

The Contrastive Reading of Japanese –*wa*, and the Role of Information Structure^{*}

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In this study, I investigate the distribution of the contrastive reading associated with the so-called Japanese topic marker –*wa*. The main goal is two-fold. First, I examine two previous approaches, which I call the “predicate-based approach,” and the “argument-based approach” respectively, and demonstrate that they are not sufficient to capture some empirical data. Second, based on the observation that *wa*-phrases in all-focus and subject-focus sentences induce the contrastive reading, I argue and demonstrate that the contrastive reading arises when *wa*-phrases are part of focus.

1. Introduction

The so-called Japanese topic marker –*wa* is known for its dual function. As illustrated in (1a) and (1b) respectively, –*wa* may mark the theme of a sentence or it may express a contrast. The following examples have been adopted from Kuno (1973; ch2).

- (1) Two readings associated with Japanese –*wa*
 - a. John-*wa* gakusee desu.
John-WA student is
Thematic: ‘Speaking of John, he is a student.’
 - b. Ame-*wa* hutte imasu ga...
rain-WA falling is but
Contrastive: ‘It is raining, but (e.g., it is not snowing).’

The current paper concerns itself with the distribution of the contrastive reading. Previous studies have attempted to link the contrastive reading either with the property of the noun that –*wa* is suffixed or with the type of the predicate with which *wa*-phrase is used. The main objective of this paper is to show that either type of approaches is at least insufficient, and that we must pay attention to information structure of a sentence to delineate the distribution of the contrastive reading.

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2. Previous Approaches

In this section, I review two major types of approaches to the distribution of the contrastive reading of *-wa*, and demonstrate that neither of the approaches is sufficient.

2.1 Argument-based approach

Kuno (1973) makes reference to the anaphoric/generic distinctions of NPs that *-wa* is attached in order to capture the two readings associated with *-wa*. I will call this type of approach “the argument-based approach” as opposed to the “predicate-based approach,” which I will discuss in the next subsection.

Kuno (1973) claims that *wa*-marked NPs receive the thematic reading when they are generic or anaphoric, and that they receive the contrastive reading when they are non-generic or non-anaphoric. Consider (2a) and (3a) on the one hand, and (2b) and (3b) on the other. The following examples have been adopted from Kuno (1973; ch2).

(2) a. Generic NP

Ame-wa sora-kara huru.
rain-WA sky-from fall

Thematic: ‘Speaking of rain, it falls from the sky.’

b. Non-generic NP

Ame-wa hutte imasu-ga, taishita koto-wa arimasen.
rain-WA falling is-but serious matter-CNT is.not

Contrastive: ‘It is raining, but it is not much.’

(3) a. Anaphoric

John-wa watashi-no tomodachi-desu.

John- WA I- GEN friend-is

Thematic: ‘Speaking of John, he is my friend.’

b. Non-anaphoric

Oozei-no hito-wa party-ni kimashita-ga omoshiroi hito-wa
many-GEN people-WA party-to came-but interesting people-WA
hitori mo imasen-deshita.

one.person even there.not-was

Contrastive: ‘Many people came to the party indeed, but there was none who was interesting.’

In the *a* sentences above, the *wa*-phrases are construed as the theme of the sentences. Notice that *ame* ‘rain’ is used generically in (2a), referring to rain in general, and that *John* is used anaphorically in (3a), referring to a referent salient in the discourse. On the other hand, the *wa*-phrases in the *b* sentences are construed as contrast. Notice that *ame* ‘rain’ in (2b) is a specific instance of rain (i.e., non-generic), and that *oozei-no hito* ‘many people’ in (3b) does not refer to any specific set of people (i.e., non-anaphoric) because it only means that the number of people who came to the party was great.

While Kuno’s approach seems to capture the contrast well at least in the examples that we examined thus far, there is a case where the anaphoric/generic distinction is not sufficient. In fact, Kuno (1973; 47) himself notes that *-wa* used with an anaphoric or a generic NP can be construed either as thematic or contrastive. Contrary to what we discussed in regard to (3a), *John* in (4), used anaphorically, results in both the thematic reading and the contrastive reading.

- (4) Ambiguity associated with anaphoric
- a. John-wa sono hon-o yonda
 John-WA that book-ACC read
 Thematic: ‘John read the book.’
 - b. John-wa sono hon-o yonda-ga Mary-wa yomanakatta.
 John-WA that book-ACC read-but Mary-CONT read.didn’t
 Contrastive: ‘John read the book, but Mary didn’t.’

Due to this ambiguity, while he can claim that non-anaphoric/non-generic NPs are necessarily construed as contrastive, Kuno cannot claim that the contrastive-*wa* is necessarily non-anaphoric/non-generic.

2.2 Predicate-based approach

The other type of approach, which I examine, makes reference to the type of the predicate; thus I call it the “predicate-based approach.” Miyajima (2002), for example, claims that *wa*-sentences with individual-level predicates (ILPs) induce the thematic reading whereas ones with stage-level predicates (SLPs) induce the contrastive reading. This is illustrated in the contrast between (5a) and (5b).

- (5) Individual-level predicates vs. stage-level predicates
- a. Taroo-wa gakusee-desu. [ILP]
 Taro-WA student-is
 Thematic: ‘Speaking of Taro, he is a student.’

- b. Hon-wa aru. [SLP]
 book-WA exists
 Contrastive: ‘There is a book (e.g., but not a pen.)’

First, compare the predicate in (5a) and that in (5b). While ‘existing (at a certain location)’ is a temporary state of affair for an entity (i.e., SLP), ‘being a student’ is less transitory if not permanent (i.e., ILP).

