A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF THE TOPIC
PARTICLES IN KOREAN AND
JAPANESE

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I. Introduction

The Korean particles -nun(♀) and -un(♂) and the Japanese particle -wa(♀) are one of
the most elusive and deceptive problems in the languages respectively. They are also charac-
teristic features of the two languages differing from English and some other languages. The
Japanese particle and the Korean -nun/un 1 resemble each other in many respects. This is
an attempt to find out the semantic features of the two and show by comparison how they
resemble each other. It will also reveal the grammatical characteristics of those particles because
our analysis will make use of syntactic devices though grammar is not our main concern. 2
In addition, to the extent that the particles are characteristics of the languages, the study
will show a new direction possible in the study of the two languages.

The procedure followed is first to find out phrase structures underlying the sentences to
be analyzed. That is, the sentences will be considered as the outputs of underlying structures
and a set of one or more transformational processes. In reference to the underlying phrase
structures from which the derived structures to be analyzed are drawn, semantic features
will be assigned to the particles. However, one contrastive use between -nun/un and -i/ka

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1 The two forms are in complementary distribution, -nun occurring after vowels and -un after consonants. They may be conveniently written as -nun/un.
2 In regard to a new linguistic trend in which syntax and semantics are systematically incorpora-
ted, see Chomsky 1957, pp. 92-105, Chomsky 1955, pp. 15-18, pp. 148-163, Katz and Fodor
1963, pp. 479-518, and Katz and Postal 1964. In the theories of these transformationalists, the
linguistic theory of a language consists of three components, phonological, syntactic and semantic, and
the syntactic component is a device which relates the phonological and the semantic components.
As the syntactic component specifies both a deep structure that determines the semantic inter-
pretation of a sentence and a surface structure that determines its phonetic interpretation, the
phonological and the semantic components which are both "interpretive" have to depend on the
syntactic.
The Topic Particles in Korean and Japanese.

(0), (7) in Korean and also the contrastive use between -wa and -ga(h) in Japanese will be analyzed by the supposition or entailment method developed by Fillmore because the transformational device alone does not seem to be adequate enough to bring out the significant difference in those contrasting pairs.

In order to describe the underlying P-markers of the sentences under analysis, a rough skeleton of Phrase Structure rules will be set up and it will be shown how the sentences can be derived from those sets of UPs by transformations. Then we will be ready to assign the semantic features to those DPs.

II. The Data and the Phrase Structures.

In the course of analysis it has been found out that Korean and Japanese have almost identical syntactic structures as far as those particles are concerned. Therefore we will not take trouble to list them separately but rather list for convenience each set of the Korean and the corresponding Japanese sentences together. The main concern of our analysis is the structures:

\[
\begin{align*}
X \quad \text{nun} \\
Y \quad \text{ka} \\
\text{(Korean)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
X \quad \text{wa} \\
Y \quad \text{ga} \\
\text{(Japanese)}
\end{align*}
\]

We have below six sets of sentences which have superficially the same grammatical
structure:

K1  
| |  
|---|---|
| i | chayk -un apeci -ka sasyetta |

J1  
| kono hon -wa chichi -ga katta. |
| this book ( ) father ( ) bought |

—My father bought this book.

K2a  
| ku -nun sensayngnim -i chayk -ul cwusyetta |

J2a  
| kare -wa sensei -ga hon -o kudasatta |
| him ( ) teacher ( ) book ( ) gave |

—The teacher gave him a book.

K2b  
| cayk -un sensayngnim -i ku -eke cwusyetta |

J2b  
| hon -wa sensei -ga kare -ni kudasatta |
| book ( ) teacher ( ) him ( ) gave |

—The teacher gave him a book.

K3  
| apeci -nun khi -ka khusita |

J3  
| chichi -wa se -ga takai |
| father ( ) height ( ) tall |

—My father is tall.

K4  
| hankwuk -un san -i mantha |

J4  
| nihon -wa onsen -ga ooi |
| Japan ( ) hot spring ( ) many |

—There are many hot springs in Japan. (Japanese)

(Korea is a hilly country.)

K5  
| kaul -un santulpalam -i pwunta |

J5  
| aki -wa soyokaze -ga huku |
| fall ( ) gentle wind ( ) blow |

—Gentle wind blows in fall.

(We have gentle wind blowing in fall.)

