

Distributional patterns of syntactic and semantic/pragmatic coding in four varieties of the Japonic languages

Category (5): “cognitive/functional syntax/semantics”

Our understanding of synchronic patterns of syntax can be advanced significantly if we incorporate the perspectives of semantics and pragmatics, as well as diachronic insight, when available. In this paper, we examine patterns of distribution of two particles, GA and NO (and its variant N and a cognate NU) in four different varieties within the Japonic language family; Standard Japanese (SJ), Kumamoto-Yatsushiro Japanese (KYJ), Naha Ryukyuan (NR), and Ikema Ryukyuan (IR).

In the modern varieties of these languages, GA and NO/NU are involved in marking “attributive” (e.g. genitive) and “subject” in different ways. Their synchronic morphosyntactic distinctions are shown in Table 1. The relevant examples are shown in Data Set (1).

[√ = possibility, (√) = possibility with restriction, * = impossibility; ATT=attributive, SUB=subject, MC =main clause, EC =embedded clause.]

Lgs	Prt.	ATT	SUB-MC	SUB-EC	Lgs	Prt.	ATT	SUB-MC	SUB-EC
SJ	ga	*	√	√	NR	ga	*	√	√
SJ	no	√	*	√	NR	nu	(√)	√	√
KYJ	ga	(√)	*	*	IR	ga	(√)	√	√
KYJ	n(o)	(√)	√	√	IR	nu	(√)	√	√

[Table 1] Attributive and subject marking in four varieties of Japonic languages

GA and NO in Standard Japanese are distributed between the subject and the attributive, but because the distinction is neutralized in the embedded clause environment (i.e. the *ga-no* conversion), the syntactic distinction is not completely isomorphic. However, the other three languages are even less systematic, and appear to go against either or both economy and clarity. In KYJ, NO marks both attributives and subject, while GA marks neither (with some clarification to be discussed later). In other words, there is no functional value for the distinction between the two particles. (Note, however, that GA has developed a function of ‘focused subject’: *ata ga / *no ittato kai* “Is it YOU who went (there)?”). In Naha Ryukyuan, both GA and NU mark a subject in both main and embedded clause contexts, while only NU marks attributives.

In contrast to the other three languages, Ikema Ryukyuan (IR) does not show any correlation between form and function; both GA and NU mark both functions. Thus, the Ikema pattern poses a question as to the reason for the existence of two separate particles. This puzzle will be cleared up when we construct a table based on the semantic distinctions that each particle codes for their associated noun. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of GA/NO(NU) for their attributive function. The relevant example sentences are shown in the Data Set 2.

Lgs	Prt.	‘I’	Person nouns (“teacher”)	Non-human (“dog”)	Lgs	Prt.	‘I’	Person nouns (“teacher”)	Non-human (“dog”)
SJ	ga	*	*	*	NR	ga	*	*	*
SJ	no	√	√	√	NR	nu	*	√	√
KYJ	ga	√	*	*	IR	ga	√	√	*
KYJ	no	*	√	√	IR	nu	*	√	√

[Table 2] Particle forms with an Attributive function

This table reveals first that Ikema particles have functional significance for distinguishing different semantic categories associated with their attached noun. In contrast, the two particles in SJ do not distinguish between them. We know, however, in the earlier form of SJ (i.e. Old Japanese), this was not the case. GA and NO as attributive markers followed different types of nouns; GA after the speaker him/herself or people closer to him/her (e.g. wife, mother, child), and NO after other types of nouns (e.g. emperors, generic people, and non-humans). This semantic distinction became less prominent, and finally obliterated, as GA acquired the subject marking function, first in the subordinate clause environment, and later extended to the main clause environment.

The transfer of distinction across the pragmatic/semantic and syntactic domains found in SJ does not seem to have happened in Ikema, as this language still maintains the pragmatics as a guiding principle for the selection of the particle. Except for clear cases with pronouns (with GA) and with non-humans (with NU), all (human) nouns show fluctuations in terms of their particle choice based on pragmatic and/or discourse factors with only a few exceptions.

Extending the data in table 2 slightly, we can make the following further observations. In KYJ, though GA in general does not code either attributives or (non-focused) subjects, it does appear with first/second person attributive forms (*on-ga*; *ata-ga*, respectively). The special status of these pronouns is also found in Naha and Ikema; in Ikema, marking of first/second persons is grammaticalized (*ba-ga* / *vva-ga*, respectively), and does not fluctuate due to pragmatic/discourse factors. In Naha, neither GA nor NU is allowed after first and second person pronouns; they are simply juxtaposed (*wan saba* ‘I sandal,’ *yaa saba* ‘you sandal’), but surprisingly GA (not NU!) appears with a third person pronoun (*ari-ga saba* ‘he-GA sandal’). We know that in Old Japanese, all personal pronouns were marked by GA (and never by NO): *aga*, *waga* (1st person), *naga* (2nd person), *shiga* (3rd person). Thus, all the languages except SJ under discussion have some traces of this Old Japanese feature, though SJ has lost it.

Naha, unlike Ikema, has already lost the attributive function of GA like SJ (Table 1) (except for the third person subject mentioned just above), and may be at the stage before that of modern SJ. This is consistent with the fact that, as with Old Japanese, Naha uses both GA and NU for a subject in both subordinate and independent clause environments, and still maintains the conclusive-attributive distinctions in the predicate.

This research goes beyond simple typological comparisons of language forms found in Japan, and suggests that the interface between form (syntax) and meaning/function (semantics/pragmatics) can significantly advance our knowledge of development of language varieties in general, and of different developmental paths originating from a possible common starting point in particular.

Data Set 1

	Attributive	SUB (MC)	SUB (SC)
	<i>Takeshi's sandals</i>	<i>Takeshi is wearing sandals</i>	<i>The sandals Takeshi is wearing</i>
SJ	takeshi *ga/no zoori	takeshi ga/*no zoori o haiteiru	takeshi ga/no haiteiru zoori
KYJ	takeshi *ga/n zoori	takeshi *ga/n zoori ba haitoru	takeshi *ga/n haitoru zoori
NR	takeshi *ga/nu saba	takeshi ga/*nu saba hachooN	takeshi ga/*nu hachooru saba
IR	takeshi ga/nu saba	takeshi ga/nu saba u hmi-ui	takeshi ga/nu hmi-ui saba

Data Set 2

	<i>My sandal</i>	<i>Teacher's sandal</i>	<i>Dog's tail</i>
SJ	watashi *ga/no zoori	sensee *ga/no zoori	inu *ga/no shippo
KYJ	on ga/*no zoori	sensee *ga/n zoori	inu *ga/n shippo
NR	wan (*nu/*ga) saba	sinsii nu/*ga saba	?ingwaa nu/*ga zyuu
IR	ba ga/*nu saba	siisii ga/nu saba	in nu/*ga zyuu

