

BASIC JAPANESE through comics

Lesson 43 • Tokoro—knowing your place

In current usage, *tokoro* is generally written with kanji (所) when it means “place” in the physical sense; hiragana (ところ) is used for more abstract meanings, such as “point in time,” “aspect,” or “level.”

The “point in time” sense is reflected in the most common grammatical patterns in which *tokoro* appears:

- 1) *~suru tokoro da* (“about to do ~”)
- 2) *~suru tokoro datta* (“was just about to do ~”)
- 3) *~shita tokoro da* (“just did ~”)
- 4) *~shite iru tokoro da* (“currently doing ~”)
- 5) *~shite ita tokoro da* (“was just doing ~”)

In this lesson, we illustrate examples of patterns 2 and 3 above, as well as an idiomatic use: *~dokoro ja nai* (“simply not possible”). We also present a well-known conjunctive use, *tokoro-de* (“by the way”).

First we begin with several examples that illustrate the various meanings of the word *tokoro* itself. (Note that *tokoro* is often contracted to *toko* in colloquial speech.)

Place

This is the most straightforward usage of *tokoro*; a physical location. These people are on their way to a cocktail bar located in a building that looks more like a run-down apartment complex than something open to the public.



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Man: こんな 所 に
Konna tokoro ni
 this kind of place in
 いったい 何 が ある のか ね?
ittai nani ga aru no ka ne?
 (emph.) what (subj.) exists (explan-?) (colloq.)
 “What in the world are we going to
 find in a place like this?” (PL2)

- *ittai* is an emphatizer for question words: “(What) in the world?/(Where) the blazes?/(How) on earth?” etc.
- asking a question with *(no) ka ne* is mostly reserved for males, and for superiors speaking to subordinates. When *no* is included, it shows the speaker is asking for an explanation of something.

A particular spot

In this example as well, *tokoro* means place, but in the sense of “part” or “spot” rather than geographical location. Mr. Nomura is explaining to his son, Tarō, how he hurt his head once as a child, and he points out the scar as proof.



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Nomura: ほれ、ここんとこ が ハゲてる だろ。

Hore, koko n toko ga hagate-ru daro.
look/see here of place (subj.) is bald isn't it?/right?
“See, this spot is bald, right?”

“See, I have a bald spot right here.” (PL2)

Tarō: あつ、ほんと だ。ケガしたところ だ。

A! Honto da, kega shita tokoro da.
(exclam.)true/real is got injured place/spot is
“Hey, you’re right. (So) that’s where you got hurt!” (PL2)

- *hore* (or *hora*) is used to focus the listener’s attention on something, like “look/see/here.”
- *koko n toko* is a contraction of *koko no tokoro*, an expression for “this spot here.”
- *hagate-ru* is a contraction of *hagate-iru* (“is bald”) from *hageru* (“become bare/bald”).
- *kega* = “injury,” and *kega shita* is the past form of the verb *kega suru*, “get hurt/injured.”

When *tokoro* is modified by a verb, adjective, or complete sentence, it’s often best translated as “where.”

Aspect

Tokoro can also mean attribute or aspect. Here, Kume is talking to a friend who has just decided to quit his job as a salaryman and become a potter. The friend has worked as a salaryman for only one year, but he’s afraid that the longer he works, the harder it will be to quit.



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Kume:

会社勤め なんてのは、半分、
Kaisha-quitome nante no wa, hanbun,
working at a company such a thing as-for half

惰性 みたいなところ がある から なあ。
dasei mitai-na tokoro ga aru kara nā
inertia -like aspect (subj.) exists because (colloq.)
“(Because) working for a company has half/some-what inertia-like aspects, doesn’t it.”

“Yeah, in some ways, when you work for a company, it’s easy to get caught up in the flow.” (PL2)

- *nante no wa* is a colloquial *nado to iu no wa*, which can be considered just a fancy *wa* (“as for”).
- *dasei* = “inertia/force of habit/coasting/auto-pilot,” and *mitai-na* after a noun can be thought of as “--like,” so *dasei mitai-na tokoro* = “inertia-like aspects.”
- *nā* or *nē* with a long vowel strongly expresses the speaker’s concurrence/agreement/sympathy: “it really is so, isn’t it?” → “I know what you mean.”

Depending on context, the more abstract uses of *tokoro* can mean variously aspect, character, manner, situation, circumstance, action, extent, etc.

A point in time

Hamasaki and Sasaki are trying to outdo each other by catching the largest fish. Sasaki has already caught a fish, albeit a small one, so he suggests they call it a day.



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In the examples on these two pages, *tokoro* denotes a place/point in time or in some other linear progression.

