

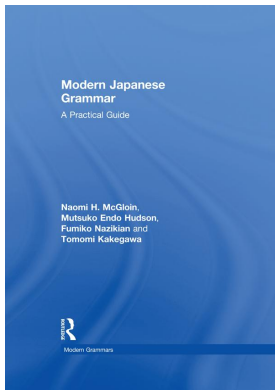
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Modern Japanese Grammar A Practical Guide

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Topic marker wa

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11

Topic marker *wa*

The particle **wa** introduces the topic of a sentence. The topic is a word or a group of words that indicates what the sentence is about. When the speaker can assume that the hearer knows what he/she is talking about, the speaker can introduce that item as a topic with the particle **wa**.

▶ 1.4; 5.2.5

11.1 How *wa*-phrases are formed

Any noun phrases, postpositional phrases or nominalized phrases can become a topic of the sentence. **Wa** replaces particle **ga** (subject marker) and **o** (object marker), while it attaches to other particles (**ni**, **de**, **to**, **e**, **kara**, **made**, etc.)

田中さんが → 田中さんは
Tanaka-san ga → **Tanaka-san wa**

本を → 本は
hon o → **hon wa**

田中さんに → 田中さんには
Tanaka-san ni → **Tanaka-san ni wa**

日本で → 日本では
Nihon de → **Nihon de wa**

The topic phrase generally appears at the beginning of a sentence. Compare the sentences with and without a topic.

ジョンがこの本を書きました。
Jon ga kono hon o kakimashita. (no topic)
 John wrote this book.

この本はジョンが書きました。
Kono hon wa Jon ga kakimashita. (**kono hon wa** is the topic.)
 Speaking of this book, John wrote it.

京都でお寺を見ました。
Kyoto de otera o mimashita. (no topic)
 (I) saw temples in Kyoto.

京都ではお寺を見ました。
Kyoto de wa otera o mimashita. (**Kyoto de wa** is the topic.)
 In Kyoto, (I) saw temples.

11.2 Topic noun phrases

An item which has been mentioned in a previous sentence often becomes the topic in the following sentence(s). In the example below, Smith is introduced as a non-topic first and then becomes the topic of the following sentence.

私の友達にスミスという人がいるんですが、スミスさんは日本語がペラペラです。

Watashi no tomodachi ni Sumisu to yuu hito ga iru n desu ga, Sumisu-san wa Nihongo ga perapera desu.

I have a friend named Smith, and he/she is fluent in Japanese.

Generic nouns (e.g. ‘the Japanese,’ ‘dogs’) and nouns which can be assumed to be publicly known to most people, such as well-known figures, can become a topic without being mentioned previously.

日本人はよく働く。

Nihonjin wa yoku hataraku.

Japanese people work a lot.

リンカーン大統領はイリノイで生まれた。

Rinkaan daitooryoo wa Irinoi de umareta.

President Lincoln was born in Illinois.

There are other ways a noun can be a topic without being previously mentioned. The important thing is that the hearer can identify what the speaker is talking about from the context. The sentence type also contributes to whether a noun can be a topic or not. In an [X is Y] type of sentence, where Y characterizes X, X tends to be a topic marked by *wa*.

(a) お金が落ちている。

Okane ga ochite iru.

Look! There is money on the ground!

(b) お金は大切だ。

Okane wa taisetsu da.

Money is important.

The same noun *okane* appears both in (a) and (b). In (a), money refers to specific money that is on the ground, while in (b), it refers to money in the generic sense. Also, while sentence (a) describes a specific situation that exists at the time of speaking, sentence (b) is a generic statement. Hence, the use of *X wa* in (b).

11.3 *wa* marking contrast

Wa is also used to contrast two or more things, people, etc., whether they are all overtly mentioned or not. The contrastive *wa* is stressed with high pitch. When there is another particle directly preceding it, that particle is pronounced with high pitch.

田中さんは来ましたが、山田さんは来ませんでした。

Tanaka-san wa kimashita ga, Yamada-san wa kimasen deshita.

