About the “particle” wa

The discussion in this handout is mostly based on:


Some other useful references:


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 intransitive(?) examples are intriguing: What is the syntactic structure here?
→ Seems to require the option of base-generated 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?
Differences between the two, as summarized by Heycock (2008: §2)

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

Additional differences, from Tomioka (2007/WPSI3)

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<tr>
<td><strong>Receive focal accent?</strong></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>must [?? even if multiple?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(high H followed by radically reduced pitch)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Category of phrase?</strong></td>
<td>NP, PP, CP [also adverbs? –JLS] (‘nominal or quasi-nominal’)</td>
<td>essentially anything, including also VP, AP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Referent?</strong></td>
<td>contextually familiar or recoverable entity (‘given/old information’)</td>
<td>can be familiar or novel</td>
</tr>
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</table>

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?

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.

*y-gen older.brother which person cop q*

(b) Hitori no otoko-

gathotuzen 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.’
\[\text{diligent cop}\]

Koozi-wa sigoto de isogasii. ‘K. is busy with work.’ / ‘As for K., he is busy…
\[\text{work inst busy-NONPAST}\]

• 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.
\[\text{marathon ni participate-PAST}\]

Takako-ga marason-kyoogi ni syutuzyoo sita.
\[\text{marathon NI participate-PAST}\]

(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.
\[\text{bus come-PAST EMPH wallet fall-PAST EMPH}\]
‘(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!
\[\text{west-GEN sky all.red cop next.door fire cop}\]
‘(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.’
   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).’
   p 141

(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?