Linguistics Paper

On the Distribution of the Particles 'ga' and 'wa' in Japanese from a Pragmatic Perspective

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Japanese language is said to be a contextual language: its surface structure is to some extent also determined by non-semantic factors. For instance, in the English language, how sentences are formulated is mainly determined by what message the speaker tries to bring across, whereas in Japanese, the context in which it is said influences the choice of words. Different verbs are used in different speech situations, which represent different levels of politeness.

In this paper the distribution of *ga* and *wa* will be explained. These two particles have similar grammatical functions, but appear in complementary distribution. First of all the Japanese syntax will be discussed. Next the classical textbook explanation of the distribution of the particles will be discussed and it will be shown why this is not sufficient. Thirdly, John Austin's speech act theory will be introduced and applied to this distribution. Finally it will be shown that in this case the context in which a sentence is uttered determines which of the particles *wa* or *ga* is used.

2. INTRODUCTION TO JAPANESE SYNTAX

The Japanese syntax naturally shows much similarity with the syntax of English, since the syntax analysis that is used by linguists includes an attitude towards problem solving that results in certain structures that do not differ fundamentally in Japanese and English. For instance, in both languages syntactical structures are represented as trees and there are different word types. In this section the discussion of Japanese syntax will be limited to the elements that differ from

English syntax, assuming a general understanding of the English syntax on the part of the reader.
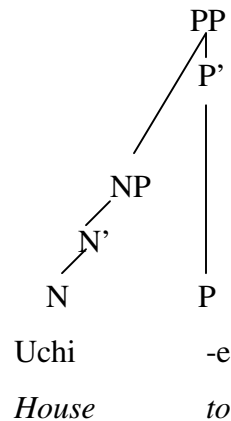
Of interest to our discussion later on are the Japanese postpositions, which *follow* the nouns they belong to. Their English counterparts, called prepositions, typically *precede* the verb to which they apply, as the name suggests.
For instance:

<u>English</u>   <u>Japanese</u>

PP		PP	
P'		P'	
	NP		NP
	N'		N'
P	Det N	N	P
To	the house	Uchi	-e
		House	*to*
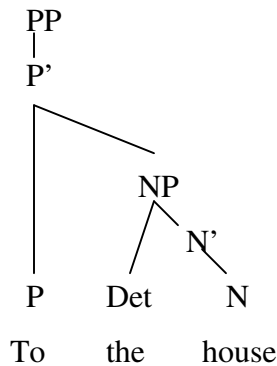
Another major difference with English is that, in Japanese, the word order at sentence level is not fixed. Consider the following examples, all of which are grammatically correct Japanese sentences:

Kyo Yuka-ga Ginza-de sushi-o tabeta.

Yuka-ga Ginza-de sushi-o tabeta.

Kyo sushi-o Yuka-ga Ginza-de tabeta.
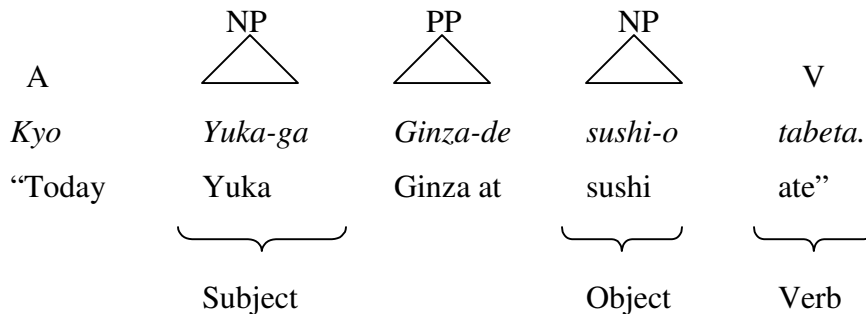
"Today, Yuka ate sushi in Ginza."

Some comments should be made with respect to this phenomenon.

First of all, this scrambled word order is possible because small case particles indicate the case of a phrase. The following case particles are used in Japanese:

Particle	Case
-ga / -wa	Nominative
-no	Genitive
-o	Accusative
-ni	Dative

Secondly, one should note, however, that certain constituents can be identified and that inside them the word order is fixed. For instance, within a PP containing a N, the P *must* follow the N.

