vocabulary expressing harmony, respect, sincerity, mindfulness, perseverance, and resilience further reinforces the close relationship between language and Japanese cultural values.

Across all four categories, Japanese descriptive texts exhibit a systematic organization consisting of stable obligatory elements and flexible optional elements. Identification and Description are the core stages in texts about people, places, and objects, whereas concept texts additionally require Cultural Interpretation. Optional stages, including historical background, practical information, personal details, evaluation, procedural explanation, cultural comparison, and illustrative examples, vary according to the communicative purpose while enriching the descriptions. Across the corpus, relational processes dominate to define and classify entities, extensive nominalization creates objective and information-dense discourse, and specialized lexical fields reflect each topic. Material, mental, and passive processes occur according to the communicative demands of the genre. Overall, these findings show that Japanese descriptive texts extend beyond simple description by integrating factual information with cultural knowledge, historical continuity, social values, and interpersonal considerations, indicating that Japanese descriptive discourse functions as a descriptive–explanatory cultural genre rather than a purely descriptive genre.

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that Japanese descriptive texts exhibit a highly systematic generic organization consistent with Hasan's (1984, 1996) Generic Structure Potential (GSP). Across the four categories analyzed (people, places, objects, and concepts), the texts consistently realize stable obligatory stages that fulfil their communicative purpose. While people, places, and object texts comprise Identification and Description, concept texts additionally require Cultural Interpretation as an obligatory stage. This supports Hasan's (1996) proposition that obligatory structural elements define a genre because they enable texts to achieve their social purpose. However, the findings also show that Japanese descriptive texts extend beyond describing entities by explaining their historical, philosophical, and cultural significance. They are therefore better characterized as a descriptive–explanatory cultural genre than as a purely descriptive genre.

The Identification stage emerged as the most stable component across all texts. Every text introduces or classifies the entity before elaborating its characteristics, functions, or cultural relevance, supporting Hasan's (1996) view that Identification provides the contextual orientation necessary for interpreting subsequent information. This finding also aligns with the SFL perspective that genres comprise predictable stages organized to accomplish specific social purposes (Martin & Rose, 2008; Eggins, 2004; Martin, 2009). The consistent progression from shared contextual knowledge to detailed information reflects the context-dependent nature of Japanese communication, which develops meaning gradually rather than explicitly at the outset (Cook, 2008; Ide, 2006; Hasegawa, 2015).

Similarly, the Description stage systematically elaborates physical attributes, historical development, functions, procedures, and social roles rather than merely listing characteristics. This supports Eggins' (2004) concept of field elaboration and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) view that experiential meaning is constructed through linguistic resources representing

entities, processes, and relationships. From a genre perspective, this gradual development of information reflects the staged organization through which genres achieve their communicative purposes (Martin & Rose, 2008; Martin, 2009). The findings therefore suggest that Japanese descriptive texts prioritize the progressive construction of knowledge, consistent with observations by Ide (2006) and Hasegawa (2015).

A distinctive finding is the systematic inclusion of Cultural Interpretation, particularly in concept texts. Rather than remaining at the level of objective description, the texts explain the cultural meanings of phenomena such as *omotenashi, kaizen, Zen, daruma*, and *Meiji Jingu*. This supports Martin and Rose's (2008) argument that genres organize not only information but also cultural values and shared knowledge, while Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) and Martin (2009) emphasize that genres encode ideological as well as experiential meanings. The prominence of cultural interpretation also reflects Hasan's (1996) view that generic structures are shaped by communicative purpose and is consistent with Japanese discourse studies highlighting the close relationship between language, culture, and shared social assumptions (Cook, 2008; Ide, 2006; Hasegawa, 2015).

Although obligatory stages remain stable, the corpus demonstrates flexibility through optional elements such as historical background, procedural explanation, visitor information, evaluation, illustrative examples, and cultural comparison. According to Hasan (1996), these represent legitimate variations within a genre without altering its essential organization. Martin and Rose (2008) and Eggins (2004) similarly argue that genres adapt to contextual differences while maintaining structural integrity. In Japanese discourse, such flexibility reflects a preference for providing contextual information according to readers' needs and shared expectations (Cook, 2008; Ide, 2006; Hasegawa, 2015).

The lexico-grammatical findings further demonstrate the close relationship between genre and meaning. Relational processes dominate because descriptive discourse primarily defines and classifies phenomena, supporting Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), Eggins (2004), and Hasegawa (2015). Extensive nominalization enables abstraction and objective knowledge construction, reflecting Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) concept of grammatical metaphor and Martin and Rose's (2008) discussion of specialized discourse. The frequent use of Sino-Japanese nominal expressions (*kango*) also contributes to conceptual precision and an impersonal style (Shibatani, 1990; Cook, 2008; Hasegawa, 2015). Process types vary according to communicative purpose: material processes predominate in descriptions of practices and objects, whereas relational and mental processes are more common in descriptions of concepts and people, consistent with SFL's functional view of language (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & Rose, 2008). In addition, culture-specific vocabulary such as 茶室, 神社, 畳, 押絵, and 金継ぎ functions as a semiotic resource for representing and transmitting culturally situated knowledge (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & Rose, 2008; Shibatani, 1990; Tsujimura, 2014; Hasegawa, 2015; Befu, 2001).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Japanese descriptive texts function as a descriptive–explanatory cultural genre that integrates factual description with cultural interpretation, historical continuity, and shared values. The interaction of stable generic stages, flexible optional elements, and systematic linguistic resources supports Hasan's (1996) GSP while extending its application to Japanese descriptive discourse. These findings also reinforce Halliday's (1978) view of language as a social semiotic system through which cultural knowledge is represented, interpreted, and transmitted.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. The corpus consisted of only 40 authentic texts and focused primarily on Generic Structure Potential and transitivity, without examining the interpersonal and textual metafunctions. Future studies could analyze

larger and more diverse corpora, including digital, literary, educational, and multimodal texts, and compare Japanese descriptive genres with those of other languages. Such research would deepen understanding of cross-cultural genre realization and support the development of genre-based Japanese language teaching materials and intercultural communication resources.

5. Conclusion

This study achieved its objectives by providing a Systemic Functional Linguistics-based account of the generic organization and lexico-grammatical realization of authentic Japanese descriptive texts, demonstrating that descriptive meaning in Japanese is closely intertwined with cultural interpretation and social context. The study contributes to SFL genre research by extending the application of Hasan's Generic Structure Potential to Japanese descriptive discourse and by offering a linguistic foundation for developing authentic Genre-Based Pedagogy materials in Japanese language education at the university level. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its relatively small corpus of forty texts and its focus on written descriptive texts, which may not fully represent the diversity of Japanese descriptive discourse across different genres, media, and communicative settings. Future research should examine larger and more diverse corpora, incorporate spoken, digital, and multimodal descriptive texts, and conduct cross-linguistic comparisons to further investigate how descriptive genres are realized across languages and cultures. Such studies would strengthen the understanding of Japanese discourse organization and support the development of more comprehensive models for language teaching and genre analysis.

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