In addition to those sentences we also have,

K6  
| nay -ka pise ipnita |

J6  
| watakushi-ga hisho desu |
| I ( ) secretary be |

—I am the secretary.
The Topic Particles in Korean and Japanese

K7 na -nun pisepini
J7 watashi-wa hisho desu
I ( ) secretary be
—I am a secretary.

Those sentences have been selected in order to represent the main types of construction features of the particles. In the following we see some sentences which have similar meanings to some of the above sentences but with different particles and structures.

K8 apeci -ka i chayk -ul sasyetta
J8 chichi -ga kono hon -o katta
father ( ) this book ( ) bought
—My father bought this book.

K9 sensayngnim -i ku -eke chayk -ul cwusyetta
J9 sensei -ga kare -ni hon -o kudasatta
teacher ( ) he (to) book ( ) gave
—The teacher gave him a book.

K10 apeci -ui khi -ka khusita
J10 chichi -no se -ga takai
father (of) height ( ) tall
—The height of my father is tall.
(My father is tall.)

K11 hankwuk -e san -i mantha
Korea (in) mountain ( ) many
—In Korea mountains are many.
(There are many mountains in Korea.
Korea is a hilly country.) (Korean)

J11 nihon -ni onsen -ga ooii
Japan (in) hot spring ( ) many
—In Japan hot springs are many.
(There are many hot springs in Japan.) (Japanese)

K12 kaul -e sandulpalam -i pwunta
J12 aki -ni soyokaze -ga huku
fall (in) gentle wind ( ) blow
—Gentle wind blows in fall.
(We have gentle wind blowing in fall.)
In reference to the sentences K6—J6 and from K8—J8 to K12—J12, we set up the following set of phrase structure rules which is far from being exhaustive but only represents some basic characteristics of the two languages, especially in respect to the structures involving those particles.  

Phrase Structure Rules for Korean and Japanese:

1. Comment \(\rightarrow\) (Adv. comm) Statement
   
2. Adv. comm \(\rightarrow\) NP \(\rightarrow\) (Pt) (Pl)
   
3. Statement \(\rightarrow\) Subject + Predicate

4. Subject \(\rightarrow\) NP + Ps

5. NP \(\rightarrow\) (Pron (Mod) N)

6. Mod \(\rightarrow\) N + Pp (Dem) (Preadj) (Adj)

7. Predicate \(\rightarrow\) NP + Cop (Adjval) (Vbal)

8. Cop \(\rightarrow\) Cop.s + End

9. Adjval \(\rightarrow\) (Preadj) Adj.s + End

\* Not all of the Phrase Structure and Lexical rules in this study give complete representations of morphemic units or phonological representations. For example 25. Adj.s-\(\rightarrow\) khusi actually includes si (an honorific morpheme). Some features irrelevant to the analysis of the topic particles have not been elaborated.
The Topic Particles in Korean and Japanese

10. \( V_ba \rightarrow (Adv.pr) \{C.obj + V_t\} \)
    \( C.obj = \) objective complement
    \( Adv.pr = \) predicate adverb

11. \( V_t \rightarrow \{V_t1, V_t2\} \)
    \( V_t1 = \) common transitive verb
    \( V_t2 = \) dative verb

12. \( C.obj \rightarrow \{Cdo \quad in \ env. \quad V_t1 \}
    \( Cdo = \) direct object
    \( Cio = \) indirect object

13. \( Cdo \rightarrow NP + Po \)
    \( Po = \) direct objective particle

14. \( Cio \rightarrow NP + Pi \)
    \( Pi = \) indirect objective particle

15. \( V_t1 \rightarrow V_t1.s + End \)
    \( V_t1.s = \) common transitive verb stem

16. \( V_t2 \rightarrow V_t2.s + End \)
    \( V_t2.s = \) dative verb stem

17. \( Adv.pr \rightarrow \{adv \quad NP + ptcl\} \)
    \( adv = \) adverbs
    \( ptcl = \) particles other than \( Ps, Pp, Po, Pi \).

18. \( V_i \rightarrow V_i.s + End \)
    \( V_i.s = \) intransitive verb stem

Lexical Rules for Korean:

19. \( Pt \rightarrow -e \)

20. \( Pl \rightarrow -e \)

21. \( Ps \rightarrow \{-i \quad in \ env. \quad -C \}
    \( \{\cdot-ka \quad in \ env. \quad -V \}

22. \( Pron \rightarrow na 'I',... \)

23. \( N \rightarrow apeci 'father', \) chayk 'book', \( khi 'height', \) hankwuk 'Korea', \( san 'mountain', \) kaul
    'fall', \( santulpalam 'gentle wind', \) pise 'secretary',...

