

第12課: The Particle *wa* は I: The Topic/Contrast Marker *wa* は

The particle *wa* は, unlike *ga* が, is not a case particle. This means that it grammatically doesn't stand for the subject or even the object of a sentence. Instead, it is a special kind of particle called a bound particle. *Wa* は is bound to the comment that follows. In return, the comment dictates the nature of *wa* は.

It is not possible to know exactly what will be said with *wa* は alone when in total isolation without context. The only thing the listener would know in such a situation is that *wa* は will mark the topic of the discussion to come. In addition, the topic marked by *wa* は is differentiated from other things that could be the topic, which is in and of itself contrast, which will also be looked at in depth in this lesson.

In this lesson, we will continue our discussion on *ga* が vs *wa* は by looking closely at the usages of *wa* は. After reading through this lesson, you will have learned enough about both particles to adequately differentiate them in most circumstances.

Curriculum Note: This lesson also requires that we look at grammatical items which haven't been fully covered. This includes adjectives, adjectival nouns, verbs and their conjugation. As such, your goal should be to focus only on the particles *ga* が and *wa* は.

Vocabulary List (Under Construction)

The Bound Particle *wa* は

1. The Topic Marker *wa* は

i. What is a “Topic”?

To understand *wa* は, we must first understand what is meant by the word “topic.” The topic (*shudai* 主題) of a sentence can be an animate or inanimate entity (of one or more components), and that entity is what provides a starting point for conversation. A topic must also be something based on previously established information, whether it be from the ongoing conversation, one not too far back in the past, or from common sense.

The topic is, thus, “old information.” In order for something to be registered information, though, you may need to use *ga* が first to establish it. Essentially, information needs to be new before it can be grammatically treated as old information. This distinction between new information and known information is exemplified in Ex. 1.

1. 昔々むかしむかし、あるところに、おじいさんとおばあさんが住すんでいました。おじいさんは山やまへ柴刈しばかりに、おばあさんは川かわへ洗濯せんたくに行いきました。

Mukashi mukashi, aru tokoro ni, ojiisan to obāsan ga sunde imashita. Ojiisan wa yama e shibakari ni, obāsan wa kawa e sentaku ni ikimashita.
Long, long ago, there lived an old man and woman. One day, the old man went to the mountains to gather firewood, and the old woman went to the river to wash clothes.

This sentence is the opening to one of the most important fairy-tales of Japan, *Momotarō* 桃太郎. At the beginning, the reader doesn't know anything about the story. This is why the particle *ga* が is used to mark the subject. Once the characters are established, they are then treated as the topic in the following sentence, thus marked by *wa* は.

2. あれは私わたしの帽子ぼうしです。
Are wa watashi no bōshi desu.
That's my hat.

Sentence Note: Although the comment, the hat being the speaker's, is "new information," the recognition of the hat is not.

In Japanese, phrases may be topicalized and put at or near the front of the sentence, after which point a comment is made about said topic. The comment could be already known or new information, but the topic is something implied to be known to both speaker and listener(s). The topic, as mentioned above, is deemed to be an entity known to others and oneself. Often times, this is based on a common sense assessment of reality.

3. お名前なまえは何なんですか。
O-namae wa nan desu ka?
What's your name?

Sentence Note: Everyone has a name. Even if this statement weren't completely true, it's practically true. This is all the information one needs to know about the human world to understand how "your name" can be grammatically treated as "old/registered" knowledge. You know the person you're talking to has a name; you just don't know what that person's name is, which is why the question forms the comment about the topic.

4. トイレはどこですか。
Toire wa doko desu ka?
Where is the toilet?

Sentence Note: When you ask this to someone, you're assuming that there is a toilet nearby. The existence of toilets can be rather easily ascertained based on one's surroundings. The fact that you're asking this means you've already determined that there is one, and you're also implying that the existence and knowledge of its location is something that others might help you find out.

5. 火星かせいは赤あかいです。
Kasei wa akai desu.
Mars is red.

Sentence Note: Most people know about Mars. It has been a part of human fascination for a long time, and so the acknowledgment of its existence is well established. It being red is also something that is so well known that it can be viewed as a generic statement.

6. 日本にほんは島しまの国くにです。

Nihon wa shima no kuni desu.

