

Subject-Object Asymmetries of Topics in Japanese*

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1 Introduction

In Japanese, an element marked with the topic particle *-wa* and placed in the sentence-initial position is interpreted as a thematic topic. In (1a) and (1b), for example, the subject *Ken* and the object *sono kabin* ‘that vase’ are marked with *-wa* and occur sentence-initially; they are (normally) interpreted as thematic topics.¹

- (1) a. Ken_i-wa e_i haha-ni sono kabin-o ageta.
Ken-TOP mother-to that vase-ACC gave
‘As for Ken, he gave that vase to his mother.’

¹ The following abbreviations are used: ACC = accusative; COP = copula; NOM = nominative; PAST = past morpheme; POL = politeness marker; Q = question particle; TOP = topic particle.

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- b. [Sono kabin]_i-wa Ken-ga haha-ni *e_i* ageta.
 that vase-TOP Ken-NOM mother-to gave
 ‘As for that vase, Ken gave it to his mother.’

Wa-marked phrases, or topic phrases, can also be construed as contrastive topics. In fact, this construal is possible with the topic phrases in (1). However, one can interpret topic phrases as thematic topics only when they appear sentence-initially. In (2), for example, the *wa*-marked object *sono kabin-wa*, which appears in its original object position, can be construed only as a contrastive topic, in contrast to the sentence-initial object topic in (1b).

- (2) Ken-ga haha-ni sono kabin-wa ageta.
 Ken-NOM mother-to that vase-TOP gave
 ‘Ken gave *that vase* to his mother.’

In this study, I aim to syntactically explore the asymmetries of subject topics (e.g. (1a)) and object topics (e.g. (1b)) in Japanese, which have attracted little attention in the literature (e.g. Watanabe 2003). I first demonstrate such asymmetries by showing two examples: one on word order, and the other on scrambling. Based on these asymmetries, I propose that in Japanese, there are two topic projections, and that the higher topic projection hosts an object topic, while the lower one hosts a subject topic. I then investigate each topic projection in more detail. Regarding the higher topic projection, I argue that it can host a gapless topic (e.g. Kuno 1973) as well. Regarding the lower topic projection, I claim that it is A/A'P, a projection proposed by Bošković (2024a, 2024b) which has mixed A- and A'-properties; this claim will provide an account of the word order asymmetry.

This paper proceeds as follows: In Section 2, I introduce two subject-object asymmetries of topics in Japanese. In Section 3, I propose that there are two topic projections in Japanese: a higher one that hosts an object topic, and a lower one that hosts a subject topic. In Section 4, I explore the higher topic position and argue that it can host not only an object topic but also a gapless topic. In Section 5, I claim that the lower topic position is A/A'P. In Section 6, I conclude the paper by summarizing this study, mentioning the issues left unresolved, and discussing further relevant research topics.

2 Subject-Object Asymmetries of Topics

This section aims to confirm the existence of subject-object asymmetries of topics in Japanese, introducing two examples, one concerning word order (Section 2.1) and the other concerning scrambling (Section 2.2).

2.1 Word Order

The first asymmetry, which has gone unnoticed to date, concerns word order. Note first that in Japanese, a single clause can contain both a subject topic and an object topic. Consider (3), for instance.

- (3) [Kono nezumi]_i-wa neko_j-wa $e_{i/j}$ $e_{j/i}$ kuwa-nai.
 this mouse-TOP cat-TOP eat-not
 ‘This mouse does not eat cats.’/‘Cats do not eat this mouse.’ (excluding topic interpretations)
 (Ono 1978: 27)

This example involves two topic phrases: *kono nezumi(-wa)* ‘this mouse’ and *neko(-wa)* ‘cat’. It also contains two gaps, one for a subject and the other for an object. This means that either one of the two topic phrases is interpreted as the subject and the other is considered the object, thus resulting in the two logically possible propositional readings in the translation in (3). Importantly, however, if both topic phrases are to be interpreted as thematic topics, only the second reading is possible, where the first topic *kono nezumi* is construed as the object and the second topic *neko* is considered the object. With the first reading, where the first and second topics correspond to the subject and object respectively, only the first topic *kono nezumi* would serve as a thematic topic, while the second topic *neko* would be interpreted only as contrastive. This observation thus indicates that in Japanese, there is a word order restriction between a subject topic and an object topic. More specifically, when subject and object topics cooccur in a single clause, the latter must precede the former (so that both are interpreted as thematic topics).

