TOPICS, CONTRAST, AND CONTRASTIVE TOPICS IN JAPANESE

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1 Introduction

The Japanese particle wa is widely considered a topic marker. The particle has two uses: thematic and contrastive (Kuno 1973). Thematic wa-phrases are unstressed, typically occupy clause-initial position and are what the rest of the sentence is about (Reinhart 1981). Contrastive wa-phrases bear an emphatic stress, can remain in-situ and implicate contrast (Saito 1985, Hoji 1985, Tomioka 2007a,b, Watanabe 2003):

1. thematic wa:
   a. sono hon-wa John-ga e, katta.
      that book-wa John-nom bought
   b. #John-ga sono hon-wa katta.
      John-nom that book-wa bought
      ‘Speaking of that book, John bought it.’

2. contrastive wa:
   a. sono hon-WA John-ga t, katta.  \(\text{(SMALL CAPS = emphatic stress)}\)
      that book-wa John-nom bought
      John-nom that book-wa bought
      ‘John bought that book.’

The two types of wa-phrases are generally analysed as two distinct types of topics: aboutness topics and contrastive topics (See Heycock to app. for overview of the literature). Indeed, other than bearing the same particle, they appear not to share any properties either in their interpretation or in their syntactic distribution.

In this paper, I argue that:

• Contrastive topics are what the rest of the sentence is about.

• Contrastive topics must also appear in clause-initial position;

⇒ Only those contrastive wa-phrases in clause-initial position are contrastive ‘topics’.

In doing so, I will show that...

• In contexts that require contrastive topics, contrastive wa-phrases must appear in clause-initial position and they are interpreted as what the rest of the sentence is about;

• In contexts that license contrastive wa-phrases in-situ, the wa-phrases cannot be fronted;

• Only contrastive wa-phrases in clause-initial position are subject to constraints on topics at the syntax-information structure interface.

2 Contrastive Topics in Contexts

In contexts where a wa-phrase is interpreted as a contrastive topic, it must appear in clause-initial position. The exchange in (3)/(4) forces Bill-wa to be a contrastive topic, as it shifts the topic of discourse from John (Jackendoff 1972, Büring 1997, 2003) (Note: John-wa in (3) is an aboutness topic).¹

(3) John-wa kinoo-no party-de nani-o tabeta no?
    John-wa yesterday-gen party-at what-acc ate Q
    ‘what did John eat at the party yesterday?’

(4) Hmm, John-wa doo-ka sira-nai-kedo,
    well, John-wa how-whether know-not-but,
    ‘Well, I don’t know about John, but...’

a. BILL-WA 8-zi-goro MAME-O tabeteita (yo)
   Bill-wa 8 o’clock-around beans-acc was.eating particle
b. #MAME-O BILL-WA 8-zi-goro t, tabeteita (yo)
   beans-acc Bill-wa 8 o’clock-around eating particle
   ‘as for Bill, he was eating beans around 8 o’clock.’

(5)/(6) shows the same observation for a context where the object is a contrastive topic:

(5) kinoo-no party-de dare-ga pasta-o tabeta no?
    yesterday-gen party-at who-nom pasta-acc ate Q
    ‘Who ate the pasta at the party yesterday?’

(6) Hmm, pasta-wa doo-ka sira-nai-kedo,
    well, pasta-top how-whether know-not-but,
    ‘Well, I don’t know about the pasta, but...’

a. #BILL-GA MAME-WA 8-zi-goro tabeteita (yo)²
   Bill-nom beans-wa 8 o’clock-around eating particle
b. MAME-GA BILL-GA 8-zi-goro t, tabeteita (yo)
   beans-wa Bill-nom 8 o’clock-around eating particle
   ‘as for the beans, Bill was eating them around 8 o’clock.’

