

# THE JAPANESE POSTPOSITIONS

## *wa* AND *ga*

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In analyses of Japanese sentences, it has become most common, though not universal, to identify the nouns of sentences like those in (1) as *topic* (indicated by *wa*) and subject of *comment* (indicated by *ga*).

- (1) a. hon wa haba ga hiroi.

book width big

As for the book, its width is big.

- b. inu wa ashi ga nagai.

dog leg long

As for the dog, its legs are long.

- c. kino wa kare ga sensei ni hanashita.

yesterday he teacher talked

Yesterday, he talked to his teacher.

- d. pen wa watakushi ga musuko ni agemashita.

pen I son gave

As for the pen, I gave it to my son.

The topic is the general notional context of the sentence and is usually considered to be already in the consciousness of the listener either because of recent prior mention or because of the subject of the discourse. In addition, it is generally considered to suggest a comparison with other ideas in the same class. Matsuo Soga even posits in the underlying form of such sentences an optionally deleted sentence joined to the first by the coordinate conjunction *ga* 'but', making explicit in the deep structure the comparison which is implicit in the surface structure. (Soga, 300)

The remainder of the Japanese sentence consists of commentary of one sort or another on the topic, and the comment noun is considered the specific grammatical subject of the sentence. It carries the main information of the sentence and, unlike the topic noun, is closely

linked to the verb. In this analysis, the comment subject is marked by *ga* whether or not the topic appears in the surface structure, and the topic is marked by *wa* whether or not the comment NP has been deleted.

It is not the purpose of this paper to take sharp issue with the above as far as it goes in my very brief sketch. Instead, I plan to explore to an elementary degree a form of deep-structure analysis not customarily applied to Japanese and which is not at all in conflict with the topic-comment concept. First, however, I want to take note of a general problem which, while not solved here, needs more attention than it normally receives. I refer to the notion of *ga* as an indicator of contrastive emphasis.

Even though as recently as 1967 Roy Andrews Miller defined *ga* as "used for the emphatic subject" (Miller, 343), the idea that *ga* is an indicator of contrastive emphasis is often dismissed with an almost cavalier disdain. Kuroda points out that "the semantic effects of stress are varied and vague" and that "one would hesitate" to distinguish syntactically certain concepts in English by means of stress. (Kuroda, 50) Koo states that the remarks of people who claim *ga* to be an emphatic marker are "not systematic, but purely notional; so they hardly deserve...further comments." (Koo, 1-2) It seems that while the above comments are essentially correct, that is, stress is vague as an indicator of syntactic constructions and it is difficult to utilize it systematically in a theory of syntax, the fact of a relationship between *ga* and emphatic stress still exists and should not be ignored. In the questions and answers in (2), the native speaker often finds the only difference between the use of *wa* and *ga* to be the stress indicated by italicizing in the English translations.

(2) A. [What is this thing?]

a. *kore wa* kami desu.

this paper is

As for this, it is (a piece of) paper.

[Which (of two things) is a piece of paper?]

b. *kore ga* kami desu.

*This* is (a piece of) paper.

B. [Whose car is that?]

a. *ano kuruma wa* watakushi no desu.

that car

As for that car, it is mine.

[Which car is yours?]

b. *ano kuruma ga* watakushi no desu.

*That* car is mine.

C. [What do you think of sake?]

a. sake *wa* kirai desu.

bad

As for sake, I dislike it.

[Which do you dislike, sake or beer?]

b. sake *ga* kirai desu.

I dislike *sake*.

The explanation, and as far as it goes it is a good one, is that emphasis of a noun *presupposes* the verb-noun relationship indicated by *ga*; hence, the particle is functioning here exactly as it does elsewhere. However, it also serves one of the functions of *wa*. It was stated earlier that one characteristic of the *wa* phrase is a comparison with other items in the same class. In sentence (2)Ba, for instance, *ano kuruma wa* means, implicitly, 'that car, in comparison with all other cars.' But all of the sentences marked b also involve comparison. Each one differs from its parallel sentence with *wa* only in that the range of the comparison has been sharply reduced. This situation does not correspond to the one in English. On those rare occasions that the 'as for.....' construction occurs naturally in English there is no bar to stressing the topic noun (e.g., "You may stay. As for *you*, get out!"). But in Japanese, the presence of stress requires *ga* even when all else suggests *wa*. One further point of interest concerns the *position* of vocal stress. In English, emphasis is shown by vocal stress on the noun or determiner; in Japanese, it is placed on the *ga* following the stressed noun, suggesting a very direct association in the speaker's mind between that particle and contrastive emphasis. The vagueness (i.e., our current lack of understanding) of the psychological nature of stress may make it difficult to discuss systematically, but to ignore it is to miss something important to an understanding of the intuition of the native speaker.