Japan is an island nation.

Sentence Note: Japan is known by both all Japanese speakers as well as most of the world, and it's also known by most people that it is an island nation.

7. ウサギはかわいいですね。

Usagi wa kawaii desu ne.

Rabbits are cute, aren't they?

Sentence Note: Wherever rabbits exist, there are humans that know about them.

The Zero-Pronoun

Whenever the topic is semantically the same as the subject or even the object of a sentence, the particle *wa* は does not mark both. It only functions as the topic marker. All sorts of things can be topicalized, which makes it seem like *wa* は has far more functions than it actually does. Semantically, it is very similar to the English expression “as for X.” It's the “X” in this expression that *wa* は stands for, and nothing more. However, using “as for” heavily in translation will result in unnatural English. Using one's own intuition on what is proper English will come to play here. Nonetheless, it's a perfect stepping stone for understanding how this particle functions grammatically.

8a. 私わたしは毎日まいにちジムに行いきます。

Watashi wa mainichi jimu ni ikimasu.

I go to the gym every day.

Ex. 8a can alternatively be translated as, “As for me, I go to the gym every day.” The purpose of *wa* は is two-fold. It establishes that “I” is the topic, but it also differentiates it from other possible topics like “he” or “she.” As such, the reason why *watashi* 私 would even be used instead of just being dropped—which is usually the case—is because the speaker has become the center of conversation. Although the subject of this sentence is “I,” the *watashi* 私 of this sentence corresponds to the “me” in “as for me.” The “I” that corresponds to the subject is not spoken because it would be semantically redundant. In fact, *watashi wa watashi ga* 私は私が is ungrammatical.

This is where the concept of a zero-pronoun comes into play. A zero-pronoun is a pronoun used to refer to the subject of a Japanese sentence when it is omitted because it is juxtaposed with a topic that happens to be the same thing. It is the grammatical fix to the grammaticalized rule of omitting semantically redundant elements. More broadly, a zero-pronoun is used in

place of an entity that is semantically the same as the topic. Thus, this can be applied to other situations as we will see as well. With a zero-pronoun in mind, we can view 8a as follows:

8b. 私わたしは毎日まいにちジムに行いきます。

Watashi-wa (ø-ga) jimu-ni ikimasu.

As for me, (I) go to the gym every day.

ø = *Watashi* 私わたし

9a. ケーキはもう食たべました。

Kēki wa mō tabemashita.

The cake, I already ate it.

Grammar Note: The particle *wa* は appears to mark the direct object, but in reality, it simply marks the topic which also happens to be the object, but the object is expressed with an unexpressed zero-pronoun. Thus, Ex. 9a can be viewed alternatively as follows:

9b. ケーキはもう食たべました。

Kēki-wa mō (ø-wo) tabemashita.

The cake, I already ate it.

ø = *Kēki* ケーキ

The Variety of Topicalized Phrases

The particle *wa* は has few restrictions on what it can topicalize. It may topicalize time phrases, location phrases, etc. This is exemplified in the following examples.

10. 日本にほんでは地震じしんがよく起おきます。

Nihon de wa jishin ga yoku okimasu.

In Japan, earthquakes often happen.

11. 今日きょうは韓国語かんこくごを勉強べんきょうします。

Kyō wa kankokugo wo benkyō shimasu.

Today, I will study Korean.

12. 私わたしはお茶ちゃです。

Watashi wa ocha desu.

I'll have tea.

Grammar Note: Whenever learners don't fully understand the concept of topicalization, they fail to understand that topic ≠ subject. It's best to never consider them one of the same thing. If this means having to deconstruct sentences and translate them literally first to figure out what the subject is and whether it's being represented by a zero-pronoun so that you don't end up misunderstanding sentences like Ex. 12 as meaning "I am tea," then it would be worth it

13. こちらは私わたしの弟おとうとです。

Kochira wa watashi no otōto desu.

This is my little brother.

14. 彼女かのじょは {中国人ちゅうごくじん・日本人にほんじん・アメリカ人じん・イギリス人じん} です。

Kanojo wa [chūgokujin/nihonjin/amerikajin/igirisujin] desu.
She is [Chinese/Japanese/American/British].

15. 中国経済ちゅうごくけいざいには問題もんだいがある。

Chūgoku keizai ni wa mondai ga aru.