Similarly, in each of these sentences, the following constituents can be distinguished, which elements cannot be separated from each other and whose order is fixed.

	NP	PP	NP	
A	*Yuka-ga*	*Ginza-de*	*sushi-o*	V
Kyo	Yuka	Ginza at	sushi	*tabeta.*
"Today				ate"
	Subject		Object	Verb

Tsujimura (191) argues in his *Introduction to Japanese linguistics* that there is a deeper structure, which is fixed, because when asked Japanese people expressed feeling that the order subject-object-verb is more natural than any other. It would reach beyond the scope of this paper to deal with this argument in more detail.

However, the existence of a deeper structure sheds an interesting light on what is to be discussed later on.

3. SYNTAX OF CASE PARTICLES

Postpositions: *de* ("at"), *made* ("to"), *e* ("to")

Contrary to postpositions, case particles are not assigned a separate node in syntactical tree structures, but are instead considered part of the N they belong to. Tsujimura (165) writes that this is due to the fact that case particles do not bear any specific meanings, but typically only express a grammatical property, namely case.

Compare the postpositions with the case particles in the following sentence (the head of the V' is actually in the complement position, because this is not the deep structure):

Gakkoo	*de*	*atarashi*	*hon-*	*o*	*katta*
College	at	new	book	Acc	bought

This paper will focus on the distribution of the particles *ga* and *wa*, both of which are used indicate the sentence subject. However, Tsujimura refers to *ga* as the Nominative Marker, and to *wa* as the Topic Marker.

Fiengo and McClure write in their article "On how to use –wa" that:

(1) *ga* and *wa* are in complementary distribution, i.e. given a certain speech situation and sentence, either only *wa* or only *ga* can be used correctly (5), and

(2) in order to understand their distribution, one has to go beyond syntax and study speech act theory. (5)

Moreover, Seiichi Makino notes in his article "How relevant is a functional notion of communicative orientation to ga and wa?", among other things, that

(a) *wa* marks the theme of a sentence

(b) *ga* marks the subject of a neutral description sentence

In this paper, first the classical textbook approach to this distribution will be discussed, and it will be proven insufficient. Secondly, Austin's Quartet of Assertions will be introduced. Thirdly, it will be shown how Fiengo and McClure argue that this theory can be applied to give a set of clear rules that describe the distribution of the Japanese particles *wa* and *ga*.

4. CLASSICAL TEXTBOOK APPROACH

A number of Japanese textbooks used to explain that *wa* is used to mark "old information" and *ga* to mark "new information."

Fiengo and McClure give the following example to illustrate this notion. It is the beginning of a story.

Mukasi,	*mukasi,*	*yama-no*		*oku-ni,*	*hitori-no*
Ago,	Ago,	mountain (Gen)		behind	one

oziisan-ga	*sunde*	*imashita.*		*Oziisan-wa* …	
old man (Acc)	living	was.		(The) old man (Topic)	

"A long time ago, an old man (*ga)* lived in the mountains. The old man (*wa*)…

When the old man is being introduced (i.e. it being mentioned includes information that is new to the reader) it is marked with *ga*. In the second sentence (of which only the first two words are shown), the old man is already known to the reader (its mentioning involves information that has become old) and therefore, it is marked with *wa*.

Although this approach yields correct results in a number of cases, it is as a description of the distribution of *wa* and *ga* certainly not sufficient, as the following example shows. This is also the first sentence of a story.

Otoko-wa	*mati-no*	*hazure-no*	*chisai*	*na*	*ie-ni*
Male (Topic)	town (Gen)	edge (Gen)	small	is	house(Dat)

sunde	*ita.*
living	was.

"There was a man (*wa*) who lived in a small house, on the edge of town."

Although the man is equally unknown to the reader, it is marked with *wa*, contrary to what the rules introduced above would predict.

That the classical text book approach does seem to touch upon something, is evident from the remark by Fiengo and McClure that the usage of *wa* in this particular situation is not the most natural choice, but a choice made by the narrator that aims to make the reader feel involved in the story from the very beginning.

