

Phrasal Restrictions on Noncontrastive Topic: The Case of Japanese*

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Preliminary Paper 1

November 6, 2012

1 Introduction

In Japanese, the topic constituent marker *wa* can attach to a variety of phrase types, all of which allow a contrastive reading. Noncontrastive readings, however, are considered to have a more restricted availability; Heycock (2008:57), for instance, notes that they are most common with subjects and so-called ‘scene-setting’ adjuncts, such as temporals and locatives. Yet it has not been made clear in the literature whether such phrasal restrictions on noncontrastive *wa* are categorical prohibitions or merely dispreferences. In this paper, I show that noncontrastive readings for NP, PP, and CP topics in Japanese are grammatically permissible regardless of thematic relation, while VP and AP topics are prohibited; the crucial distinction is that the former constituent types denote entities while the latter do not.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 establishes background on topic and Japanese *wa*. In Section 3, I examine the various types of *wa*-phrases and identify which ones permit a noncontrastive reading, and in section 4, I give an account of this distribution. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2 Background

2.1 Topic constituents and discourse topics

Before delving into the Japanese data, it is necessary to clarify from the outset what is meant by ‘topic’ in this paper, given that the terminology surrounding topic can be quite

*I thank Mürvet Enç, Yafei Li, and Monica Macaulay for their assistance and encouragement in the writing of this paper, as well as various members of the Japanese conversation table at UW-Madison (in particular, Takahiro Nakajima, Hiroaki Odawara, Makoto Oshita, Chiharu Shima, Yumi Tabata, and Shotaro Watanabe) for providing fruitful discussion and sentence judgments.

muddled. There is an important distinction between ‘topic constituent’ and ‘discourse topic’, which is described by Roberts (2010) as follows. Topic constituents, which are syntactic objects, are topics by virtue of structural position. Specifically, topic constituents have been argued to reside in TopP in the CP domain, originally by Rizzi (1997) and for Japanese in particular by Kishimoto (2009). On the other hand, discourse topics are pragmatic objects. They are the ‘themes’ of the theme/rheme dichotomy, where theme and rheme are defined as the ‘old information’ and ‘new information’ anaphoric to a question under discussion (QUD). A significant difference between these notions can be seen in the example below.

- (1) a. (Where did James eat lunch?)
 b. [James]_{Topic} ate lunch [at a café on State St.]_{Rheme}

The rheme of the sentence in (1b) is *at a café on State Street*—the information which is requested in the QUD indicated by (1a). The theme is the complement of the rheme, thus *James ate lunch*, which expresses the old information from the QUD. The topic constituent, however, is less inclusive. In this case, it is simply the subject, *James*.¹

Japanese *wa* is a marker for topic constituents, and it is in this sense that I use the term ‘topic’ in this paper. The notion of discourse topic is considered here no further.

2.2 Japanese *wa* and the contrastive/noncontrastive distinction

Japanese is a useful source of data on topic, since this is overtly marked in the morphology by the particle *wa*. This can be seen in the following sentences, where *wa* marks the subject and the direct object, respectively, as topic constituents:²

- (2) Minegishi-sensei-wa kono daigaku-no kyooju da.
 Minegishi-HON-TOP this university-GEN professor COP
 ‘Dr. Minegishi is a professor at this university.’
- (3) Ano hon-wa Yamada-san-ga kinoo katta.
 that book-TOP Yamada-HON-NOM yesterday bought
 ‘That book, Ms. Yamada bought yesterday.’

Since Kuno (1973), it has been commonplace in the literature to dichotomize *wa* into ‘thematic’ and ‘contrastive’ varieties. The above cases are both of the thematic type, where *wa* marks an constituent as being, informally speaking, what the sentence is about. The contrastive type is illustrated in (4).

- (4) Watashi-ga³ ringo-wa taberu ga, banana-wa tabenai.
 I-NOM apple-TOP eat but banana-TOP eat.NEG
 ‘I eat apples, but not bananas.’

¹Although the status of *James* as a topic constituent in the English sentence is questionable, this would be clearly marked in the equivalent Japanese sentence.

