Nominative Case without Tense in the Niigata Dialect of Japanese

It has been commonly held in the Japanese literature that nominative case is assigned to an NP by [+tensed] T (Takezawa 1987) whereas genitive case is assigned to whatever NP is contained within a larger nominal constituent by N in the configuration [NP NP/PP α] (α = projection of N) (Mihara 1994). These two case assignment options are illustrated in (1a, b). These options also yield the *ga-no* Conversion (Harada 1971) in (1c), where the subject may be marked as nominative or genitive.

(1) a. [TP Shunsuke- ***ga/*no***   Tokyo-o   hoomonsita]
         Shunsuke-Nom/Gen   Tokyo-Acc   visited
         'Shunsuke visited Tokyo.'

   b. [NP Shunsuke-****ga/no***   Tokyo-e-no   hoomon]
         Shunsuke-Nom/Gen   Tokyo-Goal-Gen   visit
         'Shunsuke's visit to Tokyo'

   c. [NP [TP Shunsuke-***ga/no***   Tokyo-o   hoomonsuru]   riyuu]]
         Shunsuke-Nom/Gen   Tokyo-Acc   visit   reason
         'the reason Shunsuke will visit Tokyo.'

There are several proposals concerning structural and morphological aspects of case assignment; see afore-mentioned work as well as Kuroda 1965, 1978, Marantz 1991, Harley 1995 and Fukui and Nishigauchi 1992. With details aside, however, the most prevailing assumption still seems to be that *-ga* is assigned to an NP by [+tensed] T within the TP whereas *-no* is assigned to an NP by N within a larger nominal constituent.

   This approach to case marking predicts that *-ga* may never be found within DPs without [+tensed] T in Japanese. My ongoing research on a particular variety of Japanese spoken around the city of Niigata reveals that this variety allows the possessor of a nominal to be marked with *-ga*, as in (2a-c), an option not available in standard Japanese. [Note: *noppe* is a famous soup served in Niigata]. Notice that genitive case can appear in the same environments in the Niigata variety, as in the standard variety.

(2) a. ora-den-***ga/no***   tambo
       I-Pl-Nom/Gen   rice field
       'our rice field'

   b. omesan-***ga/no***   annya
       you-Nom/Gen   son
       'your son'

   c. baachan-***ga/no***   noppe
       grandma-Nom/Gen   noppe
       'grandma's noppe'

This case alternation is also found in nominals with two possessors, as shown in (3b-d).

(3) a. Omesan-***no***   annya-***no***   sigoto   saikin   doo-da-bane?
     you-Gen   eldest son-Gen   job   these days   how-Cop-Q
     'How is your eldest son's job these days?'

    b. Omesan-***ga***   annya-***no***   sigoto   saikin   doo-da-bane?
      you-Nom   eldest son-Gen   job   these days   how-Cop-Q

    c. Omesan-***no***   annya-***ga***   sigoto   saikin   doo-da-bane?
      you-Gen   eldest son-Nom   job   these days   how-Cop-Q

    d. Omesan-***ga***   annya-***ga***   sigoto   sakin   doo-da-bane
      you-Nom   eldest son-Nom   job   these days   how-Cop-Q

The examples above show that the standard generative assumption that nominative case is tied with [+tensed] T does not hold *across the board* in Japanese.

A series of new questions arise. Why is case alternation permitted in this variety, not in the standard variety? What is the nature of nominative case in this dialect? One might analyze *-ga* as an inherent case assigned by the head noun. Saito 1985 supports this position for standard Japanese based on the impossibility of subject scrambling.

The data discussed here necessitates reconsideration of the standard configurational approach to Japanese case marking. I hope this squib revives the interest of linguists in the nature of nominative case in this language.

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