Nominative subjects can't move to the left periphery in Japanese

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Abstract

This paper attempts to argue convincingly that nominative subjects in Japanese cannot move to Spec-C if they are phonetically realized; in fact, they should remain in Spec-T from the viewpoint of the nominative case assignment mechanism in Japanese.

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1. Introduction

We will mainly examine multiple nominative subject constructions in Japanese, as illustrated in (1), focusing on the position of the leftmost nominative subject in these constructions.

(1)   Bunmeikoku-ga dansei-ga   heikin-zyumyoo-ga mizika-i.
civilized.country-NOM male-NOM average-life.span-NOM short-PRES
'It is in civilized countries that the male population has a short average life-span.'

(Kuno 1973: 71)

It has long been assumed that multiple nominative subject constructions are only licensed in sentences with individual-level predicates in the sense of Carlson (1977), with the topmost nominative subject carrying the sense of exhaustive listing (Inoue 2008; Kuno 1973; Mihara 1994; Saito 1985; among others). Kuno (1973) explicitly states the following rule:[1]

(2)   Marking for Exhaustive Listing [obligatory for the matrix sentence]:
If the predicate of a sentence represents a state or a habitual/generic action, and if the sentence-
initial NP-*ga* does not contain a numeral or quantifier, mark that NP-*ga* as [+exhaustive listing].

(Kuno 1973: 71)

The issue that we will address is where the topmost nominative subject in those constructions is positioned, given the general assumption that a focus interpretation is assigned to DP in the left periphery, i.e., in CP (e.g., Rizzi 1997). Observing some empirical facts and developing the nominative case assignment mechanism in Japanese, this paper argues that the leftmost nominative subject like *bunmeikoku-ga* 'civilized countries' in (1) must occupy Spec-T, rather than Spec-C.

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[1]   Kuno (1973) observes that "when the *ga* that can receive only the exhaustive-listing interpretation is present in a sentence, it takes precedence, and no other elements can be given the exhaustive-listing interpretation (Kuno 1973: 63)". Thus, in the sentence in (1), the exhaustive listing interpretation is given only to the leftmost nominative subject *bunmeikoku-ga* 'civilized countries'. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this issue to our attention. See also section 4 in which we provide the suggestion that Kuno's (1973) observation may be deduced from a one-to-one focus agreement relationship between the subject and T bearing a focus feature.

2. Previous Analysis: Inoue (2008)

According to Inoue (2008), in multiple nominative subject constructions, the leftmost nominative subject like *bunmeikoku-ga* 'civilized countries' in (1) obtains a contrastive focus interpretation (the exhaustive listing interpretation in the sense of Kuno 1973). On the basis of Rizzi's (1997) articulated CP hypothesis, roughly schematized in (3), Inoue (2008) proposes that the contrastively focused leftmost nominative subject in multiple nominative subject constructions in Japanese must move to Spec-Foc to satisfy the so-called focus criterion (Rizzi 1997). Accordingly, the topmost nominative subject in (1) is to undergo movement to Spec-Foc so that it meets the focus criterion, as roughly illustrated in (4).

(3)   ForceP … TopP … FocP … FinP … TP …

(4) $[_{\text{FocP}}$ Bunmeikoku$_i$-ga $[_{\text{Foc}'}$ $[_{\text{TP}}$ t_i dansei-ga heikin-zyumyoo-ga mizika-i] Foc]]

Inoue (2008) further argues that all contrastively focused nominative subjects in Japanese should experience movement on their way up to Spec-Foc in the same fashion as the leftmost nominative subject in multiple nominative subject constructions does. For example, the nominative subject, *Taro-dake-ga* 'only Taro', in (5a) is interpreted as exhaustive listing, and it thus undergoes movement to Spec-Foc under Inoue's (2008) analysis, as roughly demonstrated in (5b) (see also Ueda 2003 for a similar proposal).

(5)   a.   Taro-dake-ga yakuin-des-u.

                   Taro-only-NOM   executive-COP-PRES

                   'Only Taro is an executive.'

       b. $[_{\text{FocP}}$ Taro-dake$_i$-ga $[_{\text{Foc}'}$ $[_{\text{TP}}$ t_i yakuin-des-u] Foc]]

However, Inoue's (2008) analysis encounters some empirical problems. Observe the examples in (6), where the anaphor (*otagai*) in (6a) is bound by *Suzuki-san to Kato-san* 'Ms. Suzuki and Ms. Kato', and the bound pronoun (*sokono*) in (6b) is bound by *dono-kaisya-mo* 'every company'.

(6)   a.   Suzuki-san to   Kato-san$_i$-o   otagai-no   sensei-dake-ga t_i home-ta.

                   Suzuki-san and   Kato-san-ACC   each.other-GEN   teacher-only-NOM   praise-PST

                   Lit: 'It was only each other's teachers who praised Ms. Suzuki and Ms. Kato.'

       b.   Dono-kaisya-mo$_i$ sokono-kogaisya-nomi-ga t_i kyuudansi-ta.

                   which-company-also   its-subsidiary-only-NOM   denounce-PST

                   Lit: 'It was only their subsidiaries that denounced every company.'