²When a subject or direct object is marked with *wa*, the nominative particle *ga* and accusative particle *o* do not remain overt. This differs from when *wa* is attached to constituents of other types, as we shall see below.

Here, unlike in (2) and (3), *wa* carries an additional implicature that the marked constituent is in opposition to a set of alternatives.

In this paper, I am only concerned with thematic cases; however, following Heycock (2008) and others, I call these simply ‘noncontrastive’ topics, so as to avoid conflation with the notion of theme, which was addressed in the previous subsection.

2.3 Japanese *wa* and the categorical/thetic distinction

It has been mentioned that Japanese *wa* marks a constituent as being “what the sentence is about”; this subsection gives a slightly more formal consideration of the difference between a sentence with and without *wa*. Over the course of numerous studies, Kuroda (1972, 2005, *inter alia*) has argued for *wa* as a marker of ‘categorical judgment’. Consider the following pair of sentences (Kuroda 1972:161, example 8):

- (5) a. Inu-ga neko-o oikakete-iru.
dog-NOM cat-ACC chase-be
‘A/The dog is chasing a cat.’
b. Inu-wa neko-o oikakete-iru.
dog-TOP cat-ACC chase-be
‘A/The dog is chasing a cat.’

While both sentences in (5) describe the event of a dog chasing a cat, the marker on the subject is the nominative *ga* in the former and the topical *wa* in the latter. According to Kuroda, a sentence with a *wa*-phrase expresses a ‘categorical judgment’: that is, it makes an assertion about a prominent constituent (the *wa*-marked constituent). In contrast, a sentence without a *wa*-phrase expresses a ‘thetic judgment’ (or ‘descriptive judgment’): it simply affirms an eventuality—thus, it is the eventuality itself that is prominent, not a participant thereof. In the example above, (5b) asserts of a specific dog that it is chasing some cat, while (5a) simply affirms the event of a dog chasing a cat, without assigning prominence to either entity.

Furthermore, Kuroda claims that a sentence without a *wa*-phrase amounts to the material from which a sentence with a *wa*-phrase is formed. The impact of this claim for our purposes is that *wa* does not affect truth conditions but rather felicity. In this way, (5b) is only felicitous if there is a specific dog recoverable from the discourse context.

3 Identifying noncontrastive *wa*-phrases

With preliminaries concerning noncontrastive topic and Japanese *wa* now settled, we turn to the central question of which *wa*-phrase types permit a noncontrastive reading. The last section gave examples of AGENT and THEME NPs as noncontrastive *wa*-phrases; in this section, I examine a variety of other *wa*-phrases according to category as well as thematic

³The subject here could be marked with a noncontrastive *wa*, but I have avoided this to minimize confusion.

relation,⁴ and identify those for which a noncontrastive reading is available.

Since *wa*-phrases in general can be used contrastively,⁵ we need only find examples where a given type of topic constituent is clearly used with a noncontrastive reading. Thus the challenge is to establish where it is that noncontrastive readings can be expected. First, it is known that noncontrastive topics only occur sentence-initially, except when embedded under certain propositional attitude verbs, in which case they may appear clause-initially (Kuroda 2005). For simplicity, only sentence-initial examples are examined here. As another matter of simplification, sentences with negation are avoided, since such sentences may favor a contrastive reading. Finally, where possible, Reinhart's (1981) diagnostic test is used to create an appropriate context for a noncontrastive topic to arise. Namely, the background sentence 'Tell me about *x*.' sets up the context for *x* to become noncontrastive topic in the target sentence which follows. For completeness, the Japanese equivalent of this sentence is found below:

- (6) *x*-ni-tsuite oshiete kudasai.
x-about tell IMP.POL
'Tell me about *x*.'

Let us begin by considering the following sentences, which contain TIME NP-*wa* phrases:

- (7) a. ('Tell me about today.')
- b. Kyoo-wa Pari-de fushigi-na jiken-ga okita.
today-TOP Paris-LOC strange incident-NOM occurred
'Today, a strange incident occurred in Paris.'
- (8) a. ('Tell me about the 26th of this month.')
- b. Kongetsu-26-nichi-wa senmonka-ni-yoru genchi-choosa-ga
this.month-26-day-TOP expert-by field-investigation-NOM
okonawareru.
be.conducted
'On the 26th of this month, a field investigation led by experts will be conducted.'

