

Nominative Case without T in Japanese and Its Theoretical Implications

It has been commonly held in the literature on Japanese syntax 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/D, as in [_{NP} NP/PP α] (α = projection of N) (Mihara 1994: 38; Kitagawa and Ross 1982). These modes of case assignment are illustrated in (1a, b). These assumptions also yield the so-called Nominative-Genitive Conversion in Japanese (Harada 1971), as illustrated 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. [_{DP} Shunsuke-*ga*/**no* (Tokyo-e-no) hoomon]
 Shunsuke-Nom/Gen Tokyo-Goal-Gen visit
 ‘Shunsuke’s visit (to Tokyo)’
- c. [_{DP} [_{TP} Shunsuke-*ga*/*no* Tokyo-o hoomonsuru riyuu]]
 Shunsuke-Nom/Gen Tokyo-Acc visit reason
 ‘the reason Shunsuke will visit Tokyo.’

There have been several proposals concerning the structural and morphological aspects of case assignment in Japanese; see afore-mentioned work; see also Kuroda 1965, 1978, Marantz 1991, Harley 1995, and Fukui and Nishigauchi 1992). With theoretical details aside, however, it seems to be a widely held consensus that nominative case can only be assigned to an NP in a sentential structure (TP) whereas nominative case can only be assigned to an NP in a nominal structure (DP). This structural approach to case marking, thus, predicts that nominative case may never be found within DPs without [+tensed] T.

My ongoing research on a particular dialect of Japanese spoken in Niigata Prefecture has found that this variety allows the possessor of a simplex nominal constituent to be optionally marked as nominative, as in (2a, b). (3a, b) show that genitive Case is also possible in this dialect, as in the standard variety.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>(2) a. ora-den-<i>ga</i> mura
 I-Pl-Nom son
 ‘our village’</p> <p> b. ome-den-<i>ga</i> annya
 you-Pl-Nom son
 ‘your son’</p> | <p>(3) a. ora-den-<i>no</i> mura
 I-Pl-Gen son
 ‘our village’</p> <p> b. ome-den-<i>no</i> annya
 you-Pl-Gen son
 ‘your son’</p> |
|---|---|

At the present stage of my research, I cannot give definite regional characterization of dialects that allow this case alternation, so I leave this issue open for another occasion. However, the theoretical implication of the case alternation observed here is clear: the long-standing assumption that nominative case assignment is tied with ([+tensed]) T does not hold across the board in Japanese.

A series of new questions arise; a) what is the source of nominative case in (2a, b), b) why case alternation is possible in the Niigata dialect, and c) what is the true nature of nominative case. One might analyze *-ga* in this dialect not as a structural case but as an inherent case assigned by the nominal head. Saito (1985) has argued for this position in standard Japanese on the basis of the impossibility of subject scrambling.

At any rate, the data above necessitates serious reconsideration of the “standard” configurational approach to Japanese case marking, as adopted for English-style languages since the GB Theory. I hope this research leads to new avenues of research on the true nature of (nominative) case marking in Japanese.

References

- Fukui, N., and T. Nishigauchi. 1992. Head-movement and case-marking in Japanese. *Journal of Japanese Linguistics* 14: 1-35.
- Harada, S.-I. 1971. Ga-no conversion and ideolectal variations in Japanese. *Gengo Kenkyu* 60: 25-38.
- Harley, H. 1995. *Subjects, events, and licensing*. Doctoral dissertation, MIT.
- Kitagawa, C., and C. Ross. 1982. Prenominal modification in Chinese and Japanese. *Linguistic Analysis* 9: 19-53.
- Kuroda, S.-Y. 1965. *Generative grammatical studies in the Japanese language*. Doctoral dissertation, MIT.
- Kuroda, S.-Y. 1978. Case-marking, canonical sentence pattern, and counter-Equi in Japanese (a preliminary survey). In: J. Hinds and I. Howard (eds.), *Problems in Japanese syntax and semantics*, 30-51. Tokyo: Kaitakusha. [reprinted in Kuroda 1992, 222-239]
- Kuroda, S.-Y. 1992. *Japanese syntax and semantics: Collected papers*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Marantz, A. 1991. Case and licensing. *ESCOL* 91: 234-253.
- Mihara, K. 1994. *Nihongo no togo koozoo* [The syntactic structure of Japanese]. Tokyo: Shohakusha.
- Saito, M. 1985. *Some asymmetries in Japanese and their theoretical implications*. Doctoral dissertation, MIT.
- Takezawa, K. 1987. *A configurational approach to case-marking in Japanese*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington.