The topic marker *wa*

Optional handout for additional examples and discussion

The discussion in this handout is mostly based on:

- Heycock, Caroline. 2008. "Japanese *-wa*, *-ga*, and information structure." In Shigeru Miyagawa and Mamoru Saito (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Linguistics,* 54-83. Oxford: Oxford U. Press.
- Jorden, Eleanor H., and Mari Noda. 1987. *Japanese: The Spoken Language, Part I.* New Haven: Yale U.P.
- Masuoka, Takashi. 1993. Chapter 12, "Syudai." *24syuu nihongo bunpoo tuaa,* 86-93. Tokyo: Kuroshio.

Some other useful references:

- Kuno, Susumu. 1973. *The Structure of the Japanese Language.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Tomioka, Satoshi. 2007. "The grammar of anti-exhaustivity." Paper presented at Workshop on Prosody and Information Structure (WPSI) 3, Indiana University.

I. What is *wa*?

- Japanese grammar books in Japan often refer to both *wa* and *ga* as "subject markers;" this is misleading because ***wa is not a subject marker*.** Masuoka (1993) gives three arguments for this:

(1) The contexts in which *wa* は and *ga* が are used differ. Minimal pair: (M 1993: 86)

Watasi-**wa**	Tanaka	desu.	*used to introduce oneself*
Watasi-**ga**	Tanaka	desu.	*used in response to question, "Which of you is Tanaka?"*
I		*COP-FML-NPST*	

- And, crucially, in the opposite contexts these are infelicitous

(2) *wa* can be used to replace not only *ga*, but also *o* and (non-subject) *ni*. (M 1993: 87)

Bunpoo-**wa** kono hon de benkyoo-simasita. cf. *bunpoo-**o***
grammar-WA *this book INST* *study-do-FML-PAST*
'As for grammar, we studied it with this book.'

Ryoori-**wa** syuzin-ga saisyo ni hasi-o tukemasu. cf. *ryoori-**ni***
food-WA *my.husband* *first NI* *chopsticks* *attach-FML-NONPAST*
'As for the food, my husband is the first to stick his chopsticks in/on.'

(3) Some (intransitive??) predicates can be used with both *wa* and *ga* (M 1993: 87)

Zoo-**wa** hana-**ga** nagai.
elephant *nose* *long-NONPAST*
'As for elephants, their noses are long.'

- These intranstive(?) examples are intriguing: What is the syntactic structure here?

→ Seems to require the option of <u>base-generated</u> topic (not just from movement)

II. Noncontrastive and contrastive *wa* phrases

(4) There are two kinds of *wa* phrases, which we will consider separately:

(a) noncontrastive (sometimes called "thematic") *wa*
(b) contrastive *wa*

- Does recognizing a difference between noncontrastive and contrastive *wa* phrases help clarify anything about the usage and patterning of *wa*?

(5) Differences between the two, as summarized by Heycock (2008: §2)

	Noncontrastive *wa* phrases	**Contrastive *wa* phrases**
Implicature?	"convey[s] information... apparently without any implicature about the properties of any other [entity]"	"generate[s] implicatures concerning other entities in the discourse model"
Distribution in clause types?	main clause only (except: allowed with certain 'say'/'think' verbs)	main clause and many types of subordinate clause
Position?	must be clause-initial	clause-internal or clause-initial
Iteration allowed?	~No; only one occurrence per sentence (exception for 'scene-setting' PP or adverb *wa* phrases)	Yes; multiple occurrences possible in one sentence
If initial, did it undergo movement?	If no movement: noncontrastive *wa*	If movement: contrastive *wa*

(6) Additional differences, from Tomioka (2007/WPSI3)

	Noncontrastive *wa* phrases	**Contrastive *wa* phrases**
Receive focal accent? (high H followed by radically reduced pitch)	no	must [?? even if multiple?]
Category of phrase?	NP, PP, CP [also adverbs? –JLS] ('nominal or quasi-nominal')	essentially anything, including also VP, AP
Referent?	contextually familiar or recoverable entity ('given/old information')	can be familiar or novel

(7) Why is it so tempting to think of *wa* as a "subject marker"?

(a) What kind of *wa* phrase is it that most looks like it's related to "subject"?

- Main-clause-initial, 'given' in the discourse, no special intonation, 'quasi-nominal'

(b) Why do you suppose people are less likely to confuse *wa* with an "object marker"?

- What are the expected characteristics of an object that is marked with *wa*? What kind of *wa* phrase is this...
  - → ...if it remains in object position?
  - → ...if it moves to sentence-initial position?

(8) Upshot: The most confusing problem for a learner of Japanese (and for a theoretical linguist) is developing a theory to predict what situations will call for **noncontrastive topic marking** (with *wa*) and what situations will call for **subject marking** (with *ga*).

III. Some generalizations about the usage of *wa* (and *ga*)

- Disclaimer: As is clear from the later sections of the Heycock paper, there are **many interacting factors** that affect the acceptability of *wa* versus *ga* in a given sentence as uttered in a given context. The factors discussed here are not the whole story — but they might help.

A. Usage of noncontrastive topics ('As for X,...'): Some incompatible situations

(9) Noncontrastive *wa* is used to set up some entity or concept that is already familiar in the discourse as a 'topic' which the rest of the sentence will then expound upon

(a) Masuoka notes that the topic is in a sense subordinate to the "explanation" that accompanies it [i.e., it is the comment that is the new information] (M 1993: 89)

(b) Along these lines, there is often **no overt topic expressed** in a sentence, since often it is recoverable from context and can be omitted (or realized as a null element??)

