

THE SYNTAX OF TOPICS IN JAPANESE

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1 Introduction

The Japanese particle *wa* is widely considered a topic marker. The particle has two uses (Kuno 1973): non-contrastive ('thematic' in Kuno's terminology) and contrastive. Non-contrastive *wa*-phrases are unstressed, typically occupy clause-initial position and are what the rest of the sentence is about (Reinhart 1981). Contrastive *wa*-phrases bear an emphatic stress, can remain in-situ and implicate contrast (Saito 1985, Hoji 1985, Tomioka 2007a,b, Watanabe 2003):

- (1) non-contrastive *wa*:
- a. sono hon_i-wa John-ga e_i katta.
that book-wa John-nom bought
- b. #John-ga sono hon-wa katta.
John-nom that book-wa bought
'Speaking of that book, John bought it.'
- (2) contrastive *wa*:
- a. SONO HON_i-WA John-ga t_i katta. (SMALL CAPS = emphatic stress)
that book-wa John-nom bought
- b. John-ga SONO HON-WA katta.
John-nom that book-wa bought
'John bought that book (not this one).'

The two types of *wa*-phrases are generally analysed as two distinct types of topics: non-contrastive topics and contrastive topics (See Heycock to app. for overview of the literature). Indeed, other than bearing the same particle, they appear not to share any properties either in their interpretation or in their syntactic distribution.

In this paper, I argue that:

- (3) Both types of topic in Japanese are what the rest of the sentence is about (Reinhart 1981)
- (4) Topics in Japanese is licensed in clause-initial position.

⇒ Only those *wa*-phrases in clause-initial position are topics.

In doing so, I will show that...

- (5) in contexts that require a *wa*-phrase to be interpreted as a contrastive topic or non-contrastive topic, the *wa*-phrase must appear in clause-initial position;
- (6) *wa*-phrases in non-clause-initial position are not topics. The is true for both contrastive and non-contrastive *wa*-phrases.
- a. they are not interpreted as what the rest of the sentence is about:
- i. a contrastive *wa*-phrase in non-clause-initial position simply implicates contrast;
- ii. a non-contrastive *wa*-phrase in non-clause-initial position is simply discourse anaphoric;
- b. they display different syntactic behaviour from their counterparts in clause-initial position.

2 Topics in Contexts

2.1 Non-contrastive topic

A request such as *tell me about X* forces *X* to be interpreted as a topic in the following utterance (Reinhart 1981). In responding to such a request *X* must be marked with *wa* and appear in clause-initial position.

- (7) sono inu-nituite osiete-kudasai
that dog-about tell-please
'Tell me about that dog.'
- (8) a. sono inu-wa kinoo kooen-de John-o kande-simatta
that dog-wa yesterday park-at John-acc bite-closed
- b. # John_i-o sono inu-wa kinoo kooen-de t_i kande-simatta
John-acc that dog-wa yesterday park-at bite-closed
'The dog bit John in the park yesterday.'

Exactly the same observation obtains if the object is to be interpreted as a topic:

- (9) sono boosi-nituite osiete-kudasai
that hat-about tell-please
'Tell me about that hat.'
- (10) a. sono boosi_i-wa John-ga kinoo e_i kaimasita
that hat-wa John-nom yesterday bought
- b. # John-ga sono boosi-wa kinoo kaimasita¹
John-nom that hat-wa yesterday bought
'John bought that hat.'

¹ For reasons unknown to me, it appears that an object *wa*-phrase prefers not to surface adjacent to a verb. In order to circumvent this issue, adverbials are inserted between object and verb throughout this presentation.