¹ The set-up of the context is due to Neeleman & van de Koot (to app.)
² For reasons unknown to me, an object wa-phrase prefers not to surface adjacent to a verb. In order to circumvent this issue, adverbials are inserted between object and verb throughout. I assume following Neeleman & Reinhart (1998), that such structure as (6a) can be base-generated, hence the absence of an empty position below the adverbial.

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Thus, contrastive wa-phrase, when interpreted as a contrastive 'topic', cannot remain in-situ. Like aboutness topics then, contrastive topics must appear in clause-initial position (See Vermeulen (2007) for explicit arguments that thematic wa-phrases must also occupy clause-initial position). I propose that a constraint like the following is operative in Japanese:

(7) Topic is licensed in clause-initial position.

3 Contrastive wa-phrases in-situ

3.1 Interpretation of contrastive wa-phrases in-situ

There has recently been much work on the precise interpretation of contrastive wa-phrases (Kuroda 2005, Hara 2006, to app., Hara & van Rooij 2007, Tomioka 2007b, Oshima to app.). Adapting Büring’s (1997) analysis of contrastive topics in German, Hara (2006), for instance, argues that sentences containing contrastive wa induces the presupposition that a scalar alternative stronger than the assertion exists and also the implicature that the stronger alternative could be false. Data considered in the literature involve predominantly cases where subject bears wa. However, the analyses can be carried over to object wa-phrases.

(8) WA (Hara 2006, to app.)
   a. Presupposition: There is a stronger scalar alternative.
   b. Implicature: The negation of the stronger alternative is possible.

(9) John-ga NANNINKA-WA tasuketa
   John-nom some-people-wa helped
   ‘John helped some people’ (Implicature: ‘John didn’t help everyone.’)
   a. $\exists(x) [\text{[person(x)]} [\text{helped (j, x)}]]$
   b. stronger scalar alternative: $\forall(x) [\text{[person(x)]} [\text{helped (j, x)}]]$
   c. (b) can be false.

The analysis can be extended to non-quantified DPs:

(10) John-ga MARY-WA tasuketa
    John-nom Mary-wa helped
    ‘John helped Mary’ (Implicature: ‘John didn’t help Bill’ in a context where only Mary and Bill are the relevant individuals)
    a. stronger alternative: ‘John helped both Mary and Bill’
    b. (a) could be false
    c. the speaker asserted ‘John helped Mary’ , so by inference, ‘John did not help Bill’.

However, there is nothing inherent in the contrastive interpretation itself that makes a contrastive wa-phrase a topic, as noted/argued by some (e.g. Hara 2006, Kuroda 1992, 2005, Yamato 2007, Oshima to app.). I claim that those in clause-initial position are interpreted additionally as topics, i.e. what the rest of the sentence is about. In other words, the topic interpretation and the particular contrastive interpretation are two independent features of a “contrastive topic” (Kuroda 2005, Hara 2006, Tomioka 2007b, Vallduvi & Vikuna 1998, Molnár 2002)

The relevance of aboutness for interpreting contrastive topics is made explicit in the English translations of the preceding sentences in (4) and (6). I don’t know about John, and I don’t know about the pasta.

3.2 Contrastive wa-phrases in-situ can’t move

The proposal predicts then that contrastive wa-phrases that appear in-situ cannot optionally move to clause-initial position, because they are not contrastive topics and there is no trigger for the movement. The prediction is borne out. In (11)(12), (14) and (14), wa-phrases are used purely for contrast and are not interpreted as what the rest of the sentence is about (Yamato 2007). ((14) is modified from Kuno (1973: 46) attributed to Minoru Nakau (p.c.). This example shows contrast can be projected a larger constituent).

(11) dare-ga ziken-genba-de tasuke-no tetudai-o sita no
    who-nom accident-scene-to rescue-gen help-acc did Q
    ‘Who was helping with the rescue operation at the accident scene?’

(12) a. JOHN-GA 3-NIN-WA nantoka tasuketa
    John-nom 3-cl.-wa somehow rescuing,was
    b. #3-NIN-WA John-ga nantoka t, tasuketa
       three-people-wa John-nom somehow rescue
       ‘John somehow managed to rescue at least three people.’

