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Author(s): Benjamin M. Rosenthal

Proceedings of the Twenty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society: General Session and Parasession on Phonetic Sources of Phonological Patterns: Synchronic and Diachronic Explanations (2003) pp. 359-366

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The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

The Japanese ‘Nominative’ Particle: A New Approach

BENJAMIN M. ROSENTHAL

University of California, Los Angeles

0. Introduction

The Japanese case particle *ga* tends to be glossed in the literature as either NOMINATIVE or SUBJECT. Although the application of such well-established labels to Japanese case particles facilitates the drawing of parallels between Japanese and other languages, it does not give us a clear picture of how particles like *ga* actually function.

At least as far back as Kuno 1973, the prevailing view has been that *ga* indicates subject, but also the object of certain predicates that refer to preferences (e.g. *suki* ‘like’), desires (e.g. verbs with the affix *-ta-* ‘want’), needs (e.g. *iri-* ‘need’), or abilities (e.g. verbs with the affix *-e-* ‘can’). Thus, in theory, a single predicate can have two participants marked by *ga*. The use of the term ‘nominative’ allows one to gloss *ga* consistently, whether the case relationship is subject or object (Sugamoto 1982). However, one gets the impression that the object-marking function of *ga* is seen as being a quirky anomaly, as when Shibatani (1990: 305) says “the normal correspondence between the nominative *ga* and the syntactic subject is disrupted in a number of construction types.”

There have been at least two major challenges to the prevailing view of *ga*: Aoyama 1982 and Ono et al. 2000. Both analyses eschew the view that *ga* is a ‘case particle’, i.e. a particle that contributes information on the relationship of a participant of a predicate to that predicate. However, they fail to take into account how *ga* contrasts with other case particles such as *o* and *ni*.

In order to address the issues raised by Ono et al., whose analysis is based on actual data from conversation (rightly regarded as the most basic genre of language), this paper looks strictly at conversation. Evidence is adduced from three corpora of native adult-adult Japanese conversation.¹ This paper takes a “conservative” approach in that it sees *ga* as a case particle and that it therefore needs to be understood in relation to other case particles. However, it takes the

¹ JPN (University of Arizona), Pac Rim (University of California, Santa Barbara) and Callfriend (downloaded from www.talkbank.org).

radical view that *ga* does not signify subject per se, but is the case particle used with subject nouns because other case particles would specify ‘non-subject’.² This paper is also novel in that it takes an integrated view of *ga* as being conditioned by two sets of factors: the participant-predicate relationship and the pragmatic environment.

1. Previous Analyses

1.1. Aoyama (1982)

According to Aoyama, *ga* is properly defined in opposition to the particle *wa*. He characterizes this opposition in terms of ‘focus’, or concentration of attention, on the marked item: *wa* signifies HIGH FOCUS, while *ga* signifies LOW FOCUS.

However, Aoyama overlooks some crucial facts. The particle *ga* says something about the relationship of a noun to a predicate, and is thus constrained in terms of which nouns it can mark:

- (1) (talking about why a subject in school has become more enjoyable)

uchira ga tabun nareta n da to omou yo

we GA probably get.used.to-P NZ CO-NP Q think-NP PP³

“I think it’s that we’ve gotten used to it.”

[JPN]

- (2) (talking about some photographs)

dare ni miseta no

who NI show-P NZ

“Who did you show them to?”

[Pac Rim]

In (1), *ga* clarifies that the noun *uchira* ‘we’ refers to the entity that gets used to something. If, for example, the particle *ni* were used in place of *ga*, it would signify that ‘we’ is the entity that is gotten used to. Conversely, in (2), *ni* clarifies that ‘who’ refers to the identity of those to whom some photographs were shown; if *ga* were used instead, it would signify that ‘who’ refers to the identity of the one who showed the photographs. Thus, we can say that for the verbs *nare-* ‘get used to’ and *mise-* ‘show’, *ga* and *ni* are ‘designated’ for different roles.⁴

The particle *wa*, meanwhile, can mark a noun in a role for which *ga* is designated:

² I find that in Japanese, there is no need to draw a distinction between the categories ‘noun’ and ‘noun phrase’ (NP).