24. \( Pp \rightarrow -ui \)

25. \( Adj.s \rightarrow khusi- 'tall, \) manh 'many',...

26. \( Vt.s \rightarrow sasyet- 'bought',...

27. \( Po \rightarrow \{-ul \quad in \ env. \quad -C \}
    \( \{-lul \quad in \ env. \quad -V \}

28. \( Vt2.s \rightarrow cwuxyet- 'gave',... \)
29. Vi.s → *puun- ‘blow’
30. Pi → -eke
31. End → -ta

Lexical Rules for Japanese:
32. Pt → -ni
33. P1 → -ni
34. Ps → -ga
35. Pron → watakushi ‘I’
   aki ‘fall’, soyokaze ‘gentle wind’, hisho ‘secretary’
37. Pp → -no
38. Adj.s → taka- ‘high, tall’, oo- ‘many’
39. Vt1.s → kat- ‘bought’
40. Po → -o
41. Vt2.s → kudasat ‘gave’
42. Vi.s → huk- ‘blow’
43. Pi → -ni
44. End → -i, -ta, -u.

III. Transformations and Supposition.

Fig. 1 (K8—J8)
Before we proceed to the rules, we will examine the P-markers for all those sentences for which the PS rules have been set up, the sentences K8—J8 to K12—J12. The highest dominating marker in those is Comment as it has already been noted in the PS rules.

Fig. 2 (K9—J9)

Fig. 3 (K10—J10)

Fig. 4 (K11—J11)
The transformation rules to be applied to the Korean and Japanese structures in the above are exactly the same. T1 is the *Topic Transformation* rule according to which one component of the *Comment* concerned is picked up as the topic of the sentence and hence receives more attention or becomes a sort of focus of the statement made by the sentence as a whole.

\[ T1 \begin{cases} \frac{P_i}{P_0} \\ \frac{P_p}{P_t} \end{cases} \rightarrow P_{top} \quad \text{P}_{top} = \text{topic particle} \]

in env. \[
\begin{align*}
1. & \quad \text{NP}_2 + \text{Ps} + \text{NP}_1 + \quad + Z \\
2. & \quad \text{NP}_1 + \quad + \text{NP}_2 + \text{Ps} + Z \\
Z &= \text{Predicate minus NP}_1 \text{ and its particle} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[ T2 \quad \text{NP}_2 + \text{Ps} + \text{NP}_1 + P_{top} \rightarrow \text{NP}_1 + P_{top} + \text{NP}_2 + \text{Ps} \]

in env. \[
\begin{align*}
+ Z
\end{align*}
\]

Additional Lexical Rule for Korean:

45. \[ P_{top} \rightarrow \{-m\text{un} \quad \text{in env.} \quad -V \}
\]

46. \[ P_{top} \rightarrow -w\]

Additional Lexical Rule for Japanese:

45. \[ P_{top} \rightarrow \{-un \quad \text{in env.} \quad -C \}
\]

\[ T2 \] is a permutation rule which shifts around the positions of two constituents in each rule. T1 is an optional rule while T2 is obligatory once T1 has been applied to any string of markers. As the result of the application of those rules, K1 can be derived from K8, J1 from J8, K2a and K2b from K9, J2a and J2b from J9, K3 from K10, J3 from J10, K4 from K11, J4 from J11, K5 from K12, and J5 from J12.\(^{10}\) After we have applied T1

\(^{10}\) This is not to be interpreted as meaning that the transformed sentences can be derived directly from the sentences K8, K9, ...K12. It is only meant that the P-markers (DP) for the the transformed sentences may be derived from the P-markers (UP) for the sentences K8, ......K12.
and T2 to those different UPs for the sentences K8—J12 (Figs 1—5), we get the same type of dominating node *Topic* for all those different nodes in the UPs, Cdo (Fig. 1), Cio (Fig. 2), Cdo (also Fig. 2), Mod (Fig. 3), Adv.comm (Fig. 4) and Adv.comm (Fig. 5). The newly derived node *Topic* may be represented by the P-markers as in Fig. 6.