There is/are problem(s) in the Chinese economy.

Grammar Note: Due to English phrasing constraints, it may not always be possible to place the topicalized phrase of a Japanese sentence at the front of the English translation. However, the fact that the *wa* は phrase in question is being topicalized and the fact that said *wa* は phrase forms the basis for the upcoming conversation do not change.

16. 私わたしは行いきません。

Watashi wa ikimasen.

I won't go.

17. 彼かれは先生せんせいではありません。

Kare wa sensei de wa arimasen.

He is not a teacher.

Grammar Notes:

1. Ex. 16 and Ex. 17 are examples of the particle *wa* は bringing out the meaning of “X isn’t but something/someone else might be/do Z.” This implicit contrast is something that, depending on the context, may become even more profound (See Usage 2). As for Ex. 17, it could be that another person is a teacher, or “he” could be something other than a teacher. If the particle *ga* が were used, the sentences would become examples of exhaustive-listing. Remember, exhaustive-listing is still exhaustive if X simply refers to one entity and one entity only.

2. The *wa* は in *de wa arimasen* ではありません is not the topic *wa* は. Rather, it is one usage of the contrast marker *wa* は (Usage 2).

ii. Generic Statements

Many conversations are started off by mentioning something everyone already knows. However, implying that the listener(s) knows is subjective in nature. This is because one can never definitively know what someone else does or doesn’t know. This usage of *wa* は is very different from the exhaustive-listing statements that *ga* が can make. Whereas an exhaustive-listing sentence is limited semantically solely to what’s explicitly stated, *wa* は is far more open-ended due to its generic nature. There is always a chance for the speaker to imply “I know that X is Z, but I don’t know about Y.”

18. リンゴは小さい。

Ringo wa chiisai.

(The) apples are small.

Spelling Note: *Ringo* is only seldom spelled as 林檎.

19. 空そらは青あおい。

Sora wa aoi.

The sky is blue.

20. 宇宙うちゅうは広ひろい。

Uchū wa hiroi.

The universe is wide.

21. 太陽たいようは明あかるい。

Taiyō wa akarui.

The sun is bright.

22. 夜よるは暗くらい。

Yoru wa kurai.

Night is dark.

23. 花はなは美うつくしい。

Hana wa utsukushii.

Flowers are beautiful.

24. 春はるは素晴すばらしいですね。

Haru wa subarashii desu ne.

Spring is wonderful, isn't it?

25. 世界せかいは小ちいさいですね。

Sekai wa chiisai desu ne.

The world is small, isn't it?

26. 数学すうがくは難むずかしいですね。

Sūgaku wa muzukashii desu ne.

Math is difficult, isn't it?

Sentence Note: As a demonstration of the last point from above, this statement should be interpreted as meaning “I’m not sure about other subjects being hard, but math is, isn’t it?”

iii. Attribute Phrases: X wa は Y ga が

One of the most common ways to describe something is by following a topicalized phrase (X) with *wa* は with a neutral statement (Y) followed by *ga* が. In the examples below, there are generally two kinds of translations. The first reflects the nature of the Japanese grammar whereas the second rephrases it into more natural English. As you will see, the resulting translation indicates how this grammar is essentially identical to making generic statements.

27. 象ぞうは鼻はなが長ながい。

Zō wa hana ga nagai.

As for elephants, their noses are long.

Elephants have long noses.

28. 日本にほんは神社じんじゃが多おおい。
Nihon wa jinja ga ōi.
As for Japan, there are many Shinto shrines.
Japan has many Shinto shrines.

29. 秋あきはサンマが最高だ。
Aki wa samma ga saikō da.
As for autumn, Pacific saury is the best.
In autumn, Pacific saury is the best.

30. 冬ふゆには気温きおんが下がります。
Fuyu ni wa kion ga sagarimasu.
In winter, the temperature goes down.

31. その仕事しごとは、私わたしがします。
Sono shigoto wa, watashi ga shimasu.
As for that job, I'll do it.
I'll do that job.

32. キリンは首くびが長ながい。
Kirin wa kubi ga nagai.
As for giraffes, their necks are long.
Giraffes have long necks.

Spelling Note: Only rarely is *kirin* spelled as 麒麟.