    John-nom that book-acc buy-wa did-but there-at read-wa did-not
    b. #KAI-WA John-ga sono hon-o t, sita-ga, YOMI-WA sonoba-de sore-o t, sinakatta
       buy-wa John-nom that book-acc did-but read-wa there-at it-acc did-not
       ‘John bought that book, but he didn’t read it there.’

(14) a. [AME-WA hutteita-ga] [John-ga KASA-WA motte-ika-nakatta] (hanasi)
    rain-wa falling-but John-nom umbrella-wa bring-go-not.past (story)
    b. #[AME-WA hutteita-ga] [KASA-WA John-ga t, motte-ika-nakatta] (hanasi)
    rain-wa falling-but umbrella-wa John-nom bring-go-not.past (story)
    ‘(The story that) It was raining, but John did not bring an umbrella.’

4 Syntax-Information Structure Interface

It is well-known that at the level of information structure, a focus-background structure can be contained in a comment, but a topic-comment structure cannot be part of a background, (Lambrecht 1994, Hajičová, et al 1998).

(15) Information Structure
    a. topic [comment FOCUS [background …]]
    b. #FOCUS [background topic [comment …]]

1 This example is felicitous if 3-nin ‘three people’ refers to three specific people who may be salient in the discourse. The crucial reading here is where 3-nin ‘three people’ receives the contrastive ‘at least’ reading.
2 Miyagawa (2006) shows that scrambling of a non-wa-marked object in a similar context is ruled out. However, if wa generally marks contrastive topics, as widely assumed, and can appear in-situ, as in (a), then it should be possible to front it.
It has been argued by Rizzi (1997) and Neeleman & van de Koot (To app), that the sister constituent of a fronted topic is interpreted as the comment, while the sister constituent of a fronted focus is interpreted as the background:

(16) Syntax – Information structure

| a. XP₁ [vp t₁] | b. XP₁ [vp t₁] |
| Topic comment | Focus background |

These two considerations together make predictions regarding the syntactic distribution of topic and focus: a focus can follow a fronted topic, but a topic cannot follow a fronted focus:

(17) Syntax

a. topic₁ [vp FOCUS t₁ ]
b. *FOCUS₁ [vp topic t₁ ]

Examples involving embedded clauses demonstrate that the prediction in ((17)b) is correct. Moreover, only those contrastive wa-phrases in clause-initial position display the predicted distribution of ‘topic’.

A contrastive topic can appear inside an embedded clause. The context in (18) makes kono CD ‘this CD’ a contrastive topic in (19), as it shifts the topic from the book in the embedded clause.

(18) Context: John finds a book on Sue’s desk and he asks Bill to tell him something about the book, perhaps with the intention of finding out where Sue obtained the book. Bill does not know anything about the book, but he knew how Sue obtained a CD that was also on the desk. So, he decides to tell John about the CD. In describing this situation, you utter (19).

(19) Bill-wa [ko kono CD-wa Mary-ga kare,-no mise-de Sue-ni t₁ ageta to] itta. Bill-wa this CD-wa Mary-nom he-gen shop-at Sue-to gave that said ‘Bill, said that as for this CD, Mary gave it to Sue in his shop.’

Independently, a focus can move out of an embedded clause to sentence-initial position:

(20) Bill-wa [ko Mary-ga Jane-ni kono CD-o kare,-no mise-de ageta to] itta Bill-wa Mary-nom Jane-to this CD-acc he-gen shop-at gave that said ‘Bill, said Mary gave this CD to Jane in his shop’.

(21) Tigau-yo, Sue₁-wa [ko Mary-ga t₁ kono CD-o kare,-no mise-de incorrect-prt Sue-to Bill-wa Mary-nom this CD-acc he-gen shop-at ageta to] itta (ndayo) gave that said (prt) Lit.: ‘No, it’s to Sue that Bill, said that Mary gave this CD in his shop.’