The analysis I propose here is the scheme presented by Charles Fillmore in "The Case for Case". A minor deviation from Fillmore is in the order of constituents in the initial phrase structure rules which I give as follows:

1.  $S \rightarrow P+M$

2.  $P \rightarrow C_1 + \dots + C_n + V$

P = Proposition

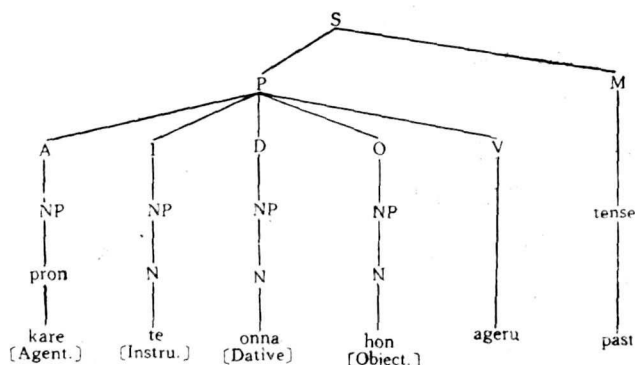
M = Modality

C = Case

This is to accommodate Japanese word order and reduce to a minimum the number of word order transformations required. (3) shows the deep structure of the sentence *Kare ga te de*

onna ni hon o agemashita 'He gave the woman the book with his hand'.

(3)



In accordance with a suggestion made by Fillmore himself, I have included in the base a rule which "associates with each noun a label identifying the case relation it holds with the rest of the sentence." (Fillmore, 27) My reason for such a rule is to make it possible to realize the postpositions by a transformation which inserts the particles, incorporating into the features of each one the case feature of the associated noun. The identity of each particle is determined by a combination of case feature and word order. The single exception pertinent to this study is *ga*, which is realized with the other postpositions but is not actually a case marker. Instead, at this point, *ga* marks the grammatical subject of the sentence and is associated with whichever noun is in the subject position at the time of particle insertion. This makes it possible to realize *ga* with the other postpositions and at the same time keep the relation "subject of" out of the deep structure. For this, it is only necessary that the first transformation be the *subject fronting* rule which moves the subject NP to the left of all other NPs in the Proposition and subjoins it directly to the S. When the *particle realization* rule is applied, the postposition to the right of the subject NP is always *ga* regardless of the case of the NP.

Writing of English sentences, Fillmore says, "If there is an A, it becomes the subject; otherwise, if there is an I, it becomes the subject; otherwise, the subject is the O." (Fillmore, 33) Elsewhere (40), he says that "when there is only one case category, its NP must serve as the surface subject." He admits these are generalizations, but the following sentences indicate that much the same can be said of Japanese.

(4) a. Hiroshi ga too o akemashita.

door opened

Hiroshi opened the door.

- b. Too wa Hiroshi ga akemashita.  
The door was opened by Hiroshi.
- c. Kagi ga too o akemashita.  
key  
The key opened the door.
- d. Hiroshi ga kagi de too o akemashita.  
Hiroshi opened the door with the key.
- e. Too ga akemashita.  
The door opened.
- f. Tookyoo ga atsui.  
hot  
Tokyo is hot.

According to Fillmore's own comments concerning the English sentences on which these are patterned (Fillmore, 25), *Hiroshi* in a and b is A; *kagi* is I in c and d; *too* is O in a, b, and e; and *Tookyoo* is L (Locative) in f. Note that in c, where there is no A, *kagi* is marked with *ga*; in e, where there is neither A nor I, *too* has *ga*; and in f, where there is no A, I, or O, the single NP gets *ga*. In a, b, and c, *too* could not have *ga* and *kagi* could not in d. Hence, the sentences in (5) are ungrammatical.