33. (私わたしは) 頭あたまが痛いたいです。
(Watashi wa) atama ga itai desu.
(As for me), my head hurts.
I have a headache.

34. (私わたしは) お腹なかが空すきました。
(Watashi wa) onaka ga sukimashita.
I'm hungry.
Literally: (As for me), my stomach is empty.

35. (私わたしは) 喉のどが渴かわきました。
(Watashi wa) nodo ga kawakimashita.
I'm thirsty.
Literally: (As for me), my throat is parched.

Grammar Note: If distinguishing oneself from other people is necessary in expressing hunger or thirst, Ex. 34 and Ex. 35 are both examples of the pattern X *wa* は Y *ga* が.

iv. Questions

As opposed to the questions made with *ga* が, those made with *wa* は have the interrogatives as part of the predicate. This is because the questions formed with *wa* は imply that the question (topic) at hand is already known to the listener(s), and this knowledge is then topicalized to bring forth the

question (comment) you'd like the discussion to be about. This pattern will be how most of the questions you ask are formed.

Word Note: As seen in Ex. 3, when *nani* 何 (what) is used as the predicate and followed by the copula, it undergoes a sound change and becomes *nan* なん.

36. サムはいつ来る？

Samu wa itsu kuru?

When is Sam coming?

37. 今日きょうは何曜日なんようびですか。

Kyō wa nan'yōbi desu ka?

What day is it today?

38. (あなたは) 誰だれですか。

(Anata wa) dare desu ka?

Who are you?

39. 病院びょういんはどこですか。

Byōin wa doko desu ka?

Where is the hospital?

40. 趣味しゅみは何ですか。

Shumi wa nan desu ka?

What are your hobbies?

2. The Contrast Marker

On top of being a topic marker, *wa* は is also the particle of contrast (*taihi* 対比), which can be seen in its usage of marking the topic. There is a line of thought that the contrast meaning of *wa* は is actually the primary meaning of *wa* は. Within a given sentence, several *wa* は may appear. Each one will have a different level of contrast implied. When a *wa* は phrase's degree of contrast is really weak, it can be viewed as the topic.

41. 私わたしは昨日きのうは昼食ちゅうしょくは取とらなかつたんです。

Watashi wa kinō wa chūshoku wa toranakatta n desu.

Yesterday, I didn't have lunch.

Although the presence of *watashi wa* 私は could imply a contrast with other people, the sentence is bringing oneself to the forefront of conversation. With this being this case, it is viewed as the topic. Both the words for "yesterday" and "lunch" are marked with *wa* は because they contrast with other scenarios. For instance, the speaker may have eaten lunch today, and he may have eaten breakfast and/or dinner that day.

42. 今日きょうは行いきます。(→ 明日あすは行きません)

Kyō wa ikimasu. (→ Asu wa ikimasen)

I'm going today. (→ I'm not going tomorrow)

43. 旦那旦那さんは上海ちゃんはいへ行いきます。(→ 奥おくさんは北京ぺきんへ行いきます)

Dan'na-san wa Shanghai e ikimasu. (→ Oku-san wa Pekin e ikimasu)
His/her husband is going to Shanghai. (→ His/her wife is going to Beijing)

44. 大阪おおさかへは行いきます。(→ 京都きょうとへは行いきません)

Ōsaka e wa ikimasu (→ Kyōto e wa ikimasen)
I'm going to Osaka. (→ I'm not going to Kyoto)

45. 本当ほんとうは嬉しいです。

Hontō wa ureshii desu.
I'm actually happy.

Grammar Note: *Hontō* 本当 is used here as a noun meaning "reality/ actuality." The speaker may not appear happy, but internally he/she is happy.

46. 「日本料理にほんりょうりは好きですか」「タイ料理りょうりは好きです」
"Nihon ryōri wa o-suki desu ka?" "Tai ryōri wa suki desu."

"Do you like Japanese cuisine?" I like Thai food(, but as far as other cuisine...)

Grammar Note: The reply provides an indirect means of saying that one doesn't like Japanese cuisine. Although this is inferred by the reply, it's politer to reply as such than simply saying no.

47. 犬いぬは好きですが、猫ねこはどうも・・・

Inu wa suki desu ga, neko wa domo...
I like dogs, but cats ...