Sasaki:

幸い 私 が 一匹 釣った し、 適当な
Saiwai watashi ga ippiki tsutta shi, tekitō-na
 fortunately I (subj.) one-(count) caught (conj.) suitable
 ところ で 切り上げます か、 浜崎ちゃん。
tokoro de kirigemasu ka, Hama-chan.
 point at quit/wind up (?) (name-fam.)
 "Well, Hama, now that I've been fortunate enough to catch one, shall we find a good stopping point and head home?" (PL3)

Hamasaki:

エッ!?
E!?
 huh?/what?
 "What!?" (PL2)

- *tekitō-na* = "appropriate/suitable/fitting."
- *kirigemasu* is the PL3 form of *kirigeru*, which means to "stop/wind up/finish for the day," often with the added implication of "leaving/going home/going back to something else." *Tekitō-na tokoro de kirigeru* = "stop at a suitable point and go home" → "find a good stopping point and go home."
- the name 浜崎 is usually pronounced Hamazaki, but Hamasaki is from Kyūshū and insists on using the regional pronunciation.

A point in time/part

A group of people have gathered around the TV to watch a pro-wrestling match, but just as the good guy is about to get tumbled, the TV station begins experiencing technical difficulties.



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TV: しばらく おまち 下さい。
Shibaraku o-machi kudasai
 a while/moment (hon.)-wait please
 "One moment please." (PL4)

Boy: なんだ、いい とこ なのに...
Nanda, ii toko na no ni...
 what good place/part even though it is
 "Geez, just when it's at a good part..." (PL2)

- *shibaraku* can refer to either a brief or an extended period of time, depending on the context. Here it is like "a moment."
- *o-machi kudasai* is a PL4 equivalent of *matte kudasai* ("please wait"), from *matsu* ("wait").
- *nanda* (literally, "what is this?") is often used as an expression of disappointment.
- *~ na no ni* ("even though it is ~") often implies discontent or disappointment. The remainder of the sentence, specifically stating the cause of the disappointment, is often left out in colloquial speech because the situation makes it obvious.

Point in time/stage

The Hotel Platon has begun to receive one cancellation after another due to negative TV coverage. The employees don't know what to do and turn to Mr. Todō, the general manager. He remains calm, however, and insists that they shouldn't worry, at least not at this point.



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Todō: 別に 今のところは
Betsu ni ima no tokoro wa
[no] particularly now = place/point as-for

何もする気はありません。
nani mo suru ki wa arimasen.
nothing do desire/intention as-for not have

"At this stage, I don't particularly intend to do anything." (PL3)

- *betsu ni* combines with a negative later in the sentence to mean "not particularly."
- *ima no tokoro* is literally "the place/point that is now" → "the present point/stage," or simply "this stage."
- *~ ki wa arimasen* is the PL3 form of *~ ki wa nai*, the negative form of the expression *~ ki ga aru*, literally "have a desire/will/intent to ~"

Stage/level

In *Chinmoku no Kantai* (The Silent Service), a military thriller, the United States has already launched one attack on this commander's renegade submarine (the *Yamato*) and is making further threatening movements.



© Kawaguchi Kaiji / Chinmoku no Kantai, Kodansha

Kaieda:

ともかく 我々 は 日本 に 戦後 初めて
Tomokaku wareware wa Nihon ni sengo hajimete
at any rate we as-for Japan at-(target) after war for first time

アメリカという 敵 に 噛みつかせた んだ。
Amerika to iu teki ni komitsukaseta nda.
America (quote) enemy to-(source) raude bite/snap at (explan.)

"At any rate, for the first time since the war, we made our enemy the United States take a snap at Japan." (PL2)

行くとこまで 行ってもらおう。

Iku tokoro made itte morau.
go place/point as far as will have them go

"We'll have them go as far as they will go."

"Let them escalate things to whatever level they will." (PL2)

- *Amerika to iu teki* = lit. "the enemy that is called America" → "the enemy that is America" → "our enemy the United States."
- *komitsukaseta* is the past form of *kamitsuku* ("bite/snap at" or "fasten one's teeth into"). In cases like this where *ni* is used to indicate both the source of an action (the US) and its target (Japan), context must tell us which is which.
- *itte* is the *-te* form of *iku* ("go"); the *-te* form of a verb plus *morau* implies having someone else do the specified action — whether by asking them directly, or, as here, by simply allowing them to proceed with something they are already doing.

The expression *iku tokoro made iku* more commonly occurs in the potential form, *ikeru tokoro made iku* ("go as far as one can go"). It can refer either to physical/geographical movements or to movements through time/stages/levels, etc.

Just did/just occurred (~ *shita tokoro da*)

A past-tense verb plus *tokoro* can refer to the place where some action occurred in the past, as in the example at the top of page 41, but it also makes an expression for “(someone) just did the action/the action just occurred.” In this scene, Roppeita and his section chief are taking a coffee break after checking in on the painting crew working at their office.



