

On the So-Called Thematic Use of *Wa*: Reconsideration and Reconciliation*

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Abstract. In past studies, there have been two major lines of analyses of the function/meaning of the particle *wa* in Japanese in its thematic use. Some scholars argue that it marks a *topic*, while others claim that it marks *ground* (old, presupposed, or backgrounded information). I demonstrate, testing their predictions against empirical data, that neither the topic-based approach nor the ground-based approach constitutes a complete theory of *wa* in its thematic use, and argue that the two approaches need to be combined in an adequate fashion. Namely, I propose that *wa* indicates topic only when it is associated with certain grammatical functions, such as direct object, while it merely indicates ground when it is associated with others, including subject.

Keywords: Japanese discourse, information structure, topic, focus

1 Introduction

This paper develops a semantic analysis of (some major functions of) the particle *wa* in Japanese, which integrates and reconciles two major lines of analyses in the existing literature: the topic-based approach and the ground-based approach.

There have been a great deal of studies of information packaging strategies in Japanese, including and especially the use of the putative ‘topic-marker’ *wa* (see Noda 1996, Fry 2003, and Heycock 2008 for literature surveys). Most previous studies of *wa* start from the assumption that, although *wa* is often (and indeed, most frequently, according to Fry’s (2003) corpus-based survey) attached to a subject, *wa* is *not* a subject-marker. This assumption is based on the fact that *wa* can be attached to constituents other than subjects, such as (direct or indirect) objects, (temporal or locative) modifiers, and even modifiers of nominal constituents; the sentences in (1) are adapted from Noda (1996:2), and the one in (2) from Mikami (1963:13).¹

- (1) a. *Kodomo-tachi-wa* karê-o tsukutte-i-mas-u.
child-Pl-*wa* curry-Acc make-Asp-Polite-Pres
‘The kids are making curry.’
(*wa* occurring on a subject)

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¹ Throughout the paper, the English translations of Japanese examples are meant to be rough approximations, rather than propositional and information-structural equivalents. The abbreviations used in glosses are: Acc = accusative, Asp = aspect, Aux = auxiliary, Ben = benefactive, Cl = classifier, Dat = dative, Gen = genitive, Hon = honorific, Imp = imperative, Nom = nominative, Pl = plural, Pres = present, Pro = pronoun, Q = question marker, SFP = sentence final particle.

- b. *Karê-wa* kodomo-tachi-ga tsukutte-i-mas-u.
 curry-*wa* child-PI-Nom make-Asp-Polite-Pres
 ‘As for the curry, the kids are making it.’
 (*wa* occurring on a direct object)
- c. *Kawara-de-wa* kodomo-tachi-ga karê-o tsukutte-i-mas-u.
 riverside-Loc-*wa* child-PI-Nom curry-Acc make-Asp-Polite-Pres
 ‘On the riverside, the kids are making curry.’
 (*wa* occurring on a locative modifier)
- (2) *Zô-wa* hana-ga naga-i.
 elephant-*wa* nose-Nom be.long-Pres
 ‘An elephant has a long nose; An elephant is such that its nose is long.’
 (*wa* occurring on a nominal modifier of a subject.)

Scholars generally (though not unanimously) agree that *wa* has at least two functions: *thematic* and *contrastive* (Kuno 1972 among others). Opinions are divided, however, on the exact function/meaning of the thematic use of *wa*.² Some scholars argue that it marks a topic (Mikami 1963; Kuno 1973; Noda 1996; Portner and Yabushita 1998; among others), while others claim that it marks a constituent carrying given, old, or backgrounded information (Martin 1975; Ono 1978; Makino 1982; Fiengo and McClure 2002, among others). The term ‘thematic *wa*’ turns out to be handy in this respect, as ‘theme (thematic)’ is used ambiguously in the literature, sometimes in the sense of *topic* (as intended by Kuno), and sometimes in the sense of (*back*)*ground*, i.e. as a notion opposing to *focus*.