Grammar Note: The *ga* が seen after *desu* です is the conjunctive particle *ga* が, which is separate from its use as a subject marker. For now, simply know that it is the "but" in this example and the ones that follow.

48. コーヒーは飲のまないが、ビールは飲のむよ。

Kōhii wa nomanai ga, biiru wa nomu yo.
I don't drink coffee, but I drink beer.

49. 鉛筆えんぴつはありませんが、ペンがありますよ。

Empitsu wa arimasen ga, pen wa arimasu yo.
There aren't pencils, but there are pens.
I don't have pencils, but I have pens.

50. あれはオオカミではない、狐きつねだよ。

Are wa ōkami de wa nai, kitsune da yo.
That isn't a wolf; it's a fox.

Grammar Note: This example demonstrates how the *wa* は in *de wa nai* ではない is the contrasting *wa* は. The grammar behind this actually goes beyond its use in the negative forms of the copula. However, due to the complexity of this grammar point, it will be discussed in a later lesson.

3. Another usage of the particle *wa* は is to express a bare minimum (*saiteigen* 最低限)--"at least." This is primarily used with number expressions, which will be studied later on. However, this usage is not limited to such expressions, as is demonstrated by Ex. 54.

51. 少すくなくとも2に時間じかんはかかります。
Sukunakutomo nijikan wa kakarimasu.
It will take at least two hours.

52. 10じゅう人にんは来きます。
Jūnin wa kimasu.
At least ten people will come.

53. 10じゅう万円まんえんは必要ひつようです。
Jūman'en wa hitsuyō desu.
It will need at least 100,00 yen.

54. 牛乳ぎゅうにゅうぐらいは買かってください。
Gyūnyū gurai wa katte kudasai.
At least buy milk, please.

Grammar Note: The particle *kurai/gurai* くらい・ぐらい is frequently used with this function of the particle *wa* は to express "at least." It can actually be inserted similarly to the other example sentences in this section. Its addition creates a greater emphatic tone.

55. 盲腸もうちょうの手術しゅじゅつでも1000せんだルはかかります。
Mōchō no shujutsu demo sen-doru wa kakarimasu.
Even appendix surgery will cost at least a thousand dollars.

Grammar Note: The particle *demo* でも means "even" and will be discussed in Lesson 67.

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Mukashi mukashi, aru tokoro ni, ojiisan to obāsan ga sunde imashita. Ojiisan wa yama e shibakari ni, obāsan wa kawa e sentaku ni ikimashita.

Long, long ago, there lived an old man and woman. One day, the old man went to the mountains to gather firewood, and the old woman went to the river to wash clothes.

This sentence is the opening to one of the most important fairy-tales of Japan, *Momotarō* 桃太郎. At the beginning, the reader doesn't know anything about the story. This is why the particle *ga* が is used to mark the subject. Once the characters are established, they are then treated as the topic in the following sentence, thus marked by *wa* は.

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O-namae wa nan desu ka?

What's your name?

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I go to the gym every day.

Ex. 8a can alternatively be translated as, “As for me, I go to the gym every day.” The purpose of *wa* は is two-fold. It establishes that “I” is the topic, but it also differentiates it from other possible topics like “he” or “she.” As such, the reason why *watashi* 私 would even be used instead of just being dropped—which is usually the case—is because the speaker has become the center of conversation. Although the subject of this sentence is “I,” the *watashi* 私 of this sentence corresponds to the “me” in “as for me.” The “I” that corresponds to the subject is not spoken because it would be semantically redundant. In fact, *watashi wa watashi ga* 私は私が is ungrammatical.

This is where the concept of a zero-pronoun comes into play. A zero-pronoun is a pronoun used to refer to the subject of a Japanese sentence when it is omitted because it is juxtaposed with a topic that happens to be the same thing. It is the grammatical fix to the grammaticalized rule of omitting semantically redundant elements. More broadly, a zero-pronoun is used in place of an entity that is semantically the same as the topic. Thus, this can be applied to other situations as we will see as well. With a zero-pronoun in mind, we can view 8a as follows:

8b. 私わたしは毎日まいにちジムに行いきます。

Watashi-wa (ø-ga) jimu-ni ikimasu.

As for me, (I) go to the gym every day.