The following examples substantiate this generalization:

- (4) [Context: While traveling abroad, Ken found a beautiful vase and bought it.]
- a. [Sono kabin]_i-wa Ken-wa_j e_j e_i haha-ni ageta.
 that vase-TOP Ken-TOP mother-to gave
 ‘(Lit.) As for that vase, as for Ken, he gave it to his mother.’
- b. #Ken-wa_i [sono kabin]_j-wa e_i e_j haha-ni ageta.
 Ken-TOP that vase-TOP mother-to gave
 ‘(Lit.) As for Ken, as for that vase, he gave it to his mother.’

Two notes are in order. First, the sentences in (4a) and (4b) differ minimally in terms of the word order between the subject topic *Ken(-wa)* and the object topic *sono kabin(-wa)* ‘that vase’; in (4a) the object topic precedes the subject topic, while this order is reversed in (4b). Second, the context in (4) prevents both topic phrases from being interpreted as contrastive topics. Given these features, the acceptability of (4a) and the unacceptability of (4b) indicate that an object topic must appear before a subject topic, thus consolidating the aforementioned generalization.

2.2 Scrambling

The second asymmetry, which was first noted by Watanabe (2003), concerns scrambling. Consider (5), for example.

- (5) a. Haha-ni_i Ken_j-wa e_j t_i sono kabin-o ageta.
 mother-to Ken-TOP that vase-ACC gave
 ‘(Lit.) To his mother, as for Ken, he gave that vase.’

- b. */#Haha-ni_i [sono kabin]_j-wa Ken-ga t_i e_j ageta.
 mother-to that vase-TOP Ken-NOM gave
 ‘(Lit.) To his mother, as for that vase, Ken gave it.’

In (5a), the Goal argument *haha-ni* ‘to mother’ scrambles over the subject topic *Ken-wa*, which is intended to be interpreted as a thematic topic. Such scrambling is possible, as demonstrated by the grammaticality of (5a) (Kuroda 1988). In (5b), the object topic *sono kabin-wa* is scrambled over. In contrast to (5a), this scrambling renders (5b) ungrammatical (at least with the reading where the object topic serves as a thematic topic).² This observation indicates that an asymmetry is present between a subject topic and an object topic with regard to scrambling; a subject topic can be scrambled over, while an object topic cannot.

While Watanabe (2003) considers only local scrambling, I further show that the same asymmetry is also observed with long-distance scrambling. Consider (6), for example.

- (6) a. Haha-ni_i Mai-ga [Ken_j-wa e_j t_i sono kabin-o ageta to] omotteiru (koto)
 mother-to Mai-NOM Ken-TOP that vase-ACC gave that think fact
 ‘(Lit.) (The fact that) to his mother, Mai thinks that, as for Ken, he gave that vase’
- b. ?*/#Haha-ni_i Mai-ga [[sono kabin]_j-wa Ken-ga t_i e_j ageta to] omotteiru
 mother-to Mai-NOM that vase-TOP Ken-NOM gave that think
 (koto)
 fact
 ‘(Lit.) (The fact that) to his mother, Mai thinks that, as for that vase, Ken gave it’

In (6), the Goal argument *haha-ni* undergoes long-distance scrambling that crosses over a topic phrase (intended to be interpreted as a thematic topic) in the complement clause. (6a) and (6b) minimally differ in the topicalized element; the complement clause involves a subject topic in (6a) and an object topic in (6b). The grammaticality difference between the two sentences thus indicates that the aforementioned asymmetry is relevant to long-distance scrambling as well.³

3 Proposal

Based on the subject-object asymmetries of topics in Japanese discussed in the previous section, this section presents a proposal regarding the syntax (or cartography) of topics in Japanese. Specifically, I propose that in Japanese, there are (at least) two projections that can host thematic topics

² Watanabe (2003) notes that an object topic that is scrambled over can be interpreted as a contrastive topic. However, it seems to me that the object topic in (5b) is difficult to interpret even as contrastive, thus rendering the example unacceptable. As this judgment issue is irrelevant to the goals of this study, I will not discuss it here, adding “(?)*/#” to the relevant data, (5b) and (6b).

³ An object topic can occur as a thematic topic in a complement clause headed by the complementizer *-to* (even when the clause is not interpreted as a direct quote), as in (i).

