

The Contrastive Topic: Not Simply Contrastive + Topic

This paper is concerned with the semantics and pragmatics of morphologically marked “contrastive topics” (CTs) in Japanese. I will illustrate that CTs are not semantically homogeneous: different placement of prosodic prominence on CTs yields two different types of interpretation, which have not received sufficient attention in recent analyses of Japanese CTs. I will present an analysis that builds on Kawamura (2002) and argue that these two types of interpretations and some related complications are best explained in terms of the interaction between the meaning of the “CT-markers” and independently-motivated general principles of pragmatics and discourse. Implications for the general theory of contrastive topics will also be discussed in relation to the competing analyses of Japanese CTs.

Problem When some phrase, say *John*, is contrastively marked by particle *-wa*, at least two prosodic options are allowed for the combined phrase: *JOHN-wa*, placing a high pitch on the contrasted phrase, and *John-WA* with prosodic prominence on the particle itself (henceforth CT₁ and CT₂ respectively). Both of these are usually subsumed under the notion of CT in the literature, and no principled account has been provided for their differences.

The facts to be accounted for include the following. (i) CT₂ cannot always occur in the same context as CT₁ does, as (1), (2) and (3) illustrate, (ii) but when it does, it often has difference in interpretation. Thus, while CT₁ in (4a) may be interpreted as a partial topic, CT₂ is strongly implicational. Thus, unlike ‘*JOHN-wa ate*’ in (4a), ‘*John-WA ate*’ in (4b) cannot be followed by ‘*Mary also ate*’. (iii) This is so even when there still is a third child who may be hungry and ready to eat lunch. (iv) Such contrast between CT₁ and CT₂ interpretations seems to disappear, or at least becomes less clear, in cases like (5) where CT₁ and CT₂ both seem to indicate uncertainty about some contextually determined entity comparable to the one denoted by the CT-marked phrase.

Solution The paradigm in (1) through (5) are explained in terms of the following two assumptions without further appealing to a mechanism specifically made for CT-marking.

- CT₁-marking on *X* in *XY* presupposes the existence of *X'* comparable to *X* in the context of utterance with which some *X'Y'* comparable to *XY* could be formed.
- CT₂ marking indicates focus on *wa*, whose only alternative is the additive *mo* which competes for the same syntactic slot.

A rough description of how these assumptions interact with general pragmatic principles in our examples go as follows. CT₁-marking in the topic part of a sentence signals the existence of a comparable topic other than the one marked by the CT-morpheme, thereby indicating the existence of another question of relevance in the context. By way of Gricean reasoning, CTs in (1a) and (4a) are interpreted as subtopics that contribute a partial answer to the QUD given. (2a) and (3a) are examples of coordinated and nested subtopics respectively. In none of these examples CT-marking gives information as to how the world is like. Likewise, CT₁-marking in the comment part of a sentence, as in (5), signals the existence of another answer of relevance to the QUD. This time, CT₁ marking invites inference about the unexpressed answer, making its pragmatic effect closer to the one made by CT₂. CT₂ marking on *X*, on the other hand, implicates a binary opposition of the form “*X* but not also *X'*”. Information about *X'*, say *Mary*, is relevant to the QUD in (4b) but not in (1b), which leads to their difference in acceptability. Neither CT₂ marking nor CT₂ interpretation is possible in (2) and (3): CTs₂ in three-way opposition in (2b) and nested CTs₂ in (3b) are ill-formed due to the lack of appropriate QUD that makes sense in the context.

Examples

- (1) What did your children eat?
a. JOHN-wa mame-o tabeta-yo.
John-CT beans-ACC ate-PRT.
b. #John-WA mame-o tabeta-yo.
- (2) What did your children eat?
a. JOHN-wa mame-o, MARY-wa niku-o, BILL-wa sakana-o tabeta.
John-CT beans-ACC, Mary-CT meat-ACC, Bill-CT fish-ACC ate.
b. #John-WA mame-o, Mary-WA niku-o, Bill-WA sakana-o tabeta.
- (3) a. JOHN-wa MARY-wa BILL-ni-wa shookai-shita
John-CT Mary-CT Bill-to-CT introduced.
b. #John-WA Mary-WA Bill-ni-WA shookai-shita
- (4) Have your children eaten lunch?
a. JOHN-wa tabeta. Mary-mo tabeta.
John-CT ate. Mary-also ate.
b. John-WA tabeta. #Mary-mo tabeta.
- (5) What did your children eat?
a. MAME-wa tabeta-yo.
beans-CT ate-PRT.
b. Mame-WA tabeta-yo.

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