Both of these *wa*-phrases describe the time of an eventuality, and both permit a noncontrastive reading. This reading is facilitated by the background sentence from Reinhart's test; however, sentences (7b) and (8b) may in fact also occur without an established context, such as at the beginning of a news report. In (7b), an event is reported as having occurred today, but in the intended reading, the events of yesterday or tomorrow are not of concern. Likewise, in (8b), an event will occur on a given date, but nothing is suggested regarding other dates.

LOCATION PPs may also be noncontrastive *wa*-phrases, as in the following examples, where the particle *de* marks the location of an event and *ni* is used for the location of a state:⁶

⁴The particular set of thematic relations chosen is not essential for the claims at hand.

⁵Contrastiveness can be induced by intonation, for instance.

⁶(10b) and (11b), as well as (12b) below, may occur without *ni*. This particle is required when *wa* is not present, however.

- (9) a. ('Tell me about Sapporo.')
- b. Sapporo-de-wa yuki-matsuri-ga 5-ka-ni kaimaku-shita.
Sapporo-LOC-TOP snow-festival-NOM 5-day-on opened
'In Sapporo, the Snow Festival began on the 5th.'
- (10) a. ('Tell me about Nara Park.')
- b. Nara-kooen-(ni)-wa shika-ga takusan iru.
Nara-park-LOC-TOP deer-NOM many be
'At Nara Park, there are many deer.'
- (11) a. ('Tell me about Mr. Kuwata.')
- b. Kuwata-san-(ni)-wa musume-ga futari iru.
Kuwata-HON-LOC-TOP daughter-NOM two.CL be
'Mr. Kuwata has two daughters.'

The case of LOCATION is similar to that of TIME; while the background sentences above help to ensure a noncontrastive reading, setting up these topic constituents in prior discourse is not strictly necessary. (9b), like (7b), could occur at the beginning of a news report. Here, it is reported of Sapporo that this is the location of a recent festival, yet this need not be in opposition to any other locations. Sentences (10b) and (11b) are parallel in form: in the former, the topic is a place of existence, in the latter, it is the possessor in an existential possession construction. In (10b), it is said of Nara Park that there are many deer there, and in (11b), it is said of Mr. Kuwata that he has two daughters. Both of these may be uttered without contrast to other places or people.

Noncontrastive *wa* is available for EXPERIENCER, passivized AGENT, and RECIPIENT PPs as well:

- (12) a. ('What do you think?')
- b. Watashi-(ni)-wa anata-no kimochi-ga yoku wakaru.
I-DAT-TOP you-GEN feeling-NOM well understand
'I know just how you feel.'
- (13) a. ('Tell me more about Yuri.')
- b. Yuri-chan-ni-wa sakki tondemonai koto-o iwareta.
Yuri-HON-by-TOP earlier outrageous thing-ACC was.said
'By Yuri, I was told an outrageous thing earlier.'
- (14) a. ('It's almost Mamoru's birthday.')
- b. Soo da. Mamoru-ni-wa kotoshi ooki-na purezento-o ageyoo.
so COP Mamoru-DAT-TOP this.year big present-ACC let's.give
'That's right. To Mamoru, let's give a big present this year.'

Although the background sentences here differ slightly from Reinhart's suggestion, they likewise serve to introduce an individual that is to be made the noncontrastive topic. In (12b), the speaker is the prominent individual, standing as the EXPERIENCER of a verb of 'nonintentional perception', in the terminology of Kuno (1973).⁷ In (13b), the *wa*-marked

⁷Verbs of 'nonintentional perception', such as *mieru* 'see' and *kikoeru* 'hear', take a dative-marked EXPERIENCER and nominative-marked THEME.

individual is Yuri, the AGENT of the verb *iu* 'say' in its passivized form. In (14b), Mamoru is the topic as well as the RECIPIENT of the verb *ageru* 'give'. These examples can each be read without contrasting the speaker, Yuri, or Mamoru with other individuals.