The task to identify the function(s) of *wa* is made difficult partly by the ‘terminological jungle’ in the theory of information structure, where such fundamental terms/concepts as topic, old, given, ground, etc., have been given various labels, definitions, and interpretations in different frameworks and by different scholars. As a consequence, it is often difficult to evaluate individual analyses of *wa* in terms of their ability of making correct predictions and correct predictions only. On the other hand, recent years have seen important progresses toward an adequate theory of information structure, where insights from the accumulating works are integrated and problematic conceptual confounds are resolved (e.g. Lambrecht 1994; Vallduví and Engdahl 1996). On this ground, this article demonstrates that neither the topichood-based analysis nor the groundhood-based (givenness-based) analysis constitutes a complete theory of *wa* in its thematic use, testing their predictions against empirical data. This is, however, not to say that we need to introduce a third concept; what we need instead is to combine the two approaches in an adequate fashion.

In Section 2, I present working definitions of some fundamental pragmatic concepts to be adopted in the present work. In Section 3, I briefly review the two existing major analyses of *wa* (the topichood-based analysis and the groundhood-based analysis) and point out their problems. In Section 4, I put forth an alternative analysis which integrates insights from previous studies and can account for a fuller range of data. Namely, I argue against the widely held assumption that (thematic) *wa* has a uniform function, say topic-marker or ground-marker, and propose that *wa* marks a topic only when it is associated with certain grammatical functions (GF’s), such as direct object, while it merely indicates groundhood (givenness) when it is associated others, including subject. In other words, I propose that what has been traditionally called thematic *wa* is an amalgam of ‘topic-marking *wa*’ and ‘ground-marking *wa*’.

2 The Tripartite Structure of Pragmatic Functions

Messages conveyed by individual utterances can be partitioned into informational subcomponents, or *pragmatic functions*. In the literature, it has been generally agreed that a single bipartite struc-

² This is not to say that the function/meaning of the contrastive use of *wa* is a straightforward matter; see Oshima (2008) among others.

ture (say, *theme-rheme*) is not fine-grained enough to explain various facts in natural languages, and we need at least two pairs of opposing concepts: *topic-comment* and *ground-focus*. Furthermore, in recent studies, it is commonplace to conflate two oppositions into one tripartite structure, where topic is construed as part of ground (Lambrecht 1994; Vallduví and Engdahl 1996). I too adopt this view, and postulate five pragmatic categories in a message conveyed by a single utterance, with the working definitions presented below.

- (3)
- a. *focus*: informative and newsy material; material that completes an open proposition provided by ground and/or the discourse context
 - b. *ground*: non-informative and expected material; material that provides an open proposition to be completed by focus
 - c. *topic*: an entity presented as something the message is ‘about’; an entity that the hearer is expected or directed to give attention to as the location of information update
 - d. *tail*: the complement of the topic in the ground (i.e., tail = ground – topic)
 - e. *comment*: the complement of the topic in the utterance (i.e., comment = link + focus)

An utterance may consist of focus only, focus-tail, focus-topic, or focus-tail-topic; it is impossible, on the other hand, for an utterance to consist of ground elements only. That is, an utterance may be topic-less or ground-less, but cannot be all-ground. (4) is an example of an utterance in English that contains all five pragmatic categories:

- (4) [I will meet Prof. Brown at the airport myself.]
As for *Prof. Smith*, **Ken** will go pick him up.
- (5)
- a. *focus*: **ken**
 - b. *ground*: $\lambda y[\text{pick.up}(y, \text{smith})]$
 - c. *topic*: **smith**
 - d. *tail*: $\lambda x[\lambda y[\text{pick.up}(y, x)]]$
 - e. *comment*: $\lambda x[\text{pick.up}(\text{ken}, x)]$

3 Previous Studies of *Wa*

This section discusses limitations of the major existing analyses of *wa*. The discussions to follow will be limited to thematic *wa*-marking in affirmative contexts and in the matrix environment;³ that is, contrastive *wa*-marking and *wa*-marking in a negative or subordinate clause will not be considered, based on the assumptions (i) that the thematic and contrastive uses of *wa* are semantically distinct, and thematic and contrastive *wa*-phrases can be distinguished on phonological grounds (Nakanishi 2001; Oshima 2008, 2009), and (ii) that conditions on *wa*-marking are different in affirmative and negative clauses, as well as in matrix and subordinate environments (McGloin 1987; Noda 1996; Oshima 2009).