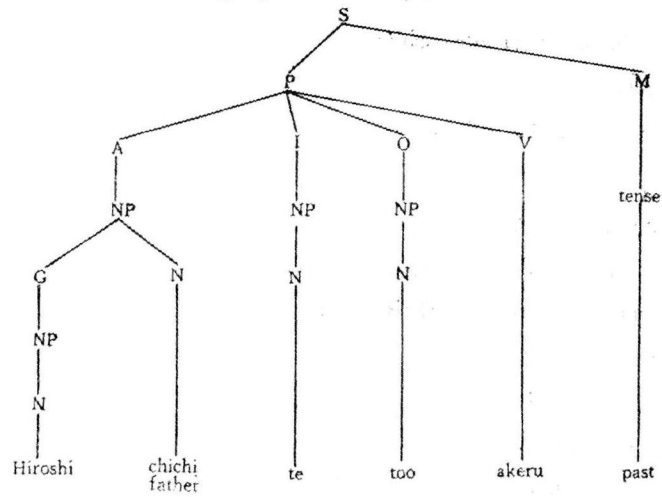
- (5) a. \*Hiroshi wa too ga akemashita.  
b. \*Kagi wa too ga akemashita.  
c. \*Hiroshi wa kagi ga too o akemashita.

The change from (6) to (7) below shows the effect of the *subject fronting* rule and that from (7) to (8) the effect of the *particle realization* rule in the string *Hiroshi no chichi ga te de too o akemashita* 'Hiroshi's father opened the door with his hand'.

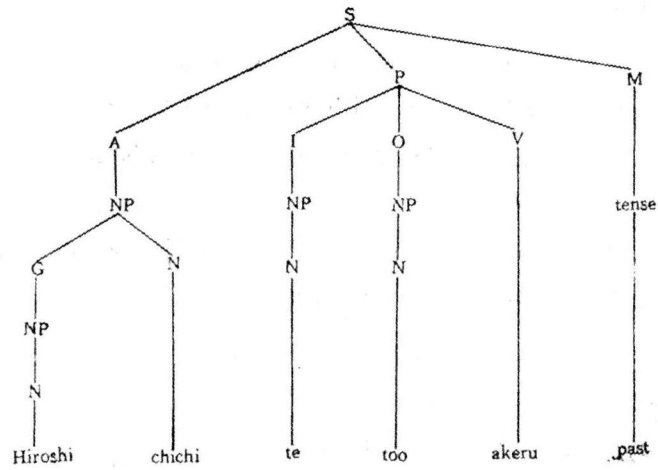
A further rule, *subject deletion*, requires some discussion. Soga says of the sentences in (9) that all of them "may sometimes be further reduced to *NP wa + Predicate*." (Soga, 297)

- [illegible]

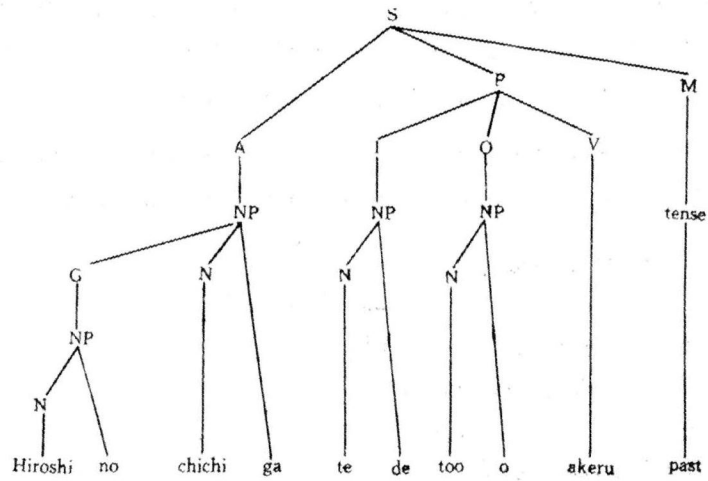
(6)



(7)



(8)



c. tookyoo wa musuko ga sunde iru.

son live is

As for Tokyo, (my) son is living (there).

d. sikago wa tomodati ga itta.

friend went

As for Chicago, (my) friend went (there).

e. tookyoo wa orinpikku ga atta.

were

As for Tokyo, the Olympics were (there).