(i) Mai-wa [[sono kabin]_j-wa Ken-ga haha-ni e_i ageta to] omotteiru.
 Mai-TOP that vase-TOP Ken-NOM mother-to gave that think
 ‘Mai thinks that, as for that vase, Ken gave it to his mother.’

This confirms that the ungrammaticality of (6b) is not caused by an object topic appearing in the complement clause.

(see Saito 2013 and Fujihira 2015 for similar proposals). This straightforwardly captures the fact that two thematic topics can appear in a single clause as in (7) (= (4a)).

(7) [Context: While traveling abroad, Ken found a beautiful vase and bought it.]

[Sono kabin]_i-wa Ken-wa_j e_j e_i haha-ni ageta.
that vase-TOP Ken-TOP mother-to gave
'(Lit.) As for that vase, as for Ken, he gave it to his mother.'

Recall, however, that the co-occurrence of a subject topic and an object topic results in a restricted word order—the latter must precede the former. Compare (7) with (8) (= (4b)), for instance.

(8) [Context: While traveling abroad, Ken found a beautiful vase and bought it.]

#Ken-wa_i [sono kabin]_j-wa e_i e_j haha-ni ageta.
Ken-TOP that vase-TOP mother-to gave
'(Lit.) As for Ken, as for that vase, he gave it to his mother.'

Based on this restriction, I argue that the higher topic projection hosts an object topic while the lower one hosts a subject topic.⁴ The next two sections will explore these topic projections in more detail.

With regard to the positions of these topic projections, I follow the standard cartographic assumption (e.g. Rizzi 1997) and assume that they reside in the CP domain. To consolidate this assumption, I introduce one relevant argument provided by Kishimoto (2009). In Japanese, the focus particle *-dake* 'only' can be attached to a tensed predicate; see (9), where *-dake* is appended to the tensed predicate *ageta* 'gave'.

(9) Ken-ga sono kabin-o haha-ni age-ta-dake da.
Ken-NOM that vase-ACC mother-to give-PAST-only COP
'Only Ken gave that vase to his mother.'/'Ken only gave that vase to his mother.'
[√only > Ken / √Ken > only]

I refer to the focus particle *-dake* attached to a tensed predicate as *T-dake*. Kishimoto (2009) observes that *T-dake* can take scope over elements that arguably appear below TP, including a nominative subject. For instance, (9) can yield an interpretation where *-dake* takes scope over the nominative subject *Ken(-ga)*, as the translation shows. However, Kishimoto (2009) further observes that *T-dake* cannot take scope over a thematic topic. For instance, witness (10) (where the *wa*-marked phrases are intended to be interpreted as thematic topics).

⁴ This claim is consistent with Watanabe's (2003) conclusion based on the subject-object asymmetry of topics regarding scrambling: "a topicalized subject does not have to be raised to a clause-initial topic position (or Spec of TopP under Rizzi's (1997) theory) in overt syntax, whereas a topicalized nonsubject must be" (Watanabe 2003: 547).

- (10) a. Ken_i-wa e_i haha-ni sono kabin-o age-ta-dake da.
 Ken-TOP mother-to that vase-ACC give-PAST-only COP
 ‘As for Ken, he only gave that vase to his mother.’
 [*only > Ken / √Ken > only]
- b. [Sono kabin]_i-wa Ken-ga haha-ni e_i age-ta-dake da.
 that vase-TOP Ken-NOM mother-to give-PAST-only COP
 ‘As for that vase, Ken only gave it to his mother.’
 [*only > that vase / √that vase > only]
- c. [Sono kabin]_i-wa Ken-wa_j e_j e_i haha-ni age-ta-dake da.
 that vase-TOP Ken-TOP mother-to give-PAST-only COP
 ‘(Lit.) As for that vase, as for Ken, he only gave it to his mother.’
 [*only > that vase/Ken / √that vase/Ken > only]

(10a), (10b), and (10c) involve a subject topic, an object topic, and both, respectively. Notice that *T-dake* cannot take scope over a thematic topic in any of the examples. Regarding *T-dake*, Kishimoto (2009) assumes that *-dake* ‘only’ is adjoined to T, thus taking scope over TP. With this assumption, the above observations indicate that a nominative subject appears below TP, or arguably in Spec,TP, while topics appear above TP, or arguably in Spec,CP. This can be schematized as in (11).