GOAL, SOURCE, COMITATIVE, and INSTRUMENT PP-*wa* phrases may also be read non-contrastively:

- (15) a. ('Tell me about San Francisco.')
 b. San-Furanshisuko-e/ni-wa hobo mainen shucchoo-de itte-iru.
 San-Francisco-to-TOP almost every.year business.trip-by be.going
 'To San Francisco, I go almost every year on business.'
- (16) a. ('Tell me about Minatomirai.')
 b. Minatomirai-made-wa densha-de itta hoo-ga ii.
 Minatomirai-until-TOP train-by went be.better
 'As far as Minatomirai, you should go by train.'
- (17) a. ('Tell me more about Keio University's Mita campus.')
 b. Mita-kyanpasu-kara-wa Tookyoo-Tawaa-ga mieru.
 Mita-campus-from-TOP Tokyo-Tower-NOM be.visible
 'From Mita campus, you can see Tokyo Tower.'
- (18) a. ('Tell me about your girlfriend.')
 b. Kanojo-to-wa daigaku-no koro-ni shiriatta.
 girlfriend-with-TOP college-GEN time-in got.to.know
 'My girlfriend, I got to know in college.'
- (19) a. ('Tell me about the Internet.')
 b. Intaanetto-de-wa kaigai-ni iru tomodachi-to-mo raku-ni renraku-ga
 Internet-by-TOP overseas-LOC be friend-with-even easily contact-NOM
 toriaeru.
 can.take
 'By means of the Internet, you can easily keep in touch even with friends who are overseas.'

Apart from thematic relation, none of these cases differ greatly from earlier examples. In (15b), San Francisco is the GOAL of the verb *iku* 'go', which can be marked by either *e* or *ni*. Neither this nor *Minatomirai-made* 'until Minatomirai' in (16b) or *Mita-kyanpasu-kara* 'from Mita campus' in (17b) are in implicit opposition to other locations or paths. Analogously, *kanojo* 'girlfriend' in (18b) need not contrast with other people and *Intaanetto* 'Internet' in (19b) need not contrast with other means of communication.

In addition to NPs and PPs, CPs may be noncontrastive *wa*-phrases:

- (20) a. ('Did you know she was born in Korea?')
 b. Ano yuumeijin-ga Kankoku-de umareta-koto-wa yoku shirarete-iru.
 that celebrity-NOM Korea-LOC was.born-COMP-TOP well be.known
 'That that celebrity was born in Korea is well known.'
- (21) a. ('Tell me more about you guys.')

- b. Bokura-ga deatta-no-wa 2-nen-mae-no koto da.
 we-NOM met-COMP-TOP 2-year-before-GEN thing COP
 'It was two years ago that we met.'
- (22) a. ('Which one should I choose?')
- b. Dochira-o erabu-ka-wa anata-shidai da.
 which-ACC choose-Q-TOP you-dependent COP
 'Which to choose is up to you.'

In these cases, *wa* attaches after complementizers *koto* and *no* as well as question particle *ka*; thus the differentiating factor here is that the prominent constituent denotes an eventuality. In (20b), it is said of the fact that a certain celebrity was born in Korea that this is well known, without implication about other things one might know. In (21b), it is said of the event of the speaker's meeting a particular person that this was something that occurred two years prior, without implication about other events. In (22b), it is said of a certain choice that this is for the addressee to decide, without implication about other choices.

On the other hand, VP-*wa* and AP-*wa* phrases may only receive a contrastive reading:

- (23) a. ('Have you thought more about the proposal?')
- b. Kangaete-wa iru. (Demo kimete-wa inai.)
 think-TOP be (but decide-TOP be.NEG)
 'I've thought about it. (But I haven't decided.)'
- (24) a. ('Is the assignment difficult?')
- b. Muzukashiku-wa aru. (Demo muri-de-wa nai.)
 difficult-TOP be (but impossible-TOP be.NEG)
 'It is difficult. (But it isn't impossible.)'