ø = *Watashi* 私わたし

9a. ケーキはもう食たべました。

Kēki wa mō tabemashita.

The cake, I already ate it.

Grammar Note: The particle *wa* は appears to mark the direct object, but in reality, it simply marks the topic which also happens to be the object, but the object is expressed with an unexpressed zero-pronoun. Thus, Ex. 9a can be viewed alternatively as follows:

9b. ケーキはもう食たべました。
Kēki-wa mō (ø-wo) tabemashita.
The cake, I already ate it.
ø = *Kēki* ケーキ

The Variety of Topicalized Phrases

The particle *wa* は has few restrictions on what it can topicalize. It may topicalize time phrases, location phrases, etc. This is exemplified in the following examples.

10. 日本にほんでは地震じしんがよく起おきます。
Nihon de wa jishin ga yoku okimasu.
In Japan, earthquakes often happen.

11. 今日きょうは韓国語かんこくごを勉強べんきょうします。
Kyō wa kankokugo wo benkyō shimasu.
Today, I will study Korean.

12. 私わたしはお茶ちゃです。
Watashi wa ocha desu.
I'll have tea.

Grammar Note: Whenever learners don't fully understand the concept of topicalization, they fail to understand that topic ≠ subject. It's best to never consider them one of the same thing. If this means having to deconstruct sentences and translate them literally first to figure out what the subject is and whether it's being represented by a zero-pronoun so that you don't end up misunderstanding sentences like Ex. 12 as meaning "I am tea," then it would be worth it

13. こちらは私わたしの弟おとうとです。
Kochira wa watashi no otōto desu.
This is my little brother.

14. 彼女かのじょは {中国人ちゅうごくじん・日本人にほんじん・アメリカ人じん・イギリス人じん} です。
Kanojo wa [chūgokujin/nihonjin/amerikajin/igirisujin] desu.
She is [Chinese/Japanese/American/British].

15. 中国経済ちゅうごくけいざいには問題もんだいがある。
Chūgoku keizai ni wa mondai ga aru.
There is/are problem(s) in the Chinese economy.

Grammar Note: Due to English phrasing constraints, it may not always be possible to place the topicalized phrase of a Japanese sentence at the front of the English translation. However, the fact that the *wa* は phrase in question is being topicalized and the fact that said *wa* は phrase forms the basis for the upcoming conversation do not change.

16. 私わたしは行いきません。

Watashi wa ikimasen.

I won't go.

17. 彼かれは先生せんせいではありません。

Kare wa sensei de wa arimasen.

He is not a teacher.

Grammar Notes:

1. Ex. 16 and Ex. 17 are examples of the particle *wa* は bringing out the meaning of "X isn't but something/someone else might be/do Z." This implicit contrast is something that, depending on the context, may become even more profound (See Usage 2). As for Ex. 17, it could be that another person is a teacher, or "he" could be something other than a teacher. If the particle *ga* が were used, the sentences would become examples of exhaustive-listing. Remember, exhaustive-listing is still exhaustive if X simply refers to one entity and one entity only.

2. The *wa* は in *de wa arimasen* ではありません is not the topic *wa* は. Rather, it is one usage of the contrast marker *wa* は (Usage 2).

ii. Generic Statements

Many conversations are started off by mentioning something everyone already knows. However, implying that the listener(s) knows is subjective in nature. This is because one can never definitively know what someone else does or doesn't know. This usage of *wa* は is very different from the exhaustive-listing statements that *ga* が can make. Whereas an exhaustive-listing sentence is limited semantically solely to what's explicitly stated, *wa* は is far more open-ended due to its generic nature. There is always a chance for the speaker to imply "I know that X is Z, but I don't know about Y."

18. リンゴは小さい。

Ringo wa chiisai.

(The) apples are small.

Spelling Note: *Ringo* is only seldom spelled as 林檎.

19. 空そらは青あおい。

Sora wa aoi.

The sky is blue.

20. 宇宙うちゅうは広ひろい。

Uchū wa hiroi.

The universe is wide.

21. 太陽たいようは明あかるい。

Taiyō wa akarui.

The sun is bright.

22. 夜よりは暗くらい。

Yoru wa kurai.

Night is dark.

23. 花はなは美うつくしい。

Hana wa utsukushii.