- (11) [CP Topic [TP Nominative Subject [VP ... V] T-*dake*] C]

With this argument, I assume in this paper that the two proposed topic projections are located in the CP domain.

4 Higher Topic Projection

This section and the next delve more deeply into the two topic projections proposed above. The current section investigates the higher topic projection, which I have proposed hosts an object topic. Specifically, I examine this topic projection in terms of gapless topics, with the aim to corroborate the plausibility of assuming it.

Gapless topics refer to topic phrases that occur without any gap that corresponds to them in a proposition clause (e.g. Kuno 1973). See (12), for example.

- (12) Sakana-wa maguro-ga biiru-to yoku au.
 fish-TOP tuna-NOM beer-with well match
 ‘As for fish, tuna goes well with beer.’

The topic phrase *sakana-wa* ‘as for fish’ in (12) is considered a gapless topic in that the proposition clause does not have any gap corresponding to it. Given their ‘gapless’ nature, Kuno (1973) argues that gapless topics are base-generated in the topic position.

Let us now examine gapless topics in terms of the two properties of topics presented in Section 2, namely those regarding word order and scrambling. With regard to word order, note first that a

gapless topic can occur with a subject topic in a single clause, as in (13), where the subject *maguro* ‘tuna’ from (12) is topicalized.

- (13) Sakana-wa maguro_i-wa *e*_i biiru-to yoku au.
 fish-TOP tuna-TOP beer-with well match
 ‘(Lit.) As for fish, as for tuna, it goes well with beer.’

Notice that in (13), the gapless topic *sakana(-wa)* ‘fish’ precedes the subject topic *maguro(-wa)* ‘tuna’. Crucially, reversing this word order would make the sentence ungrammatical, as (14) shows.

- (14) *Maguro_i-wa sakana-wa *e*_i biiru-to yoku au.
 tuna-TOP fish-TOP beer-with well match
 ‘(Lit.) As for tuna, as for fish, it goes well with beer.’

This observation thus indicates that when a gapless topic occurs with a subject topic, the former must precede the latter.

Turning next to scrambling, Fujihira (2015) observes that an element cannot undergo local scrambling over a gapless topic, as shown in (15).

- (15) *Biiru-to_i sakana-wa maguro-ga *t*_i yoku au.
 beer-with fish-TOP tuna-NOM well match
 ‘(Lit.) With beer, as for fish, tuna goes well.’

In addition to this observation, I demonstrate that an element cannot undergo long-distance scrambling over a gapless topic either; see (16), where *biiru-to* ‘with beer’ undergoes long-distance scrambling over the gapless topic *sakana(-wa)* ‘fish’ in the complement clause.⁵

- (16) ?*Biiru-to_i Mai-ga [sakana-wa maguro-ga *t*_i yoku au to] omotteiru (koto)
 beer-with Mai-NOM fish-TOP tuna-NOM well match that think fact
 ‘(Lit.) (The fact that) with beer, Mai thinks that as for fish, tuna goes well’

It can then be concluded that a gapless topic cannot be scrambled over in general.

Notice here that both properties of gapless topics are crucially parallel to those of object topics, which have been discussed in Section 2. First, an object topic needs to precede a subject topic when they co-occur. The relevant examples in (4) are repeated in (17).

⁵ A gapless topic can occur in a complement clause headed by the complementizer *-to* (even when the clause is not interpreted as a direct quote), as in (i).

(i) Mai-wa [sakana-wa maguro-ga biiru-to yoku au to] omotteiru.
 Mai-TOP fish-TOP tuna-NOM beer-with well match that think
 ‘Mai thinks that as for that vase, Ken gave it to his mother.’

This proves that the ungrammaticality of (16) is not due to the existence of a gapless topic in the complement clause.

(17) [Context: While traveling abroad, Ken found a beautiful vase and bought it.]

- a. [Sono kabin]_i-wa Ken-wa_j e_j e_i haha-ni ageta.
 that vase-TOP Ken-TOP mother-to gave
 ‘(Lit.) As for that vase, as for Ken, he gave it to his mother.’
- b. #Ken-wa_i [sono kabin]_j-wa e_i e_j haha-ni ageta.
 Ken-TOP that vase-TOP mother-to gave
 ‘(Lit.) As for Ken, as for that vase, he gave it to his mother.’

In addition, an object topic cannot be scrambled over. The relevant examples (5b) and (6b) are repeated as (18a) and (18b), respectively.