As in previous examples, the background sentences introduce a constituent that should be available to subsequently become a noncontrastive topic in the target sentence. Yet this is not what we find in the data above. In (23b), a VP from the background sentence is used as a *wa*-phrase; in (24b), it is instead an AP. As earlier, the *wa*-phrases appear sentence-initially, the sentences do not contain negation, and they are presumed to be uttered without any special intonation. Nevertheless, these VP and AP *wa*-phrases are necessarily contrastive. For each case, a plausible implicature is indicated in parentheses.⁸

4 Analysis: Topics as entities

The distribution indicated by the data in the previous section is not altogether surprising. Indeed, this points to a view of 'topics as entities', which is common in the literature: while PPs denote an individual standing in a particular relation and CPs denote an even-

⁸Of note here are two other constructions which are not actually instances of topical *wa*, in spite of their appearances. Although phrases like *kaisha-ni ite-wa* 'being at the office' and *tadashiku-wa* 'more correctly' resemble those of (23b) and (24b), these are in fact conditional constructions equivalent to those which use the particle *to*, viz., *kaisha-ni iru to* and *tadashiku iu to*.

tuality, these are both like NPs in their denoting of entities, a property which does not hold for VPs and APs.

This ‘topics as entities’ approach is shared by dynamic and information-structural accounts of topic, such as Portner and Yabushita (1998, 2001). In particular, Portner and Yabushita’s ‘information structure theory of topic’ is an extension of Heim’s (1982) File Change Semantics, under which the semantic content of a topicless sentence is distributed among the discourse referents involved (i.e., it is written onto all applicable ‘file cards’), but for a sentence with a topic, this information is strictly associated with the topical discourse referent. This is a very similar idea to Kuroda’sthetic and categorical judgments described in Section 2.3. Portner and Yabushita’s data, however, are limited to NP-*wa* phrases, and incorporating the broad range of data from the previous section of this paper into their approach does not appear to be a trivial matter.

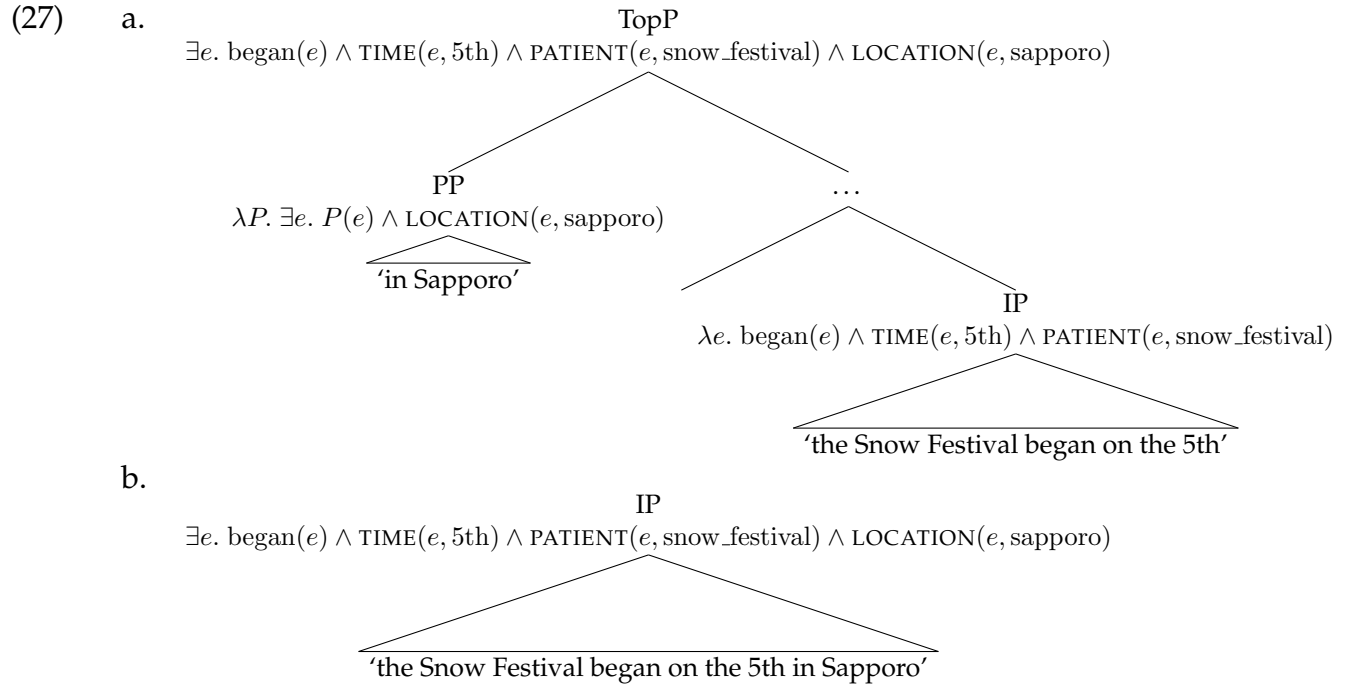
On the other hand, the claim here that a noncontrastive reading is available for a *wa*-phrase just when the *wa*-marked constituent denotes an entity of some kind readily lends itself to a neo-Davidsonian analysis (Davidson 1967, Kratzer 1996). This naturally allows for abstraction over individuals in the case of NP-*wa* or PP-*wa* phrases, and specifically over event arguments in the case of CP-*wa* phrases. As an illustration, consider again the LOCATION PP example from (9b), repeated here as (25a):

