



# Information structure in Japanese

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## 1. Japanese

Japanese exhibits the following typological characteristics:

- Pitch-accent system
- Phonotactics: Predominantly V, CV and CVN
- Agglutinating morphology
- SOV basic word order, strictly head-final
- Dependent marking (also has a topic marker)
- No (subject, object) agreement morphology
- Pro-drop
- Wh-elements in situ



The data were collected November 2005 - March 2006 in Berlin, with Japanese couples living in Berlin (except for one pair from Tokyo, who were visiting Berlin in November 2005).

## 3. Empirical observations

The following preliminary observations have been made possible through the data collection:

- **Prosody** seems to be used much *more extensively than previously claimed*, especially for contrastive focus.

In the example below, the contrastive element (underlined> has high pitch.

Q: otokono hito-ga dare-o nagutteimasuka?  
man-NOM who-ACC hitting? 'Who is the man hitting?'

A: onnano hito-ga nagutterunjanaino?  
woman-NOM hitting.not.Q 'Isn't the woman hitting?'

- **Adverbial particles** such as *mo* (also) and *dake* (only) seem to be used with a high pitch for focusing effects.

Q: Maria-wa usagi-to oomu-o motteimasuka?  
Maria-TOP rabbit-and parrot-ACC have.Q?  
'Does Maria have a rabbit and parrot?'

A: iie, usagi-dake motteimasu.  
no, rabbit-only have 'No, (she has) only a rabbit.'

- **Pro-drop** – discourse-/hearer-old thematic topics are most frequently dropped:

Q: onnano hito-ga otokono hito-o tataiteimasuka?  
woman-NOM man-ACC hitting.Q?  
'Is the woman hitting the man?'

A: hai, tataiteimasu. 'Yes, (she is) hitting (him).'

One of the most extensively studied phenomena in Japanese is the pro-drop phenomenon, but there is little research on exactly what information structural functions are more likely to be null, and thus not overtly realized through grammatical means such as those mentioned above.

## 4. Summary/Future Work

- Use of both prosody and pro-drop was much more pronounced in the data than use of word order or discourse sensitive constructions such as cleft or passive. Detailed prosodic analysis of the data would facilitate further understanding of the points noted in section 3.
- Use of (adverbial, delimiting) particles for focus effects deserves more attention than in previous research on focus.

## 2. Information Structure

Discourse elements in Japanese are expressed by multiple grammatical means:

- prosodic (tonal)
- morphological (e.g. topic marking)
- syntactic (positional) means.

- Which grammatical devices are used for which information structural functions?

### i) Morphological means

- Topics (thematic and/or anaphoric, or contrastive) are marked by the topic marker *wa* (Kuno 1972, 1973, Shibatani 1990):

*Wa* marks either the theme or the contrasted element of the sentence. The theme must be either anaphoric (i.e. previously mentioned) or generic, while there is no such constraint for the contrasted element. (Kuno 1972:270)

### ii) Word order

- Topics marked by *wa* generally appear in the left-periphery of the clause.
- Focused elements tend to appear in (immediately) preverbal position.
- Although the language is strictly head-final, in casual speech, the postverbal position is used for old, non-prominent information (Kaiser 1999).
- Clefts and passives are also available for focusing and topicalizing effects respectively.

### iii) Prosody

- According to Poser (1984), the *wa*-marked topic is generally set off from the rest of the sentence by a major phrase boundary.
- Nakanishi (2000) further shows that thematic topic and contrastive topic are distinguished prosodically: the contrastive topic triggers a dramatic drop of F0 contour, which brings the contrastive topic in high prominence.

## 5. References

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