However, it should be impossible to combine these two operations, as this will result in a structure like the following:

(22) *Foc₃ [... [cr, Top₃ ... t₁ ...]]

The prediction is borne out:

(23) Bill₄-wa [ko Mary-ga Jane-ni kono hon-o kare,-no mise-de ageta to] itta Bill-wa Mary-nom Jane-to this book-acc he-gen shop-at gave that said ‘Bill, said that Mary gave this book to Jane in his shop.’

(24) Tigau-yo, Bill-wa sono hon-niuite-wa sira-nakat-ta-ga... incorrect-prt Bill-wa that book-about-wa know-not-past-but ‘No, Bill didn’t know anything about the book, but...’ *Sue₂-wi Bill₄-wa [ko kono CD-wa Mary-ga kare,-no mise-de t₁ ageta to] itta. Sue-to Bill-wa this CD-wa Mary-nom he-gen shop-at gave that said Lit.: ‘it’s to Sue that Bill, said that as for this CD, Mary gave it in his shop.’

* Foc₃ [... [cr, WA₃ ... t₁ ...]] (WA = topic)

Crucially, the sentence is acceptable if the focus remains in-situ:

(25) Bill₄-wa [ko kono CD-wa Mary-ga kare,-no mise-de Sue₂-wi t₁ ageta to] itta. Bill-wa this CD-wa Mary-nom he-gen shop-at Sue-to gave that said ‘Bill, said that as for this CD, Mary gave it to Sue in his shop.’

✓ [cr, WA₃ ... Foc t₁ ...] (WA = topic)

On the other hand, if the contrastive wa-phrase remains in-situ in the embedded clause, the embedded focus can be fronted to sentence-initial position. This is unexpected if all contrastive wa-phrases were contrastive topics.

(26) Bill₄-wa [ko Mary-ga Jane-ni sukunakutomo 3-NIN-wa kare,-no mise-de Bill-wa Mary-nom Jane-to at.least three people shop-at syookai-sita to] itta. Bill-wa Mary-nom he-gen shop-at at.least 3-cl.-wa introduced that said ‘Bill said that Mary introduced at least three people to Jane in his shop.’

✓ [cr, WA₃ ... Foc t₁ ...] (WA ≠ topic)

(27) Tigau-yo, Sue₁-wi Bill₄-wa [ko Mary-ga t₁ sukunakutomo 3-NIN-wa Incorrect-prt Sue-to Bill-wa Mary-nom at.least 3-cl.-wa kare,-no mise-de syookai-sita to] itta-ndayo he-gen shop-at introduced that said-prt ‘No, it is to Sue that Bill said that Mary introduced at least three people in his shop.’

✓ Foc₃ ... [cr, WA ... t₁] (WA ≠ topic)
5 Nominalized VP-\textit{wa}'s

Verbs can be marked with \textit{wa}, but only the latter can be fronted:

b. * KAI-\textit{WA} Bill-ga sono hon-o kinoo t_i sita. buy-\textit{wa} Bill-nom that book-acc yesterday did

‘Bill bought the book yesterday.’ (but he hasn’t read it)

A verb nominalized by the nominalizer \textit{no} and be marked by \textit{wa}:

(29) Bill-ga sono hon-o KAU-\textit{NO}-WA kinoo sita. Bill-nom that book-acc buy-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} yesterday did
‘Bill did buying of the book yesterday.’

It seems however that the VP is nominalized rather than the verb alone:


It is not possible to test the prediction in (22), repeated below.

(31) a. * KAU-\textit{NO}-\textit{WA} Bill-ga sono hon-o t_i mati-de sita. buy-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} Bill-nom that book-acc town-at did
b. [sono hon-o KAU-\textit{NO}-WA] Bill-ga mati-de t_i sita. that book-acc buy-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} Bill-nom town-at did

Lit.: ‘Bill did the buying of the book yesterday.’ (but not the reading of it)

5.1 Nominalized VP-\textit{wa} in context

In a context that requires a nominalized VP to be a contrastive topic, it must be fronted to clause initial position.