- (25) a. Sapporo-de-wa yuki-matsuri-ga 5-ka-ni kaimaku-shita.
 Sapporo-LOC-TOP snow-festival-NOM 5-day-on opened
 ‘In Sapporo, the Snow Festival began on the 5th.’
 b. $(\lambda P. \exists e. P(e) \wedge \text{LOCATION}(e, \text{sapporo}))$
 $(\lambda e. \text{began}(e) \wedge \text{TIME}(e, \text{5th}) \wedge \text{PATIENT}(e, \text{snow_festival}))$

(25b) shows how the topic and the rest of the sentence, or comment, may be interpreted under this analysis. The topic expresses that there is an event for which the location is Sapporo, while the comment expresses the rest of the details of that event, namely that the Snow Festival began on the 5th. As such, this analysis is an implementation of the claim that a sentence with a *wa*-phrase makes an assertion about the *wa*-marked constituent. In the specific example above, it is said of the location Sapporo that this is where the Snow Festival began on the 5th.

Furthermore, this analysis also provides a formalization of the earlier notion that sentences with and without noncontrastive *wa* are truth-conditionally equivalent. The *wa*-less version of (25) is given in (26), and their syntactic trees are shown in (27a) and (27b), respectively. As this makes evident, the two sentences are semantically identical at their topmost level.

- (26) a. Sapporo-de yuki-matsuri-ga 5-ka-ni kaimaku-shita.
 Sapporo-LOC snow-festival-NOM 5-day-on opened
 ‘The Snow Festival began on the 5th in Sapporo.’
 b. $\exists e. \text{began}(e) \wedge \text{TIME}(e, \text{5th}) \wedge \text{PATIENT}(e, \text{snow_festival}) \wedge \text{LOCATION}(e, \text{sapporo})$



5 Conclusion

Although Japanese *wa* always permits a contrastive reading, the conditions under which a noncontrastive reading is available are somewhat more limited. In this paper, I have examined a range of topic constituents in Japanese and argued that noncontrastive readings are restricted to entity-denoting constituents. As such, VP and AP noncontrastive *wa*-phrases are found to be ungrammatical, while NP, PP, and CP noncontrastive *wa*-phrases are in general grammatical.

Looking ahead, the issue remains that these grammatical noncontrastive *wa*-phrases appear to have much more subtle felicity conditions, and a thorough pragmatic analysis will be useful to isolate the factors influencing felicity of various noncontrastive topic phrase types. Additionally, it will be fruitful to incorporate data from other languages with various systems of topic-marking and determine the degree to which the findings of this paper hold elsewhere.

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