- (18) a. */#Haha-ni_i [sono kabin]_j-wa Ken-ga t_i e_j ageta.
 mother-to that vase-TOP Ken-NOM gave
 ‘(Lit.) To his mother, as for that vase, Ken gave it.’
- b. ?*/#Haha-ni_i Mai-ga [[sono kabin]_j-wa Ken-ga t_i e_j ageta to] omotteiru
 mother-to Mai-NOM that vase-TOP Ken-NOM gave that think
 (koto)
 fact
 ‘(Lit.) (The fact that) to his mother, Mai thinks that, as for that vase, Ken gave it’

This parallel suggests that gapless topics have the same syntactic status as object topics. Based on this, I argue that the higher topic position can host not only an object topic but also a gapless topic. This claim thus consolidates the plausibility of positing the higher topic position.

5 Lower Topic Projection

This section zooms in on the lower topic projection, which, as I have proposed in Section 2, hosts a subject topic. Specifically, I claim that this projection is A/A'P, a projection proposed by Bošković (2024a, 2024b) that has both A- and A'-properties. Below, I first provide a brief overview of Bošković’s proposal (Section 5.1) and then illustrate my claim (Section 5.2).

5.1 A/A'P: Bošković (2024a, 2024b)

Bošković (2024a, 2024b) proposes that on the border of the traditional A and A' fields, there is a projection with mixed A- and A'-properties, which he dubs A/A'P (see also Dias 2022, Lee 2023, and Lewis 2024 for this projection). This proposal can be schematized as in (19).

(19) [CP ... [A/A'P ... [TP ...]]]

More specifically, A/A'P possesses an A-property in that an element in its specifier satisfies the EPP that is normally satisfied in TP (henceforth the subject EPP), as well as an A'-property in that

it serves as a landing site of A'-movement, such as *wh*-movement.⁶ Importantly, these two traits make A/A'P the projection dedicated to A'-moved subjects, such as subject *wh*-phrases.

He proposes A/A'P in order to capture the special statuses of A'-moved subjects that he argues for. Here, I introduce two such properties of subject *wh*-phrases in English.⁷ First, he argues that a subject *wh*-phrase, which arguably originates below *v*P, moves to the *wh*-position (i.e. the landing site of *wh*-movement) without moving to Spec,TP.⁸ He bases this claim partly on facts about quantifier float in West Ulster English (henceforth WUE), which is possible even with *wh*-movement, unlike in standard English, as in (20).

(20) What_i did he say [all *t*_i]_j that he wanted *t*_j? (in WUE) (McCloskey 2000: 61)

In WUE, quantifier float is impossible with movement of a subject to Spec,TP, as in standard English; see (21).

(21) *They_i were arrested [all *t*_i] last night. (in WUE) (McCloskey 2000: 77)

However, quantifier float is possible with movement of a subject *wh*-phrase, as (22) shows.

(22) Who_i was arrested [all *t*_i] in Duke St.?
(in WUE) (McCloskey 2000: 72)

The contrast between (21) and (22) then follows if the subject *wh*-phrase *who* in (22) does not pass through Spec,TP to move to the *wh*-position; if it did, (22) would be ruled out for the same reason (21) is. Note that this property of subject *wh*-phrases can be captured by assuming that they directly move to Spec,A/A'P, where they satisfy not only the *wh*-criterion (as an A'-property) but also the subject EPP (as an A-property), rendering the movement to Spec,TP unnecessary.

Second, Bošković (2024a, 2024b) argues that the *wh*-position for subject *wh*-phrases is different from that for object *wh*-phrases. This claim builds on some asymmetries between these types of *wh*-phrases. For instance, he observes that a subject *wh*-phrase cannot precede a topic, as in (23a), while an object *wh*-phrase can, as in (23b).

(23) a. *Mary wonders [which student, for Kim, should buy that book].

b. ?Mary wonders [which book, for Kim, Peter should buy].

⁶ See Bošković (2024a, 2024b) for more details on the contextuality of EPP.

⁷ See Bošković (2024a, 2024b) for more elements with special properties that he argues move to Spec,A/A'P, including focalized subjects and locative subjects in English.

⁸ Previous studies have provided much evidence that subject *wh*-phrases in English do not stay in Spec,TP but undergo *wh*-movement. One argument concerns *hell* phrases; consider (i).