(10) Since these are the things that a noncontrastive topic does, there are restrictions on the types of elements that can appear as (overt) noncontrastive topics

(11) Two examples judged to be "husizen" 不自然 ('unnatural'; common linguistics term for this is *infelicitous*); Masuoka says these are "repaired" if we replace *wa* with *ga* (M 1993: 90)

(a) # Dono hito-**wa** anata-no oniisan desu ka.
which person you-GEN older.brother COP Q
Intended meaning: 'Which person is your older brother?'

(b) # Hito-ri-no otoko-**wa** totuzen hanasikakete kimasita.
one-CL-GEN man suddenly talk-TE come-FML-PAST
Intended meaning: 'A man suddenly came and spoke (to me).'

- So why are those two examples not good noncontrastive topics?

  Because for something to be a noncontrastive topic, it must **designate given information**.

- Ex (a) has *wa* on a **question phrase**, which is clearly not designating anything.
- Ex (b) has *wa* on a **newly introduced discourse element**, something that would be used with an indefinite article in Eng. etc.; until after it is introduced, there is no prior information in the discourse as to what this expression designates

(12) These next examples are fine, though: (M 1993: 91)

(a) Anata-no oniisan-**wa** dono hito desu ka.
you-GEN older.brother which person COP Q

(b) Hitori no otoko-ga totuzen hanasikakete kita.
one-CL-GEN man suddenly talk-TE come-PAST
'A man suddenly came and spoke (to me).'

Otoko-**wa** pen to tetyoo-o te ni site-ita.
man pen and notebook hand NI do-PROG-PAST
'The man had a pen and a notebook in his hand.'

B. When is a (noncontrastive) topic necessary/avoided?

(13) Need to draw on the distinction between **active** and **stative** predicates (M 1993: 92)
[Question: What about **achievement** predicates?]

- A stative predicate can be identified by this diagnostic: If a stative predicate is true of a time interval, it is also true of all of its subintervals

(a) With a **stative** predicate, there is a preference for **having a topic**. (M 1993: 92)

Takako-wa kinben da. 'T. is diligent.' / 'As for T., she is diligent.'
diligent COP

Koozi-wa sigoto de isogasii. 'K. is busy with work.' / 'As for K., he is busy...'
work INST *busy*-NONPAST

- If *wa* is replaced with *ga* here, we get, e.g., the answer to a question 'Who is diligent/busy?'. I.e., with *ga*, these are a bit odd in out-of-the-blue contexts.
- And, even where the *ga* versions are used, it is probably not the case that these sentences are really without a topic — there is probably a null topic, namely, 'the one who is diligent/busy'. [JLS: this may be why these are odd as discourse-initial sentences; there is no discourse referent for that null topic.]

(b) With an **active** predicate, both [+topic], [–topic] sentences are possible (M 1993: 92)

Takako-**wa**	marason-kyoogi ni	syutuzyoo sita.
Takako-**ga**	marason-kyoogi ni	syutuzyoo sita.
	marathon NI	*participate*-PAST

(14) More factors affecting presence of noncontrastive topic:

(a) Active predicates: When an occurrence is **observed and immediately described** ("Oh, look!"), this is not the kind of utterance that is commonly given a topic-comment structure. (M 1993: 93)

Basu-**ga**	kita	yo.	Saifu-**ga**	otimasita	yo.
bus	*come*-PAST	EMPH	*wallet*	*fall*-PAST	EMPH
'(Look,) the bus came.'			'(Oh, hey,) your wallet fell [=you dropped it].'		

(b) In fact, this effect occurs even with stative predicates. (M 1993: 93)

Nisi no	sora-**ga**	makka da.	Tonari-**ga**	kazi	da!
west-GEN	*sky*	*all.red* COP	*next.door*	*fire*	COP
'(Look,) the western sky is all red.'			'(Hey!) (The house) next door is on fire!'		

- Cute side note: About the sentence *Tonari-**wa** kazi da* —
Masuoka says, "...ika ni mo aida-no nuketa hanasi desu ne."
('This really seems to be a story that is missing the middle part.')

C. Contrastive topic ('X is Y, but...')

(15) Use of *wa* to set up an overt contrast (examples from Jorden & Noda 1987)

(a) Kono eki ni arimasu. 'There's one in this station.' p 141
Kono eki ni **wa** arimasu ga... 'There's one in THIS station, but (I'm not
this station LOC exist-FML but commenting on other stations).'

(b) Kyooto made **wa** ikimasu ga... 'I'm going as far as KYOTO (at least), but...
up.to go-FML but (I probably won't go any farther).' p 163

(c) Enpitu de **wa** kakimasen.desita. 'I didn't write [it] in PENCIL (but with
pencil INST write-FML-NEG-PAST something else).' p 176

D. So...What about *ga*?

(16) Jorden & Noda (1987: 90) on NP + *ga*

(a) "In this pattern, [NP] ... (1) often refers to a **new item in the conversation** — even one which may be unfamiliar to the person addressed — and (2) usually provides **exhaustive** information within the immediate context. Completely **lacking is the notion that X is being compared or contrasted** with other items, as in the case of *X wa*." [emphasis added]

- exhaustive listing (Heycock/Kuno): approximately 'It was X that Y' (for *X-ga Y*)

(b) "In discourse, a *wa*-phrase may extend its meaning over a number of sentences, whereas a *ga*-phrase regularly links up only with a predicate in the same sentence." (Jorden & Noda 1987, 90) [could we even say further, same *clause*?]

(17) Does J&N's characterization of *ga* give any insight into why it often appears to be in "complementary distribution" with *wa*?

- How does *ga* relate to noncontrastive *wa* and contrastive *wa*?