Flowers are beautiful.

24. 春はるは素晴すばらしいですね。

Haru wa subarashii desu ne.

Spring is wonderful, isn't it?

25. 世界せかいは小ちいさいですね。

Sekai wa chiisai desu ne.

The world is small, isn't it?

26. 数学すうがくは難むずかしいですね。

Sūgaku wa muzukashii desu ne.

Math is difficult, isn't it?

Sentence Note: As a demonstration of the last point from above, this statement should be interpreted as meaning “I’m not sure about other subjects being hard, but math is, isn’t it?”

iii. Attribute Phrases: X wa は Y ga が

One of the most common ways to describe something is by following a topicalized phrase (X) with *wa* は with a neutral statement (Y) followed by *ga* が. In the examples below, there are generally two kinds of translations. The first reflects the nature of the Japanese grammar whereas the second rephrases it into more natural English. As you will see, the resulting translation indicates how this grammar is essentially identical to making generic statements.

27. 象ぞうは鼻はなが長ながい。

Zō wa hana ga nagai.

As for elephants, their noses are long.

Elephants have long noses.

28. 日本にほんは神社じんじゃが多おおい。

Nihon wa jinja ga ōi.

As for Japan, there are many Shinto shrines.

Japan has many Shinto shrines.

29. 秋あきはサンマが最高だ。

Aki wa samma ga saikō da.

As for autumn, Pacific saury is the best.

In autumn, Pacific saury is the best.

30. 冬ふゆには気温きおんが下さがります。

Fuyu ni wa kion ga sagarimasu.

In winter, the temperature goes down.

31. その仕事しごとは、私わたしがします。
Sono shigoto wa, watashi ga shimasu.
As for that job, I'll do it.
I'll do that job.

32. キリンは首くびが長ながい。
Kirin wa kubi ga nagai.
As for giraffes, their necks are long.
Giraffes have long necks.

Spelling Note: Only rarely is *kirin* spelled as 麒麟.

33. (私わたしは) 頭あたまが痛いいたいです。
(Watashi wa) atama ga itai desu.
(As for me), my head hurts.
I have a headache.

34. (私わたしは) お腹なかが空すきました。
(Watashi wa) onaka ga sukimashita.
I'm hungry.
Literally: (As for me), my stomach is empty.

35. (私わたしは) 喉のどが渴かわきました。
(Watashi wa) nodo ga kawakimashita.
I'm thirsty.
Literally: (As for me), my throat is parched.

Grammar Note: If distinguishing oneself from other people is necessary in expressing hunger or thirst, Ex. 34 and Ex. 35 are both examples of the pattern X *wa* は Y *ga* が.

iv. Questions

As opposed to the questions made with *ga* が, those made with *wa* は have the interrogatives as part of the predicate. This is because the questions formed with *wa* は imply that the question (topic) at hand is already known to the listener(s), and this knowledge is then topicalized to bring forth the question (comment) you'd like the discussion to be about. This pattern will be how most of the questions you ask are formed.

Word Note: As seen in Ex. 3, when *nani* 何 (what) is used as the predicate and followed by the copula, it undergoes a sound change and becomes *nan* なん.

36. サムはいつ来る？
Samu wa itsu kuru?
When is Sam coming?

37. 今日きょうは何曜日なんようびですか。
Kyō wa nan'yōbi desu ka?
What day is it today?

38. (あなたは) 誰だれですか。
(*Anata wa*) *dare desu ka?*
Who are you?

39. 病院びょういんはどこですか。
Byōin wa doko desu ka?
Where is the hospital?

40. 趣味しゅみは何ですか。
Shumi wa nan desu ka?
What are your hobbies?

2. The Contrast Marker

On top of being a topic marker, *wa* は is also the particle of contrast (*taihi* 対比), which can be seen in its usage of marking the topic. There is a line of thought that the contrast meaning of *wa* は is actually the primary meaning of *wa* は. Within a given sentence, several *wa* は may appear. Each one will have a different level of contrast implied. When a *wa* は phrase's degree of contrast is really weak, it can be viewed as the topic.

41. 私わたしは昨日きのうは昼食ちゅうしょくは取とらなかったんです。
Watashi wa kinō wa chūshoku wa toranakatta n desu.
Yesterday, I didn't have lunch.