However, whether information is new or old is not a sufficient linguistic criterion to determine the distribution of *wa* and *ga*.

5. AUSTIN'S QUARTET OF ASSERTIONS

Fiengo and McClure describe in their article 'On how to use –wa" the speech act theory of John Austin.

However, first of all it is important to make the distinction between sentence and statement very clear. A statement is a (non-verbal) expression that is made using language. The sentence consists of the words that are actually being used.
For instance, in different situations the following sentence might be used to make different statements:
"I feel cold."
One might utter this sentence when in a room, and hope that the other one in the room will turn up the heating. Also, one might pronounce this sentence when trying a new jacket on, and then one might want to state that in fact the jacket is too open.
Therefore, one uses a sentence to make a statement, and one sentence can be used to make different statements, depending on the situation in which it is said.

In order to be able to understand Austin's we will discuss the simple hypothetical language he used. In this language, sentences consist of an item and a predicate only:

Item		Predicate
This bird	is a	sparrow

Now we can introduce the notion of *matching*. In order for a speech act to be 'satisfactory" the thing to which the item refers, will have to be of a type that

indeed *matches* the predicate. For instance, in the given sentence, the speech act would be successful if the predicate indeed applies to the item, i.e. if *this bird* indeed is a *sparrow*.

In his analysis of speech acts, Austin found two contrasting terms – direction of fit and onus of match – that are relevant to this discussion.

Firstly, Fiengo and McClure write that the direction of fit "distinguishes *that which is given* from *that which is produced*" (9). This means that usually in utterances, the starting point is either the predicate or the item. The other is subsequently produced when making the statement.

For instance, to both the questions *What do you call that animal?* and *Show me an example of a sparrow* the answer might be *That bird is a sparrow.* However, in the first case, the one particular animal is the starting point, and the predicate is produced to fit to the item, whereas in the second case, the predicate sparrow is the starting point, and the one particular animal is produced to fit the predicate. This difference is represented through the variable that will be called direction of fit.

Secondly, Fiengo and McClure write that the onus of match "distinguishes *that which is taken for granted* from *that concerning which there might be doubt*" (9). Usually this difference is ignored, because we typically do not distinguish "match" from "match exactly." However, this nuance will turn out to be of importance.

Consider the following two examples:

    (1) *James loves Mary as much as Peter does.*

    (2) *Peter loves Mary as much as James does.*

Note for instance, that native speakers will identify them to mean the same. However, their onus of match is exactly opposite.

In sentence (1), the extent to which Peter loves Mary is taken for granted; it is the starting point. Similarly, in sentence (2) that is the extent to which James loves Mary. When sentence (1) is in doubt, the doubt is about whether James can support the onus of matching the meaning of "*to love Mary as much as Peter does*," whereas in the second example, the doubt is about whether Peter can support the onus of matching the meaning of "*to love Mary as much as James does.*" In both sentences the onus of match is on the subject, but in sentence (1) this subject refers to James, whereas in sentence (2) it refers to Peter, therefore the onus of match is opposite.

Combining the direction of fit and onus of match yields the following table. Example speech situations are added in each of which the same sentence is uttered: *This is a sparrow* as a response to different questions. Although the response is the same, it is used to perform a different speech act, and therefore, makes a different statement.

	Top Tier	
	Onus of Match	
Direction of Fit	Predicate	Item
Predicate ➜ Item	**Calling** *(What do you call that bird?)* *- This is a sparrow.*	**Describing** *(How would you describe that bird?)* *- This is a sparrow.*
Item ➜ Predicate	**Exemplifying** *(Show me a sparrow.)* *- This is a sparrow.*	**Classing** *(Which of these birds is a sparrow?)* *- This is a sparrow.*
	Bottom Tier	

6. APPLICATION TO DISTRIBUTION OF *WA* AND *GA*

This theory can be successfully applied to the determination of the distribution of
the particles *wa* and *ga* in Japanese. In order to reach this aim, Fiengo and
McClure divided the table of the four speech acts in two different parts, the Top
Tier (in which the direction of fit is from the predicate to the item) and the Bottom
Tier (in which the direction of fit is from the item to the predicate).