³ The following glosses are employed in this paper: CO = copula; EP = epistemic auxiliary; LK = linking particle; NG = negative morpheme; NP = non-past morpheme; NZ = nominalizer; P = past morpheme; PP = pragmatic particle; PS = passive morpheme; Q = quotative particle.

⁴ The designation of case particles is sensitive not only to the lexical core of the predicate, but also to certain inflectional affixes such as the ‘passive’ affix *-are-*. This issue will be addressed in §3.

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- (3) *Shibuya no koosaten wa itsumo-no-yoo-ni konde-ita no*
Shibuya LK intersection WA as.always get.crowded-be-P NZ
“The intersections in Shibuya were crowded as always.”
[Pac Rim]

For the verb *komi*- ‘get crowded’, *ga* is designated for the role of ‘that which gets crowded’. However, *wa* can also occur with nouns in roles for which other particles are designated:

- (4) *toingu wa inshuransukampanii ga tanonderu kara moo*
towing WA insurance.compny GA request-be-NP so already
“As for towing, the insurance company has already requested it, so (that’s been taken care of).”
[JPN]

The *wa*-marked noun, *toingu* ‘towing’, is in the role of ‘that which is requested’, for which the designated particle is not *ga* but *o*. However, *ga* is designated for the role of ‘that which requests’, and it occurs in that capacity in (4). In neither (3) nor (4) does the presence of *wa* clarify the relationship of the marked noun to the predicate; that relationship is ascertained entirely through inference. In fact, case particles other than *ga* and *o* can actually co-occur with *wa*:

- (5) *Akira-kun ni wa hanashitenai daroo ne*
Akira NI WA speak-be-NG-NP EP PP
“I probably haven’t told you, Akira.”
[Pac Rim]

For the verb *hanashi*- ‘speak’, *ni* is the designated particle for “that which is spoken to”. It is therefore *ni*, not *wa*, that clarifies that ‘Akira’ is the entity to which something has not been spoken. Thus, it would be difficult to defend the idea that *wa* as well as *ga* directly contributes information on noun-participant relationships.

The distribution of *wa* can be explained in terms of scope: it limits the scope of a predicate to the marked item, thereby making that item ‘stand out’. For example, the speaker of (3) is describing a scene that took place during a holiday period in Shibuya, a trendy area of Tokyo. Just prior to this utterance, she had said that most Tokyo residents were out of town, but a lot of people were in Shibuya from the countryside. The use of *wa* highlights the intersections of Shibuya as being crowded, because during this holiday period one would expect that most intersections in Tokyo would not be crowded. Thus, it is clear that *ga* should be understood in opposition not to *wa* but to other particles like *o* and *ni*.

1.2. Ono et al. 2000

Ono et al. investigated the occurrence of *ga* in spontaneous conversation among adult native speakers of Japanese and made the following findings: (a) more than two thirds of the time, *ga* does not appear with a noun in a role for which *ga* is a designated case particle; (b) *ga* occurs mainly with subjects of intransitive verbs, rarely occurring with subjects of transitive verbs; and (c) *ga* occurs chiefly with non-verbal predicates (i.e. adjectives and nouns), motion verbs (e.g. *ki-* ‘come’) and verbs used to establish the existence of a referent (e.g. *ari-* ‘be/exist’, *deki-* ‘come into being’). Furthermore, they found that the tokens of *ga* in their data could be attributed to pragmatic motivations, such as: (a) potential ambiguity of reference; (b) the introduction of a new referent; (c) a morphologically complex noun (e.g. a nominalized clause); and (d) the singling out of the referent from among other potential referents (what Kuno 1973 identifies as ‘exhaustive listing’). Based on these findings, Ono et al. conclude that *ga* does indeed mark a noun as a participant of a predicate, but only in “pragmatically highly marked” environments, with \emptyset (no particle) being the unmarked choice, and that *ga* therefore “has very little to do with either case or grammatical relations” (p.78).