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Kurata: どう? 進んでる か?
Dō? Susunde-ru ka?
 how is/are progressing (?)
 “How’s it going? (Are they) making progress?” (PL2)

Matsuda: はい、今 経理 が 終わった ところ です。
Hai, ima keiri ga owatta toko desu.
 yes, now accounting (subj.) finished place/moment is
 “Yes sir. They just finished (painting) the accounting (department).” (PL3)

- this *dō* would be spoken as a question, which makes it a colloquial “how is it?/how about it?/how goes it?”
- *susunde-ru* is a contraction of *susunde-iru* (“is/are progressing”), from *susumu* (“to advance/progress”).
- *owatta* is the plain/abrupt past form of *owaru* (“finish”), so *owatta tokoro (da/desu)* means “just finished.”
- *tokoro* is often contracted to *toko* in colloquial speech.

Sentences like this often include verb modifiers like *ima* (“now”), *sakki* (“a while ago”), *saikin* (“recently”), *kyō* (“today”), *otoshi* (“this year”), etc., but in some cases the “current/recent” nature of the action must be understood purely from context.

(Was) just now doing/just about to do (~ *suru tokoro da/datta*)

A non-past verb plus *tokoro* similarly can refer to the place where an action occurs or will occur, but it can also mean someone is “just about to do the action”—or with some verbs, “just now doing the action.” Hagure, pictured here, is on his way to visit his son when he runs into him on the street.



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Hagure: 今 おまえの所 へ 行くところ だった のだ よ。
Ima omae no tokoro e iku tokoro datta no da yo.
 now your place to go moment was (explan.) (emph.)
 “I was just now going/about to go over to your place.”
 “I was just on my way over to your place.” (PL2)

- *omae* is a relatively rough, familiar masculine word for “you,” and *no* is possessive, so *omae no* = “your.”
- *iku* (“go”) is one of the verbs for which the non-past form + *tokoro* can mean either “just about to do” or “just now doing.”

Datta is the past form of *da* (“am/is/are”), but it is the tense of the verb before *tokoro* that makes the difference between the meanings “just did/just occurred” (past verb), “is just about to do” (non-past verb), and “is just now doing” (progressive verb, or in some cases non-past verb).

Simply not possible (~dokoro ja nai)

Sasaki is talking to his mother on the phone. She called because he hasn't come to visit lately, but he explains that he just hasn't had the time.



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Sasaki 忙しくて それ どころじゃなかったんだ。
Isogashikute sore doko ja nakatta nda.
 busy-(cause) that place/position was not (explan.)
"I've been so busy, it simply wasn't possible."
 (PL2)

- *isogashikute* is the *-te* form of *isogashii* ("be busy"); the *-te* form is here being used to state a cause/reason.
- *sore doko ja nakatta* is the past form of the expression *sore doko ja nai*, which emphatically states, "it is not a time/position/situation for that." The expression implies that the action referred to by *sore* ("that") might indeed be desirable, but, whether for lack of time or for some other reason, is out of the question/impossible/beyond one's capacity.

Dokoro ja nai can also follow action nouns directly, as in *benkyō dokoro ja nai*, "I have no time (or energy/presence of mind, etc.) to be studying/I'm in no position to be studying."

By the way (*tokoro-de*)

At the very moment in *The Silent Service* that Kaieda is talking tough (the example at the bottom of page 43), US President Bennett is meeting with his top advisors to determine their next move. Partway through the discussion he realizes he needs some additional information about the situation.



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Bennett:

ところで 「やまと」 が 核 を
Tokoro-de "Yamato" ga kaku o
 by the way (submarine name) (subj.) nukes (obj.)

搭載した かどうか の CIA 報告 は?
tōsai shita ka dōka ka no shi-ai-e hōkoku wa?
 loaded whether or not as-to CIA report as-for
 "By the way, as for the CIA report as to whether or not the Yamato took nuclear warheads on board (what did it say)?"

"Incidentally, what does the CIA tell us about whether or not the Yamato is armed with nuclear warheads?"
 (PL3)

- *tōsai shita* is the past form of *tōsai suru* ("load/take aboard [a vehicle/ship/plane]," or when speaking of weapons, "arm").
- ~ *ka dō ka* after a verb makes an expression meaning "whether or not (the action has been/will be done)." *No* makes *Yamato ga kaku o tōsai shita ka dō ka* ("whether or not the Yamato loaded nukes") into a modifier for *CIA hōkoku* ("CIA report").
- the topic marker *wa* ("as for ~"), spoken with the intonation of a question, asks very generally about the status/condition/contents, etc., of what comes before it.

Tokoro-de is a conjunction similar to "incidentally/by the way"; it can also be like "now" when that word is used to introduce a shift in topic or a new stage in the narrative.