(i) a. *Who bought what the hell?

b. What the hell did John buy?

c. Who the hell bought that house?

(Bošković 2024b: 9)

(ia) and (ib) suggest that *hell* phrases can modify only *wh*-phrases that have undergone *wh*-movement (Pesetsky 1987). Now, consider (ic), which shows that *hell* phrases can modify subject *wh*-phrases. This thus indicates that subject *wh*-phrases undergo *wh*-movement. See Bošković (2024a, 2024b) and the references therein for more evidence.

This indicates that the *wh*-position for subject *wh*-phrases is lower than that for object *wh*-phrases (and the topic projection). This generalization gives rise to one question: Why is the lower *wh*-position confined to subject *wh*-phrases? According to Bošković (2024a, 2024b), this can be resolved by assuming that the lower *wh*-position is A/A'P; as noted above, this projection is dedicated to A'-moved subjects, including subject *wh*-phrases. More specifically, object *wh*-phrases cannot move to A/A'P because subjects are always closer to A/A'P and hence the A- and A'-property of A/A'P must always be associated with subjects.

To recap the above discussion, I update the structure in (19) by adding the two types of *wh*-phrases as below:

(24) [CP Object Wh-phrase [A/A'P Subject Wh-phrase [TP ...]]]

5.2 A/A'P as the Lower Topic Projection

With Bošković's (2024a, 2024b) proposal of A/A'P in mind, let us now return to the lower topic projection in Japanese. Extending Bošković's (2024a, 2024b) insights to Japanese, I propose that the lower topic projection is A/A'P. More specifically, I propose that in Japanese, A/A'P is the position where (i) the subject EPP is satisfied (as an A-property) and (ii) topics (instead of *wh*-phrases) are licensed (as an A'-property). Importantly, it follows from this proposal that objects cannot move to A/A'P, because it is a subject-dedicated position, as illustrated in the previous subsection. Therefore, this proposal gives an account of the word order restriction between a subject topic and an object topic, or the restriction that the lower topic position can host only subject topics (see Section 2.1). If this proposal is on the right track, it will provide a novel piece of evidence for Bošković's (2024a, 2024b) proposal regarding A/A'P.

To summarize the discussion so far, I submit (25) as the relevant part of the syntactic structure in Japanese, which particularly indicates the locations of the different types of topics.

(25) [TopP Object Topic/Gapless Topic [A/A'P Subject Topic [TP ...]]]

6 Concluding Remarks

This paper syntactically explored subject-object asymmetries of topics in Japanese, which is a minimally explored topic of research in the literature (e.g. Watanabe 2003). In particular, I focused on two such asymmetries: one concerning word order and the other concerning scrambling. Based on these, I proposed that in Japanese, there are two topic projections, the higher one hosting an object topic, and the lower one hosting a subject topic. I then investigated each of these topic projections in more detail. Regarding the higher topic projection, I argued that it can host not only an object topic but also a gapless topic, which corroborated the plausibility of assuming the higher topic projection. Regarding the lower topic projection, I claimed that it is A/A'P, which Bošković (2024a, 2024b) argues involves mixed A- and A'-properties. This provided an account of the word order restriction between subject topics and object topics.

However, this study has left some important questions unanswered. For example, I did not address why the higher topic position (i.e. an object topic or a gapless topic) cannot be scrambled over (see Section 2.2 and Section 4). Another unresolved issue is how topics in the higher and

lower topic projections are derived; are they base-generated there, or derived by movement? These questions will be explored in future studies.

In the rest of this section, I will present three potential research topics that will build on the current study. The first one concerns *wh*-questions in Japanese, which is a *wh*-in-situ language. (26) shows examples of Japanese *wh*-questions, with (26a) and (26b) involving a subject *wh*-phrase and an object *wh*-phrase, respectively.

- (26) a. Dare-ga sono kabin-o kai-masi-ta ka?
 who-NOM that vase-ACC buy-POL-PAST Q
 ‘Who bought that vase?’
- b. Ken-wa nani-o kai-masi-ta ka?
 Ken-TOP what-ACC buy-POL-PAST Q
 ‘What did Ken buy?’

A well-accepted hypothesis is that covert *wh*-movement occurs in (at least some types of) *wh*-questions in Japanese (e.g. Nishigauchi 1990, Saito 2017, Noguchi 2024). Under this hypothesis, one research question is how covert *wh*-movement behaves with respect to A/A'P, a landing site for subject *wh*-phrases in languages with overt *wh*-movement.