There have been two major lines of analyses on the so-called thematic use of *wa*: (i) the topichood-based analysis: ‘*Wa* marks a topic’ (e.g., Mikami 1963; Kuno 1973; Noda 1996; Portner and Yabushita 1998) and (ii) the groundhood-based analysis: ‘*Wa* marks given/old information’ (e.g., Martin 1975; Ono 1978; Makino 1982; Fiengo and McClure 2002).⁴ That is, a major portion of existing analyses of *wa* amount to the following, two competing hypotheses.

³ Hereafter, I will take the liberty to refer to ‘*wa* in its thematic use’ simply as ‘*wa*’.

⁴ Scholars like Kuroda (1972, 2005) and Shibatani (1990) claim that sentences with and without a *wa*-phrase instantiate two different ways to perceive a proposition. Sentences with a *wa*-phrase express a categorical (or predicational, experiential, etc.) judgment, where presentation of certain material and predication over it are conceptualized as two distinct processes; sentences without a *wa*-phrase, on the other hand, express athetic (or descriptive, perceptual, etc.) judgment, where a proposition is grasped as an undivided whole. I consider this view a variant of analysis (6ii), the categorical judgment corresponding to the ground-focus configuration and thethetic judgment corresponding to the all-focus configuration.

- (6) (i) *Wa* indicates topichood.
 (ii) *Wa* indicates groundhood.

Typically, these two hypotheses are paired with and complemented by their respective contraposition; i.e.,

- (7) (i') The absence of *wa* indicates the absence of a topic (unless the presence of a topic is indicated by some other means).
 (ii') The absence of *wa* indicates focushood (unless groundhood is indicated by some other means).

In the following, I will examine these two hypotheses, and argue that neither of them is sufficient by itself and that they must be combined with each other appropriately to account for a full range of data.

3.1 Groundhood and *Wa*-Marking

Let us first examine hypothesis (6ii): '*Wa* indicates ground'. There are two natural ways to elaborate this hypothesis.

- (8) (i) *Wa* marks all portions/the whole of ground. (All portions of ground must be marked by *wa*.)
 (ii) *Wa* marks all nominals that are part of ground. (All nominals that are part of ground must be marked by *wa*.)

It can be shown, with rather simple data, that neither generalization holds. Consider the following wh-question (boldface indicates focushood).

- (9) (Context: The three graduate students, Ken, Hiroshi, and Shingo, recently read *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Theogony*.)
 Ken-ga Iriasu-o yon-da no-wa **itsu** des-u-ka?
 Ken-Nom *Iliad*-Acc read-Past Pro-*wa* when be.Polite-Pres-Q
 'When is it that Ken read *Iliad*?'

In reply to (9), one can felicitously utter either (10a) or (10b).

- (10) a. Ken-wa Iriasu-o **gogatsu-ni** yomi-mashi-ta.
 Ken-*wa* *Iliad*-Acc May-in read-Polite-Past
 'Ken read *Iliad* in May.'
 b. Iriasu-o Ken-wa **gogatsu-ni** yomi-mashi-ta.
Iliad-Acc Ken-*wa* May-in read-Polite-Past
 'Ken read *Iliad* in May.'

In (10), the phrase *gogatsu-ni*, which corresponds to the wh-phrase in the question, matches the focus, and all other constituents form ground. Neither generalization (8i) nor (8ii) is compatible with such data, where the nominal *Iriasu-o* is, despite being a nominal and part of the ground, not marked by *wa*. From this observation, we can conclude that groundhood is not (always) the determining factor for the presence of *wa*-marking (a similar point is made by Heycock 2008:65-66).