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2.2 Contrastive topic

Contrastive topics display comparable behaviour. The exchange in (11)/(12) forces *Bill-wa* in the answer to be a contrastive topic (Jackendoff 1972, Büring 1997, 2003). Here, *Bill-wa* must appear in clause-initial position.²

- (11) John-wa kinoo-no party-de nani-o tabeta no?
 John-wa yesterday-gen party-at what-acc ate Q
 ‘What did John eat at the party yesterday?’
- (12) Hmm, John-wa doo-ka sira-nai-kedo,
 well, John-wa how-whether know-not-but,
 ‘Well, I don’t know about John, but...’
- a. BILL-WA 8-zi-goro MAME-O tabeteita (yo)
 Bill-wa 8 o’clock-around beans-acc eating particle
- b. # MAME_i-O BILL-WA 8-zi-goro t_i tabeteita (yo)
 beans-acc Bill-wa 8 o’clock-around eating particle
 ‘As for Bill, he was eating beans around 8 o’clock.’

(13)/(14) show the same observation for a context where the object is a contrastive topic:

- (13) kinoo-no party-de dare-ga pasta-o tabeta no?
 yesterday-gen party-at who-nom pasta-acc ate Q
 ‘Who ate the pasta at the party yesterday?’
- (14) Hmm, pasta-wa doo-ka sira-nai-kedo,
 well, pasta-wa how-whether know-not-but,
 ‘Well, I don’t know about the pasta, but...’
- a. # BILL-GA MAME-WA 8-zi-goro tabeteita (yo)
 Bill-nom beans-wa 8 o’clock-around eating particle
- b. MAME_i-WA BILL-GA 8-zi-goro t_i tabeteita (yo)
 beans-wa Bill-nom 8 o’clock-around eating particle
 ‘As for the beans, Bill was eating them around 8 o’clock.’

⇒ Topics are licensed in clause-initial position. (= (4))

(4) is a trigger for the displacement of *wa*-phrases.

3 Contrastive *wa*-phrases that aren’t topics

It is possible for a contrastive *wa*-phrase to remain in-situ:

- (15) John-ga NANNINKA-WA tasuketa
 John-nom some.people-wa helped
 ‘John helped some people’ (Implicature: ‘John didn’t help everyone.’)

3.1 Interpretation of contrastive *wa*-phrases in-situ

There has recently been much work on the precise interpretation of contrastive *wa*-phrases (Kuroda 2005, Hara 2006, to app., Hara & van Rooij 2007, Tomioka 2007b, Oshima to app.). Adapting Büring’s (1997) analysis of contrastive topics in German, Hara (2006), for instance, argues that sentences containing contrastive *wa* induces the presupposition that a scalar alternative stronger than the assertion exists and also the implicature that the stronger alternative could be false. Data considered in the literature involve predominantly cases where subject bears *WA*. However, the analyses can be carried over to object *wa*-phrases.

- (16) WA (Hara 2006, to app.)
 a. Presupposition: There is a stronger scalar alternative.
 b. Implicature: The negation of the stronger alternative is possible
- (17) John-ga NANNINKA-WA tasuketa (= (15))
 John-nom some.people-wa helped
 ‘John helped some people (Implicature: John didn’t help everyone.)’
- a. $\exists(x)$ [[person(x)] [helped (j, x)]]
 b. stronger scalar alternative: $\forall(x)$ [[person(x)] [helped (j, x)]]
 c. (b) can be false.

The analysis can be extended to non-quantified DPs:

- (18) John-ga MARY-WA tasuketa
 John-nom Mary-wa helped
 ‘John helped Mary’
 (Implicature: ‘John didn’t help Bill’ in a context where only Mary and Bill are the relevant individuals)
- a. stronger alternative: ‘John helped both Mary and Bill’
 b. (a) could be false
 c. the speaker asserted ‘John helped Mary’, so by inference, ‘John did not help Bill’.

However, there is nothing inherent in the contrastive interpretation itself that makes a contrastive *wa*-phrase a topic, as noted/argued by some (e.g. Hara 2006, Kuroda 1992, 2005, Oshima to app.). I claim that those in clause-initial position are interpreted additionally as topics, i.e. what the rest of the sentence is about. In other words, the topic interpretation and the particular contrastive interpretation are two independent features of a “contrastive topic” (Kuroda 2005, Hara 2006, Tomioka 2007b, Vallduví & Vilkuňa 1998, Molnár 2002)

² The set-up of the context is due to Neeleman & van de Koot (to app.).