Although their analysis reveals much about the use of *ga* in conversation, Ono et al. do not fully account for its use in that genre because they do not contrast it with other case particles. Specifically, they do not ask the question, “when *ga* does occur, why is it *ga* and not some other case particle like *o* or *ni*?” In most of their examples, such as (6), the substitution of *ga* with another case particle would either result in the indication of a different noun-predicate relationship or be incoherent:

(6) (talking about some photographs)

nanka nikkori-to suggoi kawaiku waratten no ga atta n da yo ne
 like wide-grin really cutely grin-be-NP NZ GA be-P NZ CO-NP PP PP
 “There was one of you with like a really cute, wide grin, remember?”
 [Ono et al.’s (11); gloss and translation modified from original]

Example (6) illustrates some of the properties of *ga* identified by Ono et al., i.e. marking a complex noun that is the subject of an intransitive verb used to establish the existence of a referent. However, any other case particle but *ga* would signal that the marked noun was not the subject of the predicate *ari-* ‘be’. Thus, while *ga* may only appear in certain kinds of environment in conversation, it is not sufficient to say that it marks a noun simply as “a” participant of a predicate; it must mark the noun as “a certain kind of” participant. It would therefore be premature to dismiss the relevance of “case relations” to *ga*.

2. New Approach to *ga*

Ono et al. (2000) acknowledge that the attested skewing of *ga* towards intransitive rather than transitive subjects is in part attributable to pragmatic factors that favor a higher occurrence of intransitive subjects in Japanese. In a separate study of

two-party face-to-face conversations in Japanese between young adult native speakers, Matsumoto (1997) found 764 tokens of intransitive predicates (intransitive verbs and non-verbal predicates), compared to only 357 tokens of transitive verbs. Moreover, while 320 (42%) of the intransitive predicates had overt subjects, only 48 (13%) of the transitive verbs had overt subjects. While Matsumoto does not give figures for how many of those transitive and intransitive subjects were marked with *ga*, it is clear that in her data, there were many more opportunities for *ga* to appear with an intransitive than a transitive subject. Matsumoto's study thus suggests two factors contributing to the skewing of *ga* towards intransitive subjects in conversation: a tendency for intransitive predicates to outnumber transitive predicates, and a tendency for intransitive subjects to be mentioned more often than transitive subjects.⁵

Clearly, then, the attested skewing of *ga* towards intransitive subjects should not be taken as evidence that there is no meaningful correlation between *ga* and the notion 'subject'. This is made even more apparent by the fact that in the kind of data analyzed by Ono et al., one **can** find tokens of *ga* marking transitive subjects. For example, the token of *ga* in (4) marks the subject of the transitive verb 'request', and the token in (7) below marks the subject of the verb *tatekae*- 'front (payment)':

- (7) (talking about how a friend had to cancel a trip)
kyanseru-ryoo no goman-en wa kareshi ga tatekaeta
cancellation-fee LK 50,000-yen WA boyfriend GA front-P
"As for the cancellation fee, her boyfriend fronted it."
[JPN]

Thus, *ga* is compatible with transitive as well as intransitive subjects. What Ono et al. have discovered then is a **tendency**, not a hard and fast rule.

If we consider Ono et al.'s findings together with the evidence presented here, what begins to emerge is a picture of *ga* in which its appearance in conversation is conditioned by two sets of factors: the participant-predicate relationship on the one hand, and the pragmatic environment on the other. The participant-predicate relationship determines the choice of *ga* over other case particles such as *o* and *ni*, while the pragmatic environment determines the choice of *ga* over a non-case particle like *wa* or simply \emptyset (no particle). This picture of *ga* is supported by evidence that a similar picture can be drawn of at least some of the other case particles. Fujii and Ono (2000) analyzed the occurrence/non-occurrence of the case particle *o* (commonly glossed as ACCUSATIVE or DIRECT OBJECT) in conversation and found that *o* too occurs in less than one third of all places where it theoretically could, and again that its occurrence tends to be motivated by a

⁵ For further discussion of the first tendency, see Thompson and Hopper 2000; for further discussion of the second tendency, see Matsumoto 1997.

limited set of pragmatic motivations (singling out a referent from among other potential referents and facilitating cognitive processing). Likewise, the case particle *ni* (commonly glossed as DATIVE or INDIRECT OBJECT) does not always occur where it theoretically could in conversation:

- (8) *moo Nihon Ø kaettara gyaku-karuchaashokku de sugoi*
 already Japan return-when reverse-culture.shock CO incredible-NP
 “When we go back to Japan, the reverse culture shock will be incredible.”
 [JPN]

The particle *ni* is a designated particle for the ‘goal/destination’ role of *kaeri*-‘return’. Lee (2002) recognizes that *ga*, *o*, and *ni* do not always occur in conversation where they theoretically could, and regards the absence of any one of the three particles as a single phenomenon (a ‘zero particle’). Thus, occurrence/non-occurrence in accordance with pragmatic factors is not unique to *ga*, and is a separate issue from what *ga* signifies regarding a participant-predicate relationship.