3.2 Topichood and *Wa*-Marking

Let us now turn to hypothesis (6i): '*Wa* indicates topichood'. A problem with this hypothesis can be illustrated with data like the following:

- (11) (in reply to (9))
- a. ??Ken-ga Iriasu-*{o/wa}* **gogatsu-ni** yomi-mashi-ta.
 Ken-Nom Iliad-Acc/*wa* May-in read-polite-Past
 (Ken read *Iliad* in May.)
- b. ??Iriasu-*{o/wa}* Ken-ga **gogatsu-ni** yomi-mashi-ta.
 Iliad-Acc/*wa* Ken-Nom May-in read-polite-Past
 (Ken read *Iliad* in May.)

The utterances in (11a,b) are awkward in the context in question (see Kuno 1972:287-288, 1973:215 for a similar observation).

If we adopt hypothesis (6i) at face value, the data given in (11) would entail that in the context in question, the subject *must* be presented as a topic (while the object need not to). To account for such data, one might claim that:

- (12) A subject must be a topic unless it is (part of) the focus.

Such a solution, however, is rather unpalatable, as there is no obvious reason why the speaker cannot opt *not* to topicalize a subject within ground, while he may leave an object within ground untopicalized. True, a subject tends to be a topic, and a topic tends to be a subject (Lambrecht 1994, among others). That a subject tends to be a topic and that a subject must be a topic, however, are two separate things. In the following, I will present and argue for a more sensible alternative to (12).

4 The Asymmetry Hypothesis

The problems with the topichood-based analysis and the groundhood-based analysis of *wa* discussed so far can be summarized as follows: (i) the groundhood-based analysis overgenerates *wa*-marking on a direct object, and (ii) the topichood-based analysis undergenerates *wa*-marking on a subject. To solve this dilemma, it seems necessary to abandon the commonly held assumption that *wa* has a uniform function whether it occurs on one grammatical function or another.

4.1 An Alternative Analysis

I propose (i) that *wa*-marking on a subject merely indicates that the subject is part or the whole of ground (so that a *wa*-marked subject may but need not be a topic), and (ii) that *wa*-marking on a direct object indicates that the direct object is not only part of the ground, but a topic (so that a *wa*-marked object must be a topic). This proposal, which I hereafter call the *asymmetry hypothesis*, amounts to say that what has been traditionally called thematic *wa* is an amalgam of two different uses of *wa*: (i) *wa*₁, a ground-marker, and (ii) *wa*₂, a topic-marker. *Wa*₁ can occur on a subject (and possibly some other GF's) but not on a direct object; *wa*₂, on the hand, is presumably not subject to such a GF-based constraint.

For a large range of data, the asymmetry analysis leads to the same predictions as Kuno's (1972, 1973) analysis of *wa* and *ga*, whose essence is summarized below:

- (13) Kuno's analysis of *wa* and *ga*
- (i) *Wa*-marking indicates a topic (theme, in his terminology)
- (ii) *Ga*-marking on a subject indicates that the subject is part or the whole of the focus.⁵

I take the view, contra Kuno, that *ga* is a mere nominative marker and by itself does not indicate a particular pragmatic function (see Amano 1998 for similar remarks). The effect of (13ii),

⁵ Kuno refers to *ga* marking a proper subpart of the focus as '*ga* of neutral description', and to *ga* marking the whole of the focus as '*ga* of exhaustive listing'.

however, follows from the asymmetry hypothesis; from (i) the assumption that *wa*-marking on a subject indicates groundhood and the absence thereof indicates focushood, and (ii) the fact that *ga*-marking entails the absence of *wa*-marking, it follows that *ga*-marking indicates focushood. The two analyses differ, however, in that only my analysis but not Kuno's leaves room for a tail-subject, i.e., a subject that is neither a topic nor (part of) a focus. In (relatively formal styles of) Japanese, a subject as a rule must be marked either by *wa* or *ga*. Thus, Kuno's analysis, where *wa* indicates topichood and *ga* indicates focushood, in effect predicts that a subject must be either a topic or (part of) a focus and cannot be (part of) tail. I find it a defect of Kuno's analysis, as it seems quite unlikely for a language to have such a 'design flaw' in its expressive capacity.

