

A Sequential Analysis of the Utterance Initial *wa* in Japanese Conversation

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The particle *wa* in Japanese has been well-known as a ‘topic’ and/or ‘contrastive’ marker (Kuno 1973; Shibatani 1990, etc.), and it has been extensively investigated in terms of its syntactic, semantic, and discourse-pragmatic characteristics and functions (Clancy and Downing 1987; Hinds 1987; Iwasaki 1987; Maynard 1980, 1987; McGloin 1986, 1987, etc.). In previous studies, however, it has been generally understood that *wa*, as other particles in Japanese, is an essentially postpositional grammatical element that attaches to a host noun or a noun phrase. Thus, researchers have conducted their study based on the presupposition that *wa* occurs in the canonical structure such as [X (NP) *wa* Y (Predicate)], and they have focused on the uses of *wa* directly accompanying an NP.

However, observing spontaneous conversations in recent years, we can actually find cases of *wa* that are detached from a possible host NP in the preceding utterances. Observe the following example from a spontaneous conversation.

1. R: *ichioo ima seekagaku tte yuu koto de.*
tentatively now biochemistry COM say thing COP
‘Now, I(’m) tentatively (majoring) in Biochemistry.’
2. A: *fu::n °fun fun°*
‘I see.’
3. (0.5)
4. A: *e- de- shoorai doo suru tsumori nan desu?*
eh then future how do intend COP-NML COP
‘Well then, what are you planning to do in the future?’
5. R: *↑WA::hah a:: nanka (.) moshi iketara kokuren toka::,*
wa (laugh) um something-like if go-if the United Nation etc.
‘WA::(laugh), um if possible, I’d like to work for the United Nation or something.’
6. A: *[fu::n.*
‘I see.’
7. R: *[soo yuu nanka kokusaikikan de::,*
such say something-like international organization at
‘(I’d like to work) for such kind of international organizations...’

As in this fragment, in response to speaker A’s question (line 4), speaker R initiates her turn with $\uparrow WA::$ and provides an answer (line 5), where *wa* is uniquely removed from the canonical structure of [X (NP) *wa* Y (Predicate)] at a sentential level. The usage of this type of *wa* can be typically found in daily conversations with younger generations, but it also appears that the range of its use has been widened recently.

This paper explores this newly emerging usage of *wa* in Japanese conversation and explicates how detachability of Japanese postpositional particles incorporates the thematic and contrastive characteristics of *wa* to achieve a particular kind of interactional work. More specifically, based on the data from naturally occurring conversation, I will examine the sequential patterns and contexts in which the utterance initial *wa* occurs and demonstrate that it typically appears as a second pair part of a question-answer sequence. I will also argue that the utterance initial *wa* serves to bracket the interlocutor’s response-soliciting utterance in the immediately preceding turn(s) as a whole, rather than to latch onto a distant possible host NP element, as other postpositional particles do (cf. Hayashi 2004). Further, I will maintain that this type *wa* used in response to a question simultaneously indicates the speaker’s interactional stance toward the interlocutor to provide an affiliative response.

Selected References

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