The relevance of aboutness for interpreting contrastive topics is made explicit in the English translations of the preceding sentences in (12) and (14), *I don't know about John*, and *I don't know about the pasta*.

3.2 Contrastive *wa*-phrases in-situ can't move

The proposal predicts then that contrastive *wa*-phrases that appear in-situ cannot optionally move to clause-initial position, because they are not contrastive topics and there is no trigger for the movement. The prediction is borne out. In (19)/(20), (21) and (22) *wa*-phrases are used purely for contrast and are not interpreted as what the rest of the sentence is about. ((22) is modified from Kuno (1973: 46) attributed to Minoru Nakau (p.c.). This example shows contrast can be projected a larger constituent).

- (19) dare-ga ziken-genba-de tasuke-no tetudai-o sita no
 who-nom accident-scene-to rescue-gen help-acc did Q
 'Who was helping with the rescue operation at the accident scene?'
- (20) a. JOHN-GA 3-NIN-WA nantoka tasuketa
 John-nom 3-cl.-wa somehow rescuing.was
 b. #SAN-NIN_i-WA John-ga nantoka t_i tasuketa³
 three-people-wa John-nom somehow rescue
 'John somehow managed to rescue at least three people.'
- (21) a. John-ga sono hon-o KAI-WA sita-ga, sonoba-de sore-o YOMI-WA sinakatta.
 John-nom that book-acc buy-wa did-but there-at it-acc read-wa did-not
 b. #KAI_i-WA John-ga sono hon-o t_i sita-ga, YOMI_j-WA sonoba-de sore-o t_j sinakatta
 buy-wa John-nom that book-acc did-but read-wa there-at it-acc did-not
 'John bought that book, but he didn't read it there.'
- (22) a. [AME-WA hutteita-ga] [John-ga KASA-WA motte-ika-nakatta] (hanasi)
 rain-wa falling-but John-nom umbrella-wa bring-go-not.past (story)
 b. #[AME-WA hutteita-ga] [KASA_i-WA John-ga t_i motte-ika-nakatta] (hanasi)
 rain-wa falling-but umbrella-wa John-nom bring-go-not.past (story)
 '(The story that) It was raining, but John did not bring an umbrella.'

3.3 Considerations from syntax-information structure mapping

Neeleman & van de Koot (to app) argue that there are constraints on the syntactic distribution of topics and foci with respect to each other (see also Hajičová, et. al 1998):

- (23) a. topic_i [_{VP} FOCUS t_i]
 b. *FOCUS_i [_{VP} topic t_i]

Examples involving embedded clauses demonstrate that the prediction in ((23)b) is correct for Japanese. Moreover, only those contrastive *wa*-phrases in clause-initial position display the predicted distribution of 'topic'.

A contrastive topic can appear inside an embedded clause. The context in (24) makes *kono CD* 'this CD' a contrastive topic in (25), as it shifts the topic from *the book* in the embedded clause.

- (24) Context: John finds a book on Sue's desk and he asks Bill to tell him something about the book, perhaps with the intention of finding out where Sue obtained the book. Bill does not know anything about the book, but he knew how Sue obtained a CD that was also on the desk. So, he decides to tell John about the CD. In describing this situation, you utter (25).
- (25) Bill_j-wa [_{CP} KONO CD_j-WA Mary-ga kare_j-no mise-de Sue-ni t_i ageta to] itta.
 Bill-wa this CD-wa Mary-nom he-gen shop-at Sue-to gave that said
 'Bill_j said that as for this CD, Mary gave it to Sue in his_j shop.'

Independently, a focus can move out of an embedded clause to sentence-initial position:

- (26) Bill_j-wa [_{CP} Mary-ga Jane-ni kono CD-o kare_j-no mise-de ageta to] itta
 Bill-wa Mary-nom Jane-to this CD-acc he-gen shop-at gave that said
 'Bill_j said Mary gave this CD to Jane in his_j shop'
- (27) Tigau-yo, SUE_i-NI Bill_j-wa [_{CP} Mary-ga t_i kono CD-o kare_j-no mise-de
 incorrect-prt, Sue-to Bill-wa Mary-nom this CD-acc he-gen shop-at
 ageta to] itta (ndayo)
 gave that said (prt)
 Lit.: 'No, it's to Sue that Bill_j said that Mary gave this CD in his_j shop.'

However, it should be impossible to combine these two operations, as this will result in the structure in (28):

- (28) *Foc_i [... [_{CP} Top_j ... t_i t_j ...]]

The prediction is borne out:

- (29) Bill_k-wa [_{CP} Mary-ga Jane-ni kono hon-o kare_k-no mise-de ageta to] itta
 Bill-wa Mary-nom Jane-to this book-acc he-gen shop-at gave that said
 'Bill_k said that Mary gave this book to Jane in his_k shop.'
- (30) Tigau-yo, Bill-wa sono hon-nituite-wa sira-nakat-ta-ga...
 incorrect-prt Bill-wa that book-about-wa know-not-past-but
 'No, Bill didn't know anything about the book, but...'
 *SUE_i-NI Bill_k-wa [_{CP} KONO CD_j-WA Mary-ga kare_k-no mise-de t_i t_j ageta to] itta.
 Sue-to Bill-wa this CD-wa Mary-nom he-gen shop-at gave that said
 Lit.: 'it's to Sue that Bill_k said that as for this CD, Mary gave it in his_k shop.'

* Foc_i ... [_{CP} WA_j ... t_i t_j ...] (WA = topic)

³ This example is felicitous if *3-nin* 'three people' refers to three specific people who may be salient in the discourse. The crucial reading here is where *3-nin* 'three people' receives the contrastive 'at least' reading.

The sentence is acceptable if the focus remains in-situ:

- (31) Bill_k-wa [_{CP} KONO CD_J-WA Mary-ga kare_k-no mise-de SUE_i-NI t_j ageta to] itta.
 Bill-wa this CD-wa Mary-nom he-gen shop-at Sue-to gave that said
 'Bill_k said that as for this CD, Mary gave it to Sue in his_k shop.'

✓ [_{CP} WA_j ... Foc t_j ...] (WA = topic)

On the other hand, if the contrastive *wa*-phrase remains in-situ in the embedded clause, i.e., is not a contrastive topic, the embedded focus can be fronted to sentence-initial position. This is unexpected if all contrastive *wa*-phrases were contrastive topics.

- (32) Bill_j-wa [_{CP} Mary-ga Jane-ni sukunakutomo 3-NIN-WA kare_j-no mise-de
 Bill-wa Mary-nom Jane-to at.lesat 3-cl.-wa he-gen shop-at
 syookai-sita to] itta
 introduced that said
 'Bill said that Mary introduced at least three people to Jane in his shop.'

- (33) [?]Tigau-yo, SUE_i-NI Bill_j-wa [_{CP} Mary-ga t_i sukunakutomo 3-NIN-WA
 Incorrect-prt, Sue-to Bill-wa Mary-nom at.least 3-cl.-wa
 kare_j-no mise-de syookai-sita to] itta-ndayo
 he-gen shop-at introduced that said-prt
 'No, it is to Sue that Bill said that Mary introduced at least three people in his shop.'

✓ Foc_i ... [_{CP} ... t_i WA ...] (WA ≠ topic)

Interim summary:

- contrastive topics must occupy clause-initial position;
- contrastive *wa*-phrases in-situ are not topics:
 - they cannot be optionally fronted;
 - they are not subject to the distributional constraints on topics at the syntax-information structure interface.

4 Non-contrastive *wa*-phrases that aren't topics

There are some instances where a non-contrastive *wa*-phrase to occupy non-clause-initial position, especially if the *wa*-phrase is a subject (Watanabe 2003):

- (34) sono inu-ga dare-o kande-simatta no?
 that dog-nom who-acc bite-closed Q
 'Who did the dog bite?'
 a. sono inu-wa kinoo kooen-de JOHN-O kande-simatta
 that dog-wa yesterday park-at John-acc bite-closed
 b. JOHN_i-O sono inu-wa kinoo kooen-de t_i kande-simatta
 John-acc that dog-wa yesterday park-at bite-closed
 'The dog bit John in the park yesterday.'