4.2 The *As For*-Test

The asymmetry hypothesis is supported by the observation that a *wa*-marked direct object in an affirmative statement generally passes what Lambrecht (1994) calls the *as for*-test, while the same is not the case for a *wa*-marked subject in the same environment.

The *as for*-test is a diagnostic test that can be used to identify an expression that serves as an information-structural topic, and has the form presented below:

- (14) The *as for*-test: If an utterance of the form: [$S_1 \dots X \dots$] can be felicitously paraphrased as [*As for* X, S_2] where S_2 is identical to S_1 except that X is replaced by a pronominal or empty form anaphoric to X, X in S_1 is a topic.

To give an example, if an utterance: 'I saw your brother yesterday' is intuitively felt to be roughly equivalent to (or be paraphrasable as) 'As for your brother, I saw him yesterday', one may conclude that *your brother* is a topic (of the original utterance).⁶

The *as for*-test can be applied to Japanese data too with expressions like *ni-tsuite-wa*, which can be taken to be a relatively faithful translation of *as for*.⁷

- (15) a. Ken-*ni-tsuite-wa*, Iriasu-o yomi-mashi-ta.
 Ken-*ni-tsuite-wa* Iliad-Acc read-Polite-Past
 'As for Ken, he read *Iliad*.'
 b. Iriasu-*ni-tsuite-wa*, Ken-ga yomi-mashi-ta.
 Iliad-*ni-tsuite-wa* Ken-Nom read-Polite-Past
 'As for *Iliad*, Ken read it.'

A crucial observation here is that a *wa*-marked direct object generally can be paraphrased with *ni-tsuite-wa*, while the same does not hold for a *wa*-marked subject.⁸

⁶ Lambrecht (1994) takes the view that not all topics pass the *as for*-test, while those expressions that pass it can be safely regarded as a topic. In other words, he does not adopt the stronger, biconditional version of the *as for*-test, i.e. 'an expression can be identified as a topic *if and only if* it can be felicitously marked by *as for*'.

⁷ One may be tempted to parse *ni-tsuite-wa* as [*ni-tsuite* 'about' + *wa*]. There are, indeed, cases where *wa* attaches to a phrase headed by *ni-tsuite* to form the sequence *ni-tsuite-wa*.

- (i) a. Kono mondai-*ni-tsuite* kinô giron-shi-ta.
 this problem-about yesterday discuss-Past
 'We discussed this problem yesterday.'
 b. Kono mondai-*ni-tsuite-wa* kinô giron-shi-ta.
 this problem-about-*wa* yesterday discuss-Past
 'As for this problem, we discussed it yesterday.'

Ni-tsuite-wa in the sense of 'as for', however, must be recognized as a single phrasal expression, as it can occur in an environment where a phrase headed by *ni-tsuite* is not selected for, too; compare (15a) and (ii).

- (ii) Ken- $\{ga/*ni-tsuite\}$ Iriasu-o yomi-mashi-ta.
 Ken- $\{Nom/ni-tsuite\}$ Iliad-Acc read-Polite-Past

⁸ Two types of apparent counterevidence are discussed in Oshima (2009). The first is *wa*-marked direct objects

In (16) are passages from novel texts that exemplify a *wa*-marked object that passes the *as for*-test.

- (16) a. *Kodomo-wa* (\approx *kodomo-ni-tsuite-wa*) tonari-no okusan-ni
 child-*wa* next.door wife-Dat
 azukatte-itadaki-mashi-ta.
 look.after-Ben-Polite-Past
 ‘As for *my daughter*, I asked a neighbor of mine to look after her while I am out.’
 (from *Eida* by Masaki Yamada)
- b. *Kozutsumi-ni hatte-at-ta fûtô-wa* (\approx *fûtô-ni-tsuite-wa*) hagitotte
 parcel-Dat attach-Asp-Past envelope-*wa* tear.off
 danro-ni kubete moshi-ta.
 stove-Dat put burn-Past
 ‘As for *the envelope attached to the parcel*, I tore it off and burned it in the stove.’
 (from *Sôjô no tsumikiuta* by Masaki Yamada)
- c. *Mô-hitotsu-no ranpu-wa* (\approx *ranpu-ni-tsuite-wa*) watashi-ga motte-i-ta.
 other-one-Gen lamp-*wa* I-Nom hold-Asp-Pres
 ‘As for *the other lamp*, I was holding it.’ (from *Suishô no piramiddo* by Soji Shimada)

The passage in (17), on the other hand, exemplifies a *wa*-marked subject that does not pass the *as for*-test.