(32) Dare-ga syokuzi-o tukutta no? who-nom meal-acc made Q
‘Who cooked the meal?’

(33) Hmm, tukuru-no-\textit{wa} doo-da-ka sira-nai-kedo well, cook-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} how-cop-weather know-not-but
‘Well, I don’t know about cooking (it), but...’

a. #Bill-ga [so [s\_ zairyoo-o KAU-\textit{NO}-WA] mati-de sita. Bill-nom ingredients-acc buy-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} town-in did
b. [so [s\_ zairyoo-o KAU-\textit{NO}-WA] Bill-ga mati-de t_i sita. ingredients-acc buy-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} Bill-nom town-in did

‘As for buying the ingredients, John did it in town.’

5.2 Nominalized VP-\textit{wa} in-situ can’t move:

In a contexts where a nominalized VP-\textit{wa} appears in-situ, it cannot be optionally fronted:

(34) kyoo-no kateeka-no zyugyoo-wa doo desita ka?
Today-gen home.economics-gen class-wa how was Q
‘How was today’s home economics class?’

(35) a. John-ga [so [s\_ ryoori-o narau\textit{]-no}-wa] yorokonde sita-\textit{kedo}, John-nom cooking-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} learn-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} happily did-but
[so [s\_ sar\_o katzukeru\textit{]-no}-wa] zuri-ni koto-\textit{ni-mo} si-n akat-ta. (koto) dishes-acc clear.up-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} cheekily do-not-past (fact)
b. #[so [s\_ ryoori-o narau\textit{]-no}-wa] John-ga yorokonde sita-kedo, John-nom happily did-but
[so [s\_ sar\_o katzukeru\textit{]-no}-wa] zuri-ni koto-\textit{ni-mo} si-n akat-ta. (koto) dishes-acc clear.up-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} cheekily do-not-past (fact)

Lit.: ‘Bill happily did the learning of cooking, but cheekily didn’t do clearing of the plates.’

5.3 Syntax-information structure interface

It is not possible to test the prediction in (22), repeated below.

(22) *Foc[ ... t_i t_i ...] Background

Testing this prediction requires the embedded verb to be ditransitive so that one of its arguments can be fronted as focus and the other can remain inside the nominalized VP.

(36) a. *[so [s\_ CD-o AGERU\textit{]-no}-wa] John-ga Mary-ni t_i sita. CD-acc give-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} John-nom Mary-to did
Lit.: ‘As for giving a CD, John did to Mary.’
b. *[so [s\_ MARY-ni AGERU\textit{]-no}-wa] John-ga CD-o t_i sita. Mary-to give-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} John-nom CD-acc did
Lit.: ‘As for giving Mary, John did a CD.’

(37) a. *[so [s\_ JANE-o SYOOKAI\textit{SURU}\textit{-no}-wa] Mary-ga Bill-ni t_i sita. Jane-acc introduce-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} Mary-nom Bill-to did
Lit.: ‘As for introducing Jane, Mary did to Bill.’
b. *[so [s\_ BILL-ni SYOOKAI\textit{SURU}\textit{-no}-wa] Mary-ga Jane-ni t_i sita. Bill-to introduce-\textit{nmz-\textit{wa}} Mary-nom Jane-acc did
Lit.: ‘As for introducing to Bill, Mary did Jane.’
6 Conclusion

- Like aboutness topics, contrastive topics in Japanese must appear in clause-initial position;
- Like aboutness topics, contrastive topics are what the rest of the sentence is about;
- Contrastive wa-phrases in-situ are not contrastive topics;
- *wu is not a topic marker.

References

Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. *Information Structure and Sentence Form*. CUP.