The subject deletion rule which allows the reduction states that if the subject is clear to the listener it may be deleted entirely from the sentence. Soga is here restricting the domain of the rule, and, therefore, the designation "subject of the sentence" to the *NP ga* phrase alone. This is precisely true viewed in the light of the English translation of each sentence; however, I submit that the English is something less than a perfect picture of what is going on in the inverted Japanese sentence. English has no subject deletion rule and so to delete the subject makes the sentence more or less meaningless if it affects it at all. But in Japanese, to delete the corresponding *ga* phrase has one of two effects. In sentences (9)b-e it changes nothing as long as the listener knows what is left out. However, to change a to *zoo wa nagai* has the effect of changing the meaning of the sentence. It is now the elephant, not its trunk, that is long. Note the similar result of applying the rule to sentences a and b of (1).

(10) a. hon wa hiroi. 'As for the book, it is big.'

b. inu wa nagai. 'As for the dog, it is long.'

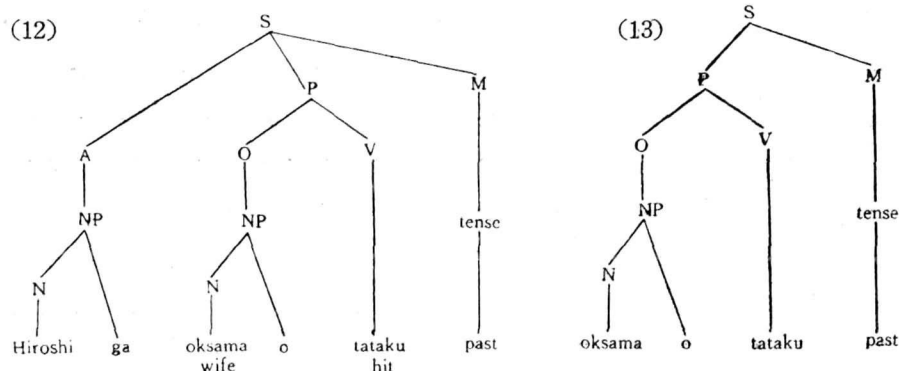
These sentences have a single trait in common; their nouns bear the universe-scope relationship described by Householder and Cheng. When the *ga* phrase is deleted from each of sentences (9)b-e, selectional restrictions make it clear that the topic noun does not receive the action of the verb, but that is not true of the universe-scope sentences. Because the scope noun is subsidiary to, and shares certain semantic features with, the universe noun, the deletion of the former usually means that the latter automatically becomes the subject of the sentence. While the sentences in (11) are significantly different, the native speaker considers their subjects the same regardless of what he knows about the deleted *ga* phrase of (11)a.

(11) a. zoo wa nagai. 'As for the elephant, it is long.'

b. zoo ga nagai. 'The elephant is long.'

To express (11)a in a discourse about elephants' trunks is to invite confusion. This seems to suggest that whether we consider *zoo wa* the subject or merely the source of all the semantic features of an implied subject in the same way that an antecedent noun assigns features to a pronoun, we must reserve for it a function in the surface subject not suggested by the English translation. This is borne out further by the fact that sentences (9)a-e can also be reduced to *nagai*, *hanasu*, *sunde iru*, *itta* and *atta* respectively. In fact, in universe-scope sentences, it is only by deleting *both* NPs instead of just the *ga* phrase that the meaning can be clearly retained. Following is a discussion of how this situation can be handled.

From the definition of "subject" already given it is clear that the subject deletion rule allows the case category subjoined directly to S to be deleted, as in (12) and (13) below, *quam* the discourse makes clear to the listener what is intended.



'Hiroshi hit his wife.' *Hiroshi ga oksama o tataita.*  $\Rightarrow$  *Oksama o tataita.*

It is this rule which makes clear the distinction between such pairs of sentences as those in (14).

(14) a. *too o akemashita.* '(Someone) opened the door.'

b. *too ga akimashita.* 'The door opened.'