- (17) Shin-no higeki-dat-ta. Fune-ni-wa 2,200-nin-no ningen-ga
 true-be tragedy-be-Past ship-Dat-*wa* 2,200-Cl-Gen people-Nom
 notte-i-ta-ga, kyûmeibôto-wa saidai 1,178-nin-bun-shika nakat-ta.
 board-Asp-Past-although life.saving.boat-*wa* at.most 1,178-Cl-worth-but not.exist-Past
 Soredemo *Taitanikku-wa* Eikokutsûshôinkai-no sadame-ru kitei-yori
 still *Titanic-wa* British.Trade.Committee-Gen determine-Pres regulation-than
 zutto ôku-no bôto-o tsunde-i-ta-nodear-u.
 by.far many boat-Acc carry-Asp-Past-Aux-Pres
 ‘It was a real tragedy. On the ship [= the Titanic] were 2,200 people, but there were life saving boats for at most 1,178 people only. Still, *the Titanic* carried far more boats than required by the regulations of the British Trade Committee.’ (from *Suishô no piramiddo* by Soji Shimada)

occurring in sentences carrying an illocutionary force other than statement (e.g., question, request, promise), as in (i).

- (i) *Kore-wa* minasan-de tabete-kudasa-i.
 this-*wa* all-by eat-Ben-Imp
 ‘I would like you all to eat this.’

It appears that the conditions on *wa*-marking in questions, requests, etc. pattern the same with those in negative statements.

The second is what I call the property attribution construction, which is exemplified in (ii).

- (ii) Enryakuji-wa Saichô-ga 788-nen-ni konryû-shi-ta.
 Enryakuji-*wa* Saicho-Nom 788-year-in build-Past
 ‘Enryakuji Temple was founded by Priest Saicho in 788.’

In a sentence like (ii), the initial *wa*-phrase appears to be an object and yet does not (necessarily) allow paraphrasing with *ni-tsuite-wa*. Such a sentence can be analyzed as a disguised ‘multiple subject construction’ (Heycock 1993 among others), where the initial phrase is a ‘major subject’, rather than an object.

See Oshima (2009) for fuller discussion of these points.

4.3 The Focus-Fronting Construction

Another interesting issue in connection with *wa*-marking on a subject within ground (as in (10a,b)) is the fact observed by Kuno (1972:288-289, 1973:214-215) that it becomes optional when the focus phrase is fronted, as shown in (19).

- (18) Ken-ga yon-da no-wa **dono hon** des-u-ka?
 Ken-Nom read-Past Pro-*wa* which book be.Polite-Pres-Q
 ‘Which book is it that Ken read?’
- (19) (In reply to (18))
- a. Ken-{{ga/wa}} **Iriasu-o** yomi-mashi-ta.
 Ken-Nom/*wa* Iliad-Acc read-Polite-Past-Q
 ‘Ken read *Iliad*.’
- b. **Iriasu-o** Ken-{ga/wa} yomi-mashi-ta.
 Iliad-Acc Ken-Nom/*wa* read-Polite-Past-Q
 ‘Ken read *Iliad*.’

Kuno (1973) argues, to account for this phenomenon, that fronting of a focus phrase results in a complex structure along the lines of (20), and accordingly the part following the fronted focus phrase acquires characteristics of a subordinate-clause, where, as is well-known (Noda 1996; Kuroda 2005), the opposition of *wa* and *ga* may be neutralized.

