

About the “particle” *wa*

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 tuua*, 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. Slides: [<http://www.indiana.edu/~gpsi/Tomioka-wpsi3.pdf>]

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.	<i>used to introduce oneself</i>
Watasi- ga	Tanaka	desu.	<i>used in response to question, “Which of you is Tanaka?”</i>
<i>I</i>		<i>COP-FML-NPST</i>	

 - 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.	<i>cf. bunpoo-o</i>
<i>grammar-wa</i>	<i>this book INST</i>	<i>study-do-FML-PAST</i>	
<i>‘As for grammar, we studied it with this book.’</i>			
Ryoori- wa	syuzin-ga	saisyo ni	hasi-o
<i>food-wa</i>	<i>my.husband</i>	<i>first NI</i>	<i>chopsticks attach-FML-NONPAST</i>
<i>‘As for the food, my husband is the first to stick his chopsticks in/on.’</i>			
 - (3) Some (intransitive??) predicates can be used with both *wa* and *ga* (M 1993: 87)

Zoo- wa	hana- ga	nagai.
<i>elephant</i>	<i>nose</i>	<i>long-NONPAST</i>
<i>‘As for elephants, their noses are long.’</i>		

 - 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*?

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

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

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

	Noncontrastive <i>wa</i> phrases	Contrastive <i>wa</i> phrases
<i>Receive focal accent?</i> (<i>high H followed by radically reduced pitch</i>)	no	must [?? even if multiple?]
<i>Category of phrase?</i>	NP, PP, CP [also adverbs? –JLS] (‘nominal or quasi-nominal’)	essentially anything, including also VP, AP
<i>Referent?</i>	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*?