Sentence (14)a has undergone subject deletion in which the agentive NP has been lost from the tree. In (14)b, the objective noun *too*, as the only noun in the string, has become the surface subject and the optional subject deletion rule has not been applied.

It has been suggested (Householder and Cheng and others) that the derivations of universe-scope sentences differ from the others in that they contain possessive phrases of the sort illustrated in (15)

(15) a. *hon no haba ga hiroi*  $\Rightarrow$  *hon wa haba ga hiroi.*

'The book's width is great.'

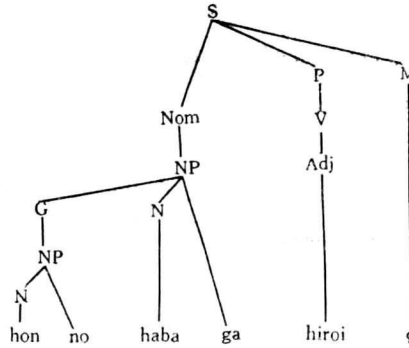


b. inu no ashi ga nagai  $\Rightarrow$  inu wa ashi ga nagai.

'The dog's legs are long.'

Tree (16), then, shows the situation that holds at a certain point in the derivations.

(16)



It is at this point that the decision to apply or not to apply the subject deletion rule must be used. If the rule applies, then everything under 'Nom' is deleted, including both nouns. Hence, the deleted scope situation never arises; either the entire universe-scope complex is deleted or nothing is.

The semantic relationship between *ga* and *wa* has been the subject of an enormous amount of discussion and there are still points of disagreement. By assigning *ga* the role of subject marker before introducing *wa* into the grammar we've answered the question of whether *wa* itself is the subject marker. In fact, the identity of the grammatical subject is not affected by the presence or absence of *wa* which is realized by an insertion rule after both *particle realization* and *subject deletion*.

The *wa* particle can be inserted after any phrase which can serve intelligibly as the topic of the sentence, which is to say most of the case constituents of P and of M; constituents of lower-level elements are not customarily topicalized. The *wa-insertion* rule has the following effects on the existing particles: when it follows *ga*, *o*, or *no*, the old particle is deleted, leaving only *wa*. In all other environments, it is optional whether or not to delete the particle already in place. Rule (17) is the final portion of the topicalization process.

$$(17) \#(NP_1 \text{ ga}) (x) NP_2 \text{ wa} \Rightarrow \begin{matrix} 3 & 1 & 2 \\ 1 & 2 & 3 \end{matrix}$$

After *wa-insertion* and *particle deletion*, the *wa* phrase is moved to the leftmost position in the string and subjoined to S.

The following concerns the case categories most commonly topicalized.

*Agentive.* Watakushi ga too o akemashita  $\Rightarrow$

'I opened the door.'

\*Watakushi ga wa too o akemashita  $\Rightarrow$

Watakushi wa too o akemashita

'As for me, (I) opened the door.'

Nominals in the agentive case are always followed by *ga* before *wa*-insertion even though *ga* is not a case marker. This is because any existing agentive noun automatically becomes the subject of the sentence and is therefore assigned the *ga* particle. Replacing *ga* with *wa* does not mean that *wa* is now the subject marker but only that the former subject is now also the topic.

*Objective.* Watakushi ga too o akemashita  $\Rightarrow$

'I opened the door.'

\*Watakushi ga too o wa akemashita  $\Rightarrow$

\*Watakushi ga too wa akemashita  $\Rightarrow$

Too wa watakushi ga akemashita

'As for the door, I opened it.'

*Genitive.* Zoo no hana ga nagai  $\Rightarrow$

'The elephant's nose is long.'