While the distinction between SLPs and ILPs is not very clear-cut, Miyajima’s approach seems to be able to capture the distribution of the two readings if we can agree on the definition of SLPs and ILPs. However, there is a major problem with Miyajima’s approach, or with any predicate approach. There are cases where the same predicates induce either of the two readings. Observe that the same predicate *aru* ‘to exist’ induces the contrastive reading in (6a) and the contrastive reading in (6b). If *aru* ‘to exist’ is an SLP as we assumed for (5b), Miyajima’s approach would predict not only (6a) but also (6b) to be contrastive, contrary to fact.

- (6) a. Asoko-ni hon-wa aru.
 there-at book-WA exists
 Contrastive: ‘There is a book there (e.g., but not a pen).’
 b. Hon-wa asoko-ni aru.
 book-WA there-at exists
 Thematic: ‘The book is there.’

This is a serious problem for Miyajima’s proposal, and for any proposal that makes reference to different types of predicates. The interpretive asymmetry between (6a) and (6b) cannot be attributed to a property of the predicate since the only difference between the two sentences is the location of the locative phrase *asoko-ni* ‘there.’

I demonstrated in this section that neither the argument-based approach nor the predicate-based approach can sufficiently capture the distribution of the contrastive reading. In the next section, I demonstrate that information structure plays a crucial role determining the interpretation of *wa*-sentences.

3. Claims

I observed in Deguchi (2006) that, while it is generally weak, the contrastive reading of *wa*-sentences is robust in the environment where nominative-marked

sentences would receive the neutral-description reading.¹ Let us consider the minimal pair in (7), where the only difference is the marking on the subject.

- (7) a. (Hora) Hanako-ga kita.
 look Hanako-NOM came
 Neutral-description: ‘(Look!) Hanako is coming.’
- b. (Hora) Hanako-wa kita.
 look Hanako-WA came
 Contrastive: ‘(Look!) Hanako is coming, but (not Taro).’

Unless the subject is narrow-focused, (7a) is only construed as a neutral description sentence.² In contrast, as illustrated in (7b), a *wa*-marked sentence in the very same environment receives the contrastive reading unambiguously.

First, it is important to note that (7a) is an event-reporting sentence. Assuming with Lambrecht (1994) that event-reporting sentences are all-focus/sentence-focus, I hypothesize that a *wa*-phrase receives the contrastive reading when it is part of focus. If this hypothesis is correct, we expect the contrastive reading to disappear when a *wa*-phrase is de-focused. This is indeed the case as illustrated in (8).

- (8) De-focusing *wa*-phrase
- a. Asoko-ni hon-wa aru. [= (6a)]
 there-at book exists
 Contrastive: ‘There is a book over there, (not a newspaper).’
- b. ASOKO-NI hon-wa aru.
 there-at book exists
 Thematic: ‘The book is over there.’

The *a* sentence is a “normal” event-reporting sentence, and the *wa*-phrase is contained in focus. As we observed with (6a), (8a) receives the contrastive reading. However, once the locative phrase is narrow-focused, the contrastive reading obviates and the thematic reading emerges as illustrated in (8b). I argue that the

¹ Miyajima (2002) has also independently reached a similar observation that there is a correlation between the contrastive reading of a *wa*-phrase and the neutral description reading of a *ga*-phrase. More specifically, she claims that they are both linked to SLPs.

² If the subject were narrow focused, the exhaustive listing would obtain.

contrastive reading disappears because the *wa*-phrase is defocused due to the narrow focus on the locative phrase.

I have argued that a *wa*-phrase receives the contrastive reading when it is part of focus. To support the claim, we examined cases where a *wa*-phrase is used in all-focus sentences above. In what follows, we examine cases where a *wa*-phrase appears as the subject of a subject-focus sentence.

In (9), I have used a question/answer pair to attract focus to the subject. Responding to the subject-focus question, the *wa*-phrase is in focus in the answer. In addition, the suppression of lexical accents in the predicate (indicated by downward arrows) shows the fact that the *wa*-phrase is in focus in (9).

(9) Subject-focus sentence

- Q: Dare-ga okanemochi-desu-ka.
 who-NOM rich-is-Q
 ‘Who is rich?’
 A: Hanako-wa ↓okanemochi-desu↓-yo.
 Hanako-WA rich-is-INFORM
 Contrastive: ‘Hanako, for one, is rich.’

The question in (9) asks to identify who is rich, and the answer using *-wa* identifies Hanako as an instance of such an individual. Kuroda (2005) calls the type of interpretation exemplified in this type of answer “anti-exhaustive-listing reading.” I take the anti-exhaustive-listing reading to be a type of contrastive reading since there is an implicit set of individuals in which Hanako is contrasted. With the contrastive reading, broadly defined here, what we observe in (9) is also consistent with my claim. Now compare (9) with (10), where the lexical accent of the predicate is retained.

(10) Predicate-focus counterpart of (9)

- (Hanako nitsuite oshiete-kudasai “Tell me something about Hanako”)
 Hanako-wa oKANEmochi-desu-yo.
 Hanako-WA rich-is-INFORM
 Thematic: ‘Speaking of Hanako, she is rich.’

In this sentence, the predicate is in focus (as indicated by the lexical accent); in fact, only the predicate is in focus since this is not an event-reporting sentence. Notice that the contrastive reading observed in (9) has obviated in (10), where the *wa*-phrase is no longer part of focus.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, I first reviewed two types of proposals: the argument-based approach and the predicate-based approach. While both approaches capture the distribution of the contrastive reading to a large degree, there are cases where they fall short. To fill the gap, I argued that information structure plays a crucial role in determining the interpretation of *wa*-phrases. More specifically, I claimed that a *wa*-phrase receives the contrastive reading when it is part of focus, whether it is in an all-focus sentence or in a predicate-focus sentence.

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