According to both of the following, the *wa*-phrase in (34)b should not be a topic:

- (35) Topics in Japanese must occupy clause-initial position. (= (4))

- (36) *FOCUS_i [_{VP} topic t_i] (= (23)b)

4.1 Interpretation of non-contrastive *wa*-phrases in non-clause-initial position

The difference in (34) and (7) is that the context in the former does not require the *wa*-phrase in the answer to be what the rest of the sentence is about in the way that the latter does. It merely mentions the phrase in the preceding question. I propose that it is simply discourse anaphoric in the sense that it is merely mentioned previously in the discourse and not a topic, contra Reinhart (1981) and Lambrecht (1994).

4.2 Licensing non-contrastive *wa*-phrases

Non-contrastive *wa*-phrases are widely assumed to be base-generated in a left-peripheral position, binding a *pro* internally to the clause. Contrastive topics are generally assumed to involve movement (e.g. Hoji 1985, Saito 1985, cf. Kuroda 1988, Sakai 1994).

- (37) Topic_i [_{IP} pro_i]

A topic can be associated with a position inside a relative clause and *pro* can be overtly realised (Perlmutter 1972, Kuno 1973, Saito 1985):

- (38) sono sinsi_i-wa [_{TP}[_{NP} Ø_j [_{TP} pro/(kare_i-ga) e_j kitei-ta] yoohuku]-ga yogoretei-ta.
 that gentleman-wa (he-nom) wearing-Past suit-GA dirty-Past
 'Speaking of that gentleman, the suit (he) was wearing was dirty.'
 (modified from Kuno (1973: 249))

If the structure in (37) is associated with 'topics' rather than *wa*-phrases, which is in line with the claim in (4), then we predict that a topic *wa*-phrase, but not a discourse anaphoric *wa*-phrase, can be associated with a position inside a relative clause. The prediction is borne out.

- (39) sono kodomo-nituite osiete-kudasai.
 that child-about tell-please
 'Tell me about that child.'
 (40) sono kodomo_i-wa kooen-de kyoo [_{NP} [_{TP} pro/kare_i-ga e_j kinoo katta] inu_j]-ga
 that child-wa park-in today he-nom yesterday bought dog-nom
 John-o kande-simatta.
 John-acc bite-closed
 'That child, the dog that (he) bought yesterday bit John today.'

The same sentence is infelicitous, if *sono kodomo-wa* ‘that child-wa’ is simply discourse anaphoric:

- (41) [_{NP} [_{TP} sono kodomo-ga e_j kinoo katta] inu_j]-ga dare-o kanda no?
 that child-nom yesterday bought dog-nom who-acc bit Q
 ‘Who did the dog that the child bought yesterday bite?’
- (42) #sono kodomo_i-wa kyoo [_{NP} [_{TP} pro_i/kare-ga e_j kinoo katta] inu_j]-ga/wa
 that child-wa today he-nom yesterday bought dog-nom/wa
 JOHN-O kande-simatta.
 John-acc bite-closed
 ‘The dog that the child bought yesterday bit John today.’

(Notice here that the constraint in (4) does not say that a *wa*-phrase in clause-initial position must be a topic.)

There is a further prediction: the post-focal *wa*-phrase cannot be associated with a position inside a relative clause. The prediction is borne out:

- (43) #JOHN_k-O sono kodomo_i-wa kooen-de [_{NP} [_{TP} pro_i e_j kinoo katta] inu_j]-ga t_k kanda.
 John-acc that child-wa park-at yesterday bought dog-nom bit
 ‘The dog that this child bought yesterday bit John in the park.’

5 Conclusion

- Topics in Japanese, both contrastive and non-contrastive, are what the rest of the sentence is about;
- both types of topics must appear in clause-initial position;
- *wa*-marked items in non-clause-initial positions are not interpreted as topics and do not behave syntactically like a topic;
- *wa* is not a marker for topic.

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