Although the presence of *watashi wa* 私は could imply a contrast with other people, the sentence is bringing oneself to the forefront of conversation. With this being this case, it is viewed as the topic. Both the words for "yesterday" and "lunch" are marked with *wa* は because they contrast with other scenarios. For instance, the speaker may have eaten lunch today, and he may have eaten breakfast and/or dinner that day.

42. 今日きょうは行いきます。(→ 明日あすは行きません)
Kyō wa ikimasu. (→ Asu wa ikimasen)
I'm going today. (→ I'm not going tomorrow)

43. 旦那だんなさんは上海しゃんはいへ行いきます。(→ 奥おくさんは北京ぺきんへ行いきます)
Dan'na-san wa Shanghai e ikimasu. (→ Oku-san wa Pekin e ikimasu)
His/her husband is going to Shanghai. (→ His/her wife is going to Beijing)

44. 大阪おおさかへは行いきます。(→ 京都きょうとへは行きません)
Ōsaka e wa ikimasu (→ Kyōto e wa ikimasen)
I'm going to Osaka. (→ I'm not going to Kyoto)

45. 本当ほんとうは嬉うれしいです。
Hontō wa ureshii desu.
I'm actually happy.

Grammar Note: *Hontō* 本当 is used here as a noun meaning "reality/ actuality." The speaker may not appear happy, but internally he/she is happy.

46. 「日本料理にほんりょうりは好きですか」「タイ料理りょうりは好きです」
"Nihon ryōri wa o-suki desu ka?" "Tai ryōri wa suki desu."
"Do you like Japanese cuisine?" I like Thai food(, but as far as other cuisine...)

Grammar Note: The reply provides an indirect means of saying that one doesn't like Japanese cuisine. Although this is inferred by the reply, it's politer to reply as such than simply saying no.

47. 犬いぬは好きですが、猫ねこはどうも・・・
Inu wa suki desu ga, neko wa domo...
I like dogs, but cats ...

Grammar Note: The *ga* が seen after *desu* です is the conjunctive particle *ga* が, which is separate from its use as a subject marker. For now, simply know that it is the "but" in this example and the ones that follow.

48. コーヒーは飲のまないが、ビールは飲のむよ。
Kōhii wa nomanai ga, biiru wa nomu yo.
I don't drink coffee, but I drink beer.

49. 鉛筆えんぴつはありませんが、ペンがありますよ。
Empitsu wa arimasen ga, pen wa arimasu yo.
There aren't pencils, but there are pens.
I don't have pencils, but I have pens.

50. あれはオオカミではない、狐きつねだよ。
Are wa ōkami de wa nai, kitsune da yo.
That isn't a wolf; it's a fox.

Grammar Note: This example demonstrates how the *wa* は in *de wa nai* ではない is the contrasting *wa* は. The grammar behind this actually goes beyond its use in the negative forms of the copula. However, due to the complexity of this grammar point, it will be discussed in a later lesson.

3. Another usage of the particle *wa* は is to express a bare minimum (*saiteigen* 最低限)--"at least." This is primarily used with number expressions, which will be studied later on. However, this usage is not limited to such expressions, as is demonstrated by Ex. 54.

51. 少すくなくとも2に時間じかんはかかります。
Sukunakutomo nijikan wa kakarimasu.
It will take at least two hours.

52. 10じゅう人にんは来きます。
Jūnin wa kimasu.
At least ten people will come.

53. 10じゅう万円まんえんは必要ひつようです。
Jūman'en wa hitsuyō desu.
It will need at least 100,00 yen.

54. 牛乳ぎゅうにゅうぐらいは買かってください。
Gyūnyū gurai wa katte kudasai.
At least buy milk, please.

Grammar Note: The particle *kurai/gurai* くらい・ぐらい is frequently used with this function of the particle *wa* は to express "at least." It can actually be inserted similarly to the other example sentences in this section. Its addition creates a greater emphatic tone.

55. 盲腸もうちょうの手術しゅじゅつでも1000センドルはかかります。
Mōchō no shujutsu demo sen-doru wa kakarimasu.
Even appendix surgery will cost at least a thousand dollars.

Grammar Note: The particle *demo* でも means "even" and will be discussed in Lesson 67.