Here, we adopt the standard assumption that the binders for anaphors and bound pronouns must be in an A-position, and the binding is impossible from A′-position (see Chomsky 1981; Hoji 1985; Saito 1985, 1992; among others for relevant discussion). Given that the scrambled objects remain in Spec-T (see Miyagawa 2001 for detailed discussion of the landing site of scrambled objects in Japanese), these objects in (6) can correctly bind the subjects marked with the overt focus particles (*dake* 'only' in (6a) and *nomi* 'only' in (6b)). It then follows that the positions of the subjects in (6) are necessarily below (or in) Spec-T. Inoue's (2008) analysis expects, however, that the focused subjects as well as the scrambled objects in (6) should occupy Spec-T at least at some point of the derivation; the former then move to Spec-Foc, and the latter subsequently move to a higher position than Spec-Foc. To maintain Inoue's (2008)

analysis, there is a need to posit the application of string vacuous scrambling of the object only to retain the word order, an undesirable situation in terms of economy of derivation.

3. Nominative case assignment and focus agreement

Hayashi (2022) provides the possibility that DPs obtain case on the basis of a label given to a set under the labeling framework advanced by Chomsky (2013, 2015). It is assumed that in English, a set that consists of a subject and finite T is assigned a <phi, phi> label as a consequence of phi-feature agreement. Investigating functions of labels at the interfaces, Hayashi (2022) proposes the following nominative case assignment mechanism, effective at the SM interface:

(7) The set labeled <phi, phi> by a nominal and T assigns nominative case to a nominal contained.

(Hayashi 2022: 152)

Hayashi's (2022) proposal can nicely account for nominative case assignment in English. Notice, however, that phi-feature agreement is a prerequisite for nominative case assignment under Hayashi's (2022) proposal, the point being incompatible with the widely acknowledged view that phi-feature agreement is absent in Japanese (Fukui 1986; Kuroda 1988; Saito 1985; among others); thus, we slightly modify Hayashi's (2022) analysis in the following discussion.

It is acknowledged that finite T itself is likely to be connected to nominative case assignment in Japanese (Koizumi 1994; Moritake 2023; Saito 1985, 2016; Takezawa 1987; among others). Refining Hayashi's (2022) proposal, we propose that in Japanese, DPs receive nominative case as long as their topmost occurrence is contained (dominated) by TP headed by finite T at the SM interface, as shown in (8). We postulate that multiple DPs can, in principle, be targets for nominative case assignment in Japanese (e.g., Hayashi 2022).

(8) $[_{CP} [_{C'} [_{TP}$ DP (DP) (DP) $[_{T'} [_{v(*)P} \ldots]$ finite T$]]$ C$]]$

Central to this analysis is that case assignment proceeds at the SM interface, along the same lines of Hayashi's (2022) analysis, whereby subjects need to occupy Spec-T not only within narrow syntax but also at the SM interface to obtain nominative case; otherwise, nominative case assignment to subjects fails (see also Saito 1985 for a similar proposal couched in the Government and Binding framework). Insofar as this analysis is on the right track, the obligatory halting of nominative subjects in Spec-T in Japanese stems from the nominative case assignment mechanism.[2]

A remaining question is how subjects in Japanese can be focused in Spec-T, not in Spec-Foc. Following Miyagawa's (2010, 2017) analysis, we assume that Japanese employs an agreement system with a focus feature being inherited from C by finite T; thus, DP can be focused in Spec-T via agreement with finite T bearing a focus feature.[3]

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[2] Space limitations do not allow us to discuss a mechanism of accusative case assignment in Japanese in detail. I refer the reader to Saito (1985, 2016) for relevant discussion.

[3] It should be noted here that when a sentence involves a stage-level predicate in the sense of Carlson (1977), a focus interpretation is not always assigned to a nominative subject in a matrix clause in Japanese (see Kuno 1973 for detailed discussion). For instance, the nominative subject *Mary-ga* 'Mary' need not be focused in (i), and the whole sentence in (i) can express the neutral description interpretation, although the relevant subject can be interpreted

4. Analyses

Here, we explain how the topmost subject in (1) is assigned nominative case and is interpreted with exhaustive listing. We assume with Saito (1985, 2016) that the subject in question is directly merged in Spec-T, as represented in (9).