**Fig. 6**

The only difference in the P-markers dominated by *Comment* in this DP (Fig. 6) from those in Figs 1—5 is that the one in the DP lacks the part which has been transformed and shifted to the position of *Topic* node. This DP structure is so common in both Korean and Japanese that it seems more natural to consider a sentence as consisting of *Topic* and *Comment* than of any other possibilities.

In the pair of sentences K7—J7, *-mun* and *-wa* are obviously subjective case as well as *-ka* and *-ga* are both subjective in the pair K6—J6. In such cases, too, it is possible to set up another transformation rule (*Topicalization 2*) or to incorporate it in T1, if we consider the pair K6—J6 as representing the UP and the pair K7—J7 as the DP. But in such cases it does not look easy to make out the difference in meaning by transformational device first of all because the meaning difference is not of the difference of truth value of those sentences but rather of different attitudes of the speaker depending upon situations. It does not reveal anything new by transforming the sentence with *-ka* into one with *-mun/un* or by transforming the sentence with *-ga* into one with *-wa*. As Fillmore’s entailment device looks good for our purpose on the other hand, we will try according to his line of thought in the following. Both K6 and J6 mean “I am the secretary,” and both K7 and J7 are given the translation “I am a secretary.” The difference in translation “the” and “a” in those two, however, does not show the real difference between the two sets but rather only a reflection.
of some other difference. The former set may be paraphrased “It is not anybody else but I that is the secretary,” while the second set may be “I am a secretary while somebody else is not a secretary but something else.” This difference may be brought out by introducing two different entailment rules for the sets.

In *nay-ka pise ipnita* (K6)

\[ \text{EK1. } (\text{NP}+i/\text{ka}+Z) \quad \text{entails} \quad (\bar{\alpha}(\text{NP}))+Z \]

where \( Z \) represents any type of *Predicate* and \( \alpha \) and \(-\alpha\) is a set of sign-changing rule representing the opposite negative-positive value to each other. Similarly in *watakushi-ga hisho desu* (J6),

\[ \text{EJ1. } (\text{NP}+\text{ga}+Z) \quad \text{entails} \quad (\alpha(\text{NP}))+Z \]

which means exactly the same as EK1.

For *na-nun pise ipnita*, (K7),

\[ \text{EK2. } (\text{NP}+\text{num/un}+Z) \quad \text{entails} \quad \text{NP}+(\alpha(Z)) \]

Exactly in the same manner, *watakushi-wa hisho desu* (J7)

\[ \text{EJ2. } (\text{NP}+\text{wa}+Z) \quad \text{entails} \quad \text{NP}+(\alpha(Z)) \]

\[ \text{Someone else}+(-\alpha(Z)) \]

IV. Conclusion

From the discussion in the above the following may be summarized.

1. The topic particles are not the subjective case nor do they represent only three or four cases. They represent at least the six cases discussed in this article.

2. The topic particles may be successfully considered as the transform of some other case particles. The topic particles substitute for various particles, holding the same case relations and adding the meaning of topicalization or contrast.11

11 The study seems to support partially Noam Chomsky's remark that "Topic-Comment is the basic grammatical relation of surface structure corresponding (roughly) to the fundamental Subject-Predicate relation of deep structure." He also defines “the Topic-of the Sentence as the leftmost NP immediately dominated by S in the surface structure, and the Comment-of the Sentence as the rest of the string,” (Chomsky 1965, p. 220 f). We consider the support partial because he seems to imply (note his word “roughly”) that the correspondence between the Topic-Comment of a sentence and the Subject-Predicate of deep structure is extensive even though he gives the sentence "This book I really enjoyed" as one of the counter-examples in English. From the present study it may be assumed that Topic-Comment is the basic grammatical relation of surface structure corresponding to some other case relations (including Subject-Predicate) of deep structure. As to the position of the Topic of a sentence, the study seems to support Chomsky fully (see the permutation rule T2) even though there are examples of sentences in which some other elements appear to the left of
3. The semantic features of the particles may be drawn in chart as the following:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>subj</th>
<th>dative</th>
<th>object</th>
<th>possess</th>
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<th>contrast</th>
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REFERENCES


the Topic. In such cases the leftmost elements seem to weaken the topicalization effect at least in Korean and Japanese. This observation needs further study before it can be fully described. It must be added that this proposal about Topic-Comment was suggested to Chomsky by Paul Kiparsky. (ibid, p. 221).

12 In regard to the subject and the predicate contrats in the topic and the subjective particles, stress also seems to be relevant which is not included in the present study.