The second research topic is to investigate another type of topic in Japanese, PP topics, which refer to PPs to which the topic particle *-wa* is attached. For instance, (27) involves a PP topic *Amerika-de-wa*, which appears sentence-initially and thus can be construed as a thematic topic.

- (27) [PP Amerika-de]_i-wa Ken-ga e_i piza-o yoku tabeta.
 America-in-TOP Ken-NOM pizza-ACC often ate
 ‘(Lit.) As for (in) America, Ken often ate pizza there.’

Consider PP topics in terms of word order, for example. Kuroda (1988) and Saito (2010, 2013) observe that a PP topic and a subject topic can co-occur in a single clause, with both being interpreted as thematic topics, as exemplified in (28).

- (28) [Amerika-de]_i-wa Ken_j-wa e_j e_i piza-o yoku tabeta.
 America-in-TOP Ken-TOP pizza-ACC often ate
 ‘(Lit.) As for (in) America, as for Ken, he often ate pizza there.’

Observe that in the above example, the PP topic precedes the subject topic. Now, consider (29), where the word order of the two topics in (28) is reversed.

- (29) Ken_i-wa [Amerika-de]_j-wa e_i e_j piza-o yoku tabeta.
 Ken-TOP America-in-TOP pizza-ACC often ate
 ‘(Lit.) As for Ken, as for (in) America, he often ate pizza there.’

Saito (2010, 2013) notes that when a subject topic precedes a PP topic as in (29), only one of them can be interpreted as a thematic topic, while the other is construed as a contrastive topic. However,

it seems to me that it is possible to interpret both topics in (29) as thematic topics. This word order issue will require more investigation.

The third potential research topic is to extend the insights in this study to topic constructions in other languages. As an example, I will briefly discuss Brazilian Portuguese (e.g. Lacerda 2020), where subject aboutness topics (henceforth ATs) appear either with or without a resumptive pronoun, as (30) exemplifies.

- (30) Já o João_i, {*e_i* / *ele_i*} não leu nenhum.
 Já the John he not read none
 ‘As for John, he didn’t read any.’ (Lacerda 2020: 143)

Lacerda (2020) observes that subject ATs behave differently depending on whether they appear with a resumptive pronoun. For example, as (31) shows, a subject AT can co-occur with a fronted *wh*-phrase, with the former preceding the latter, only when they appear with a resumptive pronoun.⁹

- (31) Já o João_i, o que {?**e_i* / *ele_i*} leu?
 Já the John what he read
 ‘As for John, what did he read?’ (Lacerda 2020: 147)

To capture such asymmetries, Lacerda (2020) argues that (i) a subject AT without a resumptive pronoun does not move to a topic position but instead stays in Spec,TP, while (ii) a subject AT with a resumptive pronoun is base-generated in the left periphery. Here, I suggest a potential alternative analysis by extending the proposal of this study. This analysis builds on the following three assumptions: (i) A subject AT without a resumptive pronoun appears in Spec,A/A’P (instead of staying in Spec,TP, as Lacerda 2020 claims); (ii) a subject AT with a resumptive pronoun is base-generated in the higher topic projection; and (iii) the landing site of a fronted *wh*-phrase lies between the higher topic position and A/A’P. These assumptions can be schematized as in (32).

- (32) [_{TopicP} AT_R [_{whP} Fronted Wh-phrase [_{A/A’P} AT_{noR} [_{TP} ...]]]]
 (AT_R = subject aboutness topic with a resumptive pronoun; AT_{noR} = subject aboutness topic without a resumptive pronoun)

Under this analysis, the ungrammaticality in (31) follows from the fact that the subject AT without a resumptive pronoun and the fronted *wh*-phrase are not aligned as specified in (32). However, Lacerda (2020) observes that (31) will still be ungrammatical even if the two elements in question are aligned as specified in (32); see (33).

- (33) *O que já o João_i *e_i* leu?
 what Já the John read
 ‘As for John, what did he read?’ (Lacerda 2020: 147)

⁹ In Brazilian Portuguese, the fronting of *wh*-phrases is optional.

I suggest that this could be attributed to the minimality condition; the fronting of the *wh*-phrase crosses the AT in A/A'P, thus violating the minimality condition regarding their A'-property. I leave it open to future research to verify whether this line of analysis is on the right track.

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