(9) $[_{CP} [_{C'} [_{TP}$ Bunmeikoku-ga$_{[Foc]} [_{T'} [_{vP} \dots] T_{[Foc]}] C]]$

The leftmost subject *bunmeikoku* 'civilized countries' occupies Spec-T and is finally sent to the SM interface (and the Conceptual–Intentional interface); hence, it is properly contained within TP at the SM interface, and thus, nominative case assignment to *bunmeikoku* 'civilized countries' succeeds. Additionally, *bunmeikoku* 'civilized countries' can be focused in Spec-T since it holds an agreement relationship with finite T that inherits a focus feature from C. Notice that in this case, other two nominative subjects in (1), *dansei-ga* 'male' and *heikinzyumyoo-ga* 'an average life-span', do not establish any agreement relationship with T bearing a focus feature, in contrast to *bunmeikoku-ga* 'civilized countries'; hence, it is expected that they are never exhaustively focused, and this expectation is indeed in line with Kuno's (1973) observation that only one element is compatible with the exhaustive listing interpretation (see also footnote 3 for relevant discussion).

Under the current analysis, the focused leftmost nominative subject in (1) remains in Spec-T, i.e., an A-position; thus, the present analysis, unlike Inoue's (2008) analysis, can accommodate the binding phenomena discussed in section 2, without assuming vacuous scrambling of the object to preserve the word order.

5. Scrambling of Subjects in Japanese

The current analysis is consistent with Saito's (1985) observation that nominative subjects cannot be subject to long-distance scrambling, as exemplified in (10).

(10) *Zyuu-nin-no ryuugakusei$_i$-ga   sensei-ga   [kotosi t_i nihon-ni
      ten-CL-GEN international.student-NOM   teacher-NOM   this.year   Japan-to

      ku-ru   to] it-ta.
        come-PRES C   say-PST

        Lit: 'The teacher said that ten international students come to Japan this year. '

Under the present analysis, it is expected that nominative case is unavailable for *zyuu-nin-no*

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as exhaustive listing.
   (i)   Mary-ga   ki-ta.
            Mary-NOM   come-PST
            'Mary has come.'

Note that focus agreement is not the only option available in Japanese; according to Miyagawa (2010, 2017), topic agreement can also proceed in Japanese. Nishioka (2019) offers the generalization that a topic or focus must always be activated in a matrix clause in Japanese due to its property ascribed to discourse-configurationality (see also Kiss 1995; Miyagawa 2010, 2017; Moritake 2022 for relevant discussion). With this in mind, consider the sentence in (i). Nishioka (2019) assumes that the sentence in (i) is regarded as thetic judgement in the sense of Kuroda (1992), arguing that such a sentence can contain an implicit stage-topic (Erteschik-Shir 2007) expressing the 'here-and-now' in the discourse. Nishioka (2019) then suggests that the relevant stage-topic is responsible for the activation of a topic interpretation, and hence, the sentence in (i) does not have to activate focus; in fact, there is no need to inherit a focus feature from C by T to implement focus agreement between the subject and T in such cases. Therefore, a nominative subject like *Mary-ga* 'Mary' in (i) does not necessarily obtain a focus interpretation in cases where a stage-level predicate serves as a primary predicate (see also Moritake 2022 for relevant discussion). We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for clarifying this point.

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ryuugakusei 'ten international students' since it occupies matrix Spec-C at the SM-interface. Therefore, the sentence in (10) is never derived in the first place.[4]

Kikuchi (1989) argues, however, that nominative subjects can indeed undergo movement, by observing constructions with comparative deletion in Japanese. See the sentence in (11), where Kikuchi (1989) offers the analysis that the operator moves out of Spec-T, although its variable (trace), corresponding to the nominative subject *ookuno hito-ga* 'many people' in the matrix clause, must bear nominative Case, given the analysis presented by Saito (1985) that "[v]ariables must have Case (Saito 1985: 206)". Kikuchi's (1989) analysis might thus undermine the current proposal.

(11) [Op$_i$ [t_i ano paatii-ni   kite-ta]] yorimo   ookuno hito-ga kokoni   iru.
           that party-DAT   come-PST than many people-NOM   here   be
      'There are more people here than attended at that party.'   (Kikuchi 1989: 12)

However, the operator in (11), unlike *zyuunin-no ryuugakusei* 'ten international students' in (10), has no phonetic realization; hence, we argue that nominative Case is unnecessary for a variable (trace) of an operator even if it corresponds to a nominative subject. To the extent that this analysis succeeds, Kikuchi's (1989) analysis is never seen as a counterexample to our analysis.

6. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the positions of nominative subjects in Japanese, arguing that, based on the proposed nominative case assignment mechanism, nominative subjects must appear in Spec-T rather than Spec-C, regardless of whether they are focused or not.

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[4] One might argue that *zyuu-nin-no ryuugakusei* 'ten international students' can move to matrix Spec-T (A-position) via embedded Spec-C (A´-position) to comply with the phase impenetrability condition (Chomsky 2000). It would then be erroneously expected that *zyuu-nin-no ryuugakusei* 'ten international students' can receive nominative case in the matrix clause in (10). However, it is tacitly/implicitly assumed that movement from A´-position to A-position is excluded because of improper movement (e.g., Fukui 1993); hence, the movement of *zyuu-nin-no ryuugakusei* 'ten international students' from the subordinate clause to matrix Spec-T is never implemented.

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