Now let us turn to the issue of what *ga* says about a participant-predicate relationship. If neither Aoyama 1982 nor Ono et al. 2000 offer an alternative explanation, then we are still left with the proposition that there is a “normal correspondence” between *ga* and the participant-predicate relationship ‘subject’.

Clearly, a one-to-one correspondence cannot be established; otherwise, it should not be possible for *ga* to be a designated case particle for more than one participant role. However, if we take the notion of ‘subject’ rather than *ga* as our starting point, we find that there is indeed a correlation: if a noun is the subject of a predicate, then the only compatible case particle will be *ga*. We have already noted that *ga* is the only case particle compatible with the subject of (6). The same is true for (1), (4), and (7), where the *ga*-marked noun is also the subject of the predicate. Furthermore, if the verb is passivized, in which subject status is shifted away from the default participant role, then *ga* becomes the only viable case particle for the passive subject:

- (9) (talking about a friend’s chances of getting into medical school)
waku ga kime-rare-te-te sono waku ga mata chiisai n da tte
quota GA decide-PS-be-and that quota GA again small-NP NZ CO-NP Q
 “Apparently, there’s a fixed quota, and that quota is small.”
 [JPN]

Were it not for the presence of the passive morpheme *-rare-*, the first token of *ga* in (9) would be incongruous. This is because the role occupied by *waku* with respect to the verb *kime-* ‘decide’ (i.e. ‘that which gets decided’) is not the default subject role for that verb; as such, the designated case particle would be *o* rather

than *ga*. Therefore, if a participant role is the subject, whether by default or derivation, the only compatible case particle will be *ga*.

To say that *ga* is the only case particle designated for 'subject' does not entail that *ga* is restricted to subject nouns. All it entails is that other case particles are incompatible with 'subject'. This, then, appears to be the crucial distinction between *ga* and other case particles: other case particles specify a non-subject relation. This difference can be characterized as one of **semantic specificity**: *ga* is the only case particle not to specify that the marked noun is not the subject of the relevant predicate. This accounts for the fact that *ga* is not restricted to subject nouns; *ga* does not specify 'subject', it only refrains from specifying 'not subject'.

None of this is to say that the subject role **must** always be marked by the designated case particle. For example, if (1) were uttered without any particle on 'we', then it would be up to the hearer to figure out the relationship of 'we' to the verb.

- (1) *uchira* \emptyset *tabun nareta n da to omou yo*
we probably get.used.to-P NZ CO-NP Q think-NP PP
"I think it's that we've gotten used to it."
[JPN]

Given the context, the logical inference would be that 'we' are the ones who have done the 'getting used to'. The presence of *ga* merely eases the burden of inference. In this way, the relative infrequency of *ga* in conversation is not inconsistent with its signification of a participant-predicate relationship.

3. Conclusion

This paper takes a fresh approach to the analysis of the Japanese nominative particle *ga* in two ways. First, it presents an integrated view of *ga* as being conditioned by two sets of factors: the participant-predicate relationship and the pragmatic environment. The choice of *ga* over other case particles in conversation is a reflection of the participant-predicate relationship, while the actual appearance/non-appearance of *ga* is a reflection of the pragmatic environment (as revealed by Ono et al. 2000). Second, this paper clarifies the relationship of *ga* to the notion 'subject': if a participant role of a predicate is also the subject role, either by default or through derivative morphology, then *ga* is the designated case particle for that role. The fact that *ga* is not limited to subject nouns can thus be explained in terms of semantic specificity: it is not that *ga* specifies a subject relation, but rather that *o*, *ni* and other case particles specify non-subject relations, leaving *ga* as the only option for subject nouns.

It is reasonable to hypothesize that if *ga* is found to have different rates of occurrence in genres other than conversation, it will be attributable to a different set of pragmatic factors (e.g. conversation affords access to interactional resources

like prosody and body language that are not readily available in written discourse). However, that is a matter for future research.

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Benjamin M. Rosenthal
Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures
290 Royce Hall
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1540

milaben@hotmail.com