- (20) [_S Iriasu-o [_S Ken-ga __ yomi-mashi-ta]] (= (19b))

Under the hypothesis that *wa* occurring on a subject indicates groundhood, we can find a functional account of this phenomenon. In Japanese, the location of a focus can be indicated by the following four means (Kori 1997; Oshima 2006), which all involve manipulation of pitch movements occasioned by lexical and phrasal tones (accents):⁹

- (21) a. deaccenting of (suppression of pitch movements within) the phrases following the last focus phrase
 b. deaccenting of the phrases preceding the first focus phrase
 c. expansion of pitch movements within a focus phrase
 d. a rising tone (known as a prominence-lending rise) at the end of a focus phrase

Among these four means, the first is obligatorily enforced while the other three are optional. The following generalizations thus hold:

- (22) a. When the sentence-initial phrase (and nothing else) is a focus, the focus-ground configuration is always unambiguously specified by the tonal configuration.
 b. When a sentence-medial phrase is a focus or part thereof, the focus-ground configuration may not be entirely specified by the tonal configuration.

A possible tonal configuration of (19b), for example, is as follows (boldface, as before, indicates information-structural focus; curly brackets indicate accent phrase boundaries):

- (23) {**Iriasu-o**} {Ken-ga/wa} {yomi-mashi-ta}
 (not deaccented) (deaccented) (deaccented)

Additionally, the phrase *Iriasu-o* can be accompanied by expansion of pitch movements and/or a prominence-lending rise. In any event, from the tonal information indicated in (23), one may infer

⁹ The term *phrase* in (21) refers to an accent phrase, which typically corresponds to what has been called *bunsetsu* in traditional Japanese grammar. Adjacent accent phrases form a larger phonological unit called an intonation phrase.

that the initial phrase and nothing else is a focus.

Consider next a possible tonal configuration of sentence (19a), a variant of (19b) with canonical word order.

- (24) {Ken-wa} {Iriasu-o} {yomi-mashi-ta}
 (not deaccented) (not deaccented) (deaccented)

A crucial point here is that the initial phrase, which is part of the ground, may but need not be deaccented. Thus, from the tonal configuration alone, one cannot always determine whether the initial phrase is part of the focus or of the ground. It is only with the presence of *wa* and the constraint that a subject must be marked by *wa* when it is part of ground that the hearer can infer that the initial phrase is part of the ground, rather than of the focus.

In sum, under the asymmetry hypothesis, *wa*-marking on a ground-subject and fronting of a focus can be understood as alternative means of pragmatic function coding. When one is used in an utterance, the enforcement of the other may be suspended. If, on the other hand, we pursue the hypothesis that *wa* invariably marks a topic, we will be forced either to adopt the syntax-based account illustrated above, or else to postulate the following generalization, which is a modified version of (12):

- (25) A subject must be a topic unless it is part of the focus or is preceded by the focus.

(25) is a rather *ad hoc* constraint, for which I cannot think of any sensible motivation.

5 Conclusion

In this work I argued that the so-called thematic use of *wa* in Japanese, which has been extensively studied for decades, is an amalgam of two functions: the topic-marking use and the ground-marking use. *Wa* can be interpreted as a ground-marker only in combination with certain grammatical functions, in particular the subject, while *wa* as a topic-marker is not subject to such a GF-based constraint. This hypothesis (the asymmetry hypothesis) reconciles, so to speak, the dispute between the two competing analyses of *wa*: the topichood-based analysis and the groundhood-based analysis.

The proposed analysis has significant implications on the typology of information packaging, as Japanese has often been taken as a paradigmatic case of a topic-prominent language, where the sentence structure is determined primarily based on the topic-comment relation, rather than the argument-predicate relation (Li and Thompson 1976). Under the proposed analysis, many occurrences of *wa*-phrases are not topics, which entails that the topic is not as prominent (abundant) in Japanese discourse as many scholars have believed. It seems quite possible, indeed, that the frequency at which an utterance in Japanese contains an explicitly and unambiguously indicated topic is no higher than the frequency at which an utterance in English does so with an expression like *as for*, the so-called B-accent, etc. If Japanese is not a topic-prominent language as has been commonly believed, is there any topic-prominent language? It is a rather interesting question whether the asymmetry analysis of *wa* is applicable to putative topic-markers, including topic positions and topic-marking contours, in other languages.

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