First it will be discussed how the speech act theory can be applied to (positive)
assertive sentences that are similar to the simple sentences in Austin's
hypothetical language. Secondly, the slightly adapted rules for negative sentences
will be dealt with.

In order to make the Japanese sentences compatible with the speech act theory a
further description of how "predicate" should be dealt with will be provided here.
As described before, both *wa* and *ga* indicate that the NP to which they belong is
written in the nominative case and therefore subject. The rest of the sentence will
be considered predicate.

For instance:

Nominative NP		Predicate
I	(am)	going to read this.
Peter	(is)	loving Mary just as much as James.

This is not unnatural in Japanese, because in that language most verbs are actually
considered adjectives that are matched to the subject using the word *desu* (to be).
The forms of to be that are inserted in between the Nominative NP and the
Predicate would be translated by *desu* (which can be left out).

Now the rule that can be formulated according to Fiengo and McClure (13) is:

> The particle *–wa* is placed on an NP if and only if that NP refers to an item which is given.

Otherwise, the particle *–ga* will be used. Looking at the table of the four speech acts, one can conclude that *wa* marks sentences from the Top Tier whereas *ga* marks sentences from the Bottom Tier.

Consider the following two examples, given by Fiengo and McClure:

Question	*Answer*
Are wa nan to iu hana desu ka? What is that flower called?	*Are wa sakura desu yo.* That is a cherry blossom.
Sakura o misete kurenai? (I cannot tell the difference between a cherry and a plum blossom.) Could you show me a cherry?	*Are ga sakura desu yo.* That is a cherry blossom.

However, once negative sentences come into play, the rule will have to be expanded.

A distinction will be made between Describing and Exemplifying on one hand, in both of which the direction of fit and onus of match are *opposite* to each other, and Calling and Classing on the other hand, in both of which the direction of fit and onus of match are *parallel*.

First the former pair will be discussed. Both use a negative sentence apparently correct and meet the requirements of the speech act situation. If one is asked to describe a bird and says *That bird does not have feathers*, he or she has successfully described (part of) the bird. Similarly, one may (counter-)exemplify (Fiengo and McClure, 19) a bird saying *That bird is not tufted*.

When the direction of fit and onus of match are *parallel*, a problem arises in creating a negative sentence. A subtle distinction has to be made in order to understand this. Compare the following two situations:

(1) Not calling that bird *a sparrow*.

(2) Calling that bird *not a sparrow*.

The second one does not make sense in the speech act theory. It is futile to produce a predicate whose sense can bear the onus of not matching. This is exactly the error that is unavoidable when trying to perform a Calling or Classing using a negative sentence, and is illustrated in the following discussion:

Person1   *How would you call that bird?*
Person2   *I do call that not a sparrow.*

It should be emphasised that the response is not *I do not call that a sparrow* (which would have been at least to some extent sufficient). The same problem arises with Classing; *classing a bird as not a sparrow* makes no sense, opposed to *not classing a bird as a sparrow* which at least has some meaning.

Therefore, Fiengo and McClure conclude that a negative sentence may only be used to perform a Describing or an Exemplifying. In both cases, the use of *wa* or *ga* will be determined according to whether the speech act belongs to the Top Tier or the Bottom Tier.

Below will follow two example sentences:

Japanese	English	Usage
Datyoo wa tobenai	Ostriches can't fly.	Only for Describing.
Datyoo ga tobenai	Ostriches can't fly.	Only for Exemplifying.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper was meant to give a comprehensible answer to the question how the Japanese particles *wa* and *ga* are distributed. The following facts have been discovered:

(1) The distribution of *wa* and *ga* is complementary and not dependent on grammatical properties of the rest of the sentence, but rather on the communicational context in which the sentence is uttered.

(2) The particle *wa* is used to mark information which is given, whereas *ga* marks information that is produced.

(3) Negative sentences are only possible in communicational situations in which the direction of fit is *opposite* to the onus of match.

It is interesting to see that English does not exhibit a similar difference (the responses translated to English were identical in every speech situation of Austin's Quartet).

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