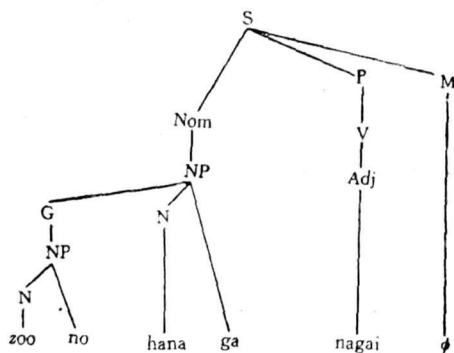
\*Zoo no wa hana ga nagai  $\Rightarrow$

Zoo wa hana ga nagai

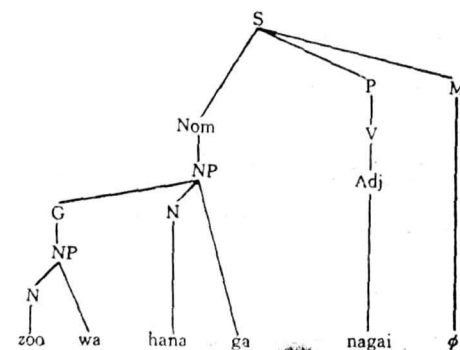
'As for the elephant, its nose is long.'

It is the latter pattern that produces the universe-scope sentences and it is only in this

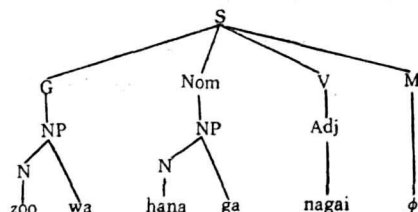
(18)



(19)



(20)



instance that the affected case category is not a constituent of P or M. Trees (18), (19), and (20) show the changes that take place.

*Dative.* Watakushi ga hon o kare ni agemashita ⇒

‘I gave the book to him.’

\*Watakushi ga hon o kare ni wa agemashita ⇒

Kare (ni) wa watakushi ga hon o agemashita

‘As for him, I gave (him) the book.’

*Instrumental.* Watakushi ga kagi de too o akemashita ⇒

‘I opened the door with the key.’

\*Watakushi ga kagi de wa too o akemashita ⇒

Kagi (de) wa watakushi ga too o akemashita

‘As for the key, I opened the door (with it).’

Clearly, all of the above case categories except genitive might, under certain conditions, become the subject of the sentence, and, in fact, a general rule is that any NP that can be subjectivized can be topicalized. Indications of the greater freedom of *wa* are (a) the lack of constraints concerning which of several NPs can be topicalized in a string (as opposed to the rigid constraints on the subject marker), and (b) the fact that the modality constituents listed below can be topics but not subjects.

*Directional.* Watakushi ga Tookyoo e itta ⇒

‘I went to Tokyo.’

\*Watakushi ga Tookyoo e wa itta ⇒

Tookyoo (e) wa watakushi ga itta

‘As for Tokyo, I went (there).’

*Locative.* Ame ga Tookyoo ni futta ⇒

rain fell

'It rained in Tokyo.'

\*Ame ga Tookyoo ni wa futta ⇒

Tookyoo (ni) wa ame ga futta

'As for Tokyo, it rained (there).'

*Temporal.* Kare ga kyoo itta ⇒ \*Kare ga kyoo wa itta ⇒  
today

'He left today.'

Kyoo wa kare ga itta. 'As for today, he left (then).'

Instances in which topicization does *not* occur are illustrated in (21) and (22).

(21) a. dono inu ga shiroi. 'Which dog is white?'  
which white

b. donata desu ka. 'Who is it?'  
who is

(22) a. mizu ga nomitai. 'I want to drink (some) water.'  
water want to  
drink

b. pan ga tabetai. 'I want to eat (some) bread.'  
bread want to  
eat

The block to *wa*-insertion in sentences with interrogative pronouns and desiderative verbs is a simple semantic one. In both cases, because of the peculiar functions of the sentences, the meaning would be lost if the nominal were treated as the notional context of the sentence rather than the subject of the verb. This is borne out further for the interrogatives by the fact that the following are ungrammatical as replies to questions (21)a and (21)b respectively.

(23) a. \*kono inu wa shiroi. 'This dog is white.'  
this

b. \*Otoko wa desu. 'It is a man.'  
man

Grammaticality could be regained simply by changing *wa* to *ga*.

Obviously no new answers have been discovered in what has been mainly a brief illustration of a certain procedure; however, one important point that has been made all too seldom in the past stands out clearly here. The confusion over the relative roles of *wa* and *ga* is based on a myth, the myth that the two are closely related entities. In fact, they are really quite different both in function and derivation.

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