Mr/Ms Tanaka came, but Mr/Ms Yamada did not come.

子供はうちでは日本語を話しますが、学校では英語です。

Kodomo wa uchi de wa Nihongo o hanashimasu ga, gakkoo de wa Eego desu.

My child speaks Japanese at home, but English at school.

In a negative sentence, one *wa* usually indicates contrast. In the example below, the first *wa* (*watashi wa*) indicates topic, but the second *wa* (*osushi wa*) indicates contrast. The sentence states that the speaker does not eat sushi, but implies that he/she eats other Japanese food.

私は日本料理が好きですが、おすしは食べません。

Watashi wa nihonryoori ga suki desu ga, osushi wa tabemasen.

I like Japanese food, but I don't eat sushi.

The following sentence implies that the speaker went to other places, but not London.

夏休みはヨーロッパへ行きました。ロンドンへは行きませんでした、とても楽しかったです。

Natsuyasumi wa Yooroppa e ikimashita. Rondon e wa ikimasen deshita ga, totemo tanoshikatta desu.

I went to Europe for the summer vacation. I did not go to London, but it was a lot of fun.

When there are more than two **wa** phrases in a sentence, the **wa** that immediately precedes the predicate is usually interpreted as contrastive.

私はきのうはコーヒーは飲みませんでした。

Watashi wa kinoo wa koohee wa nomimasen deshita.

I didn't drink coffee yesterday. (The sentence implies that the speaker drank something else.)

11.4

wa with adverbs and verbs

The particle **wa** also occurs with adverbs and verbs. When it does, **wa** is invariably interpreted as contrastive. The following sentence means that the speaker can speak a little but not very well.

大学でフランス語を習いましたが、上手には話せません。

Daigaku de Furansugo o naraimashita ga, joozu ni wa hanasemasen.

I took French in college, but I can't speak well.

When **wa** is used with verbs, it follows the stem of the **-masu** form and is followed by an auxiliary verb **suru** 'to do.' The sentence below implies that there are other problems with the person (for example, he is always late for classes.)

休みはしないんですが...

Yasumi wa shinai n desu ga...

(He) does not skip classes, but...

11.5

wa vs. ga (summary)

The following principles are useful to keep in mind for the use of the particles **wa** and **ga**, when they both refer to the subject of the sentence.

1. In [X **wa** Y], Y is the comment on X, and the new information one wants to convey in uttering this sentence is the Y part. In [X **ga** Y], X represents the new information. This structure is generally used to identify which X fits Y, such as in answering the question, 'who did Y?' or 'which one is Y?'. When you are looking at a building and the hearer wants to know what that building is, (a) is appropriate. Sentence (b) is appropriate when the hearer wants to know which building is the school.

(a) あれは学校です。
Are wa gakkoo desu.
That's a school.

(b) あれが学校です。
Are ga gakkoo desu.
That's the school.

Sentence (c) is appropriate when you are talking about whether Tanaka came or not, while (d) is appropriate when you are trying to identify who did not come.

- (c) 田中さんは来ませんでした。
Tanaka-san wa kimasendeshita.
 Mr/Ms Tanaka did not come.
- (d) 田中さんが来ませんでした。
Tanaka-san ga kimasendeshita.
 It's Mr/Ms Tanaka who did not come.

2. **Ga** is used when one is describing a scene that one can observe.

(You look outside and see a cat.)

あ！庭に猫がいる。
A! Niwa ni neko ga iru.
 Look! There is a cat in the yard/garden.

(Looking outside, you notice that it is raining.)

雨が降っている！
Ame ga futte iru!
 It's raining!

3. The subject of the subordinate clause is generally marked by **ga**.

In (e), most likely **kodomo** 'child' is the subject of the subordinate predicate (**byooki da** 'be sick'). The main subject of (e) is the speaker. In (f), on the other hand, since **wa** is used, the main subject as well as the subject of the subordinate clause is **kodomo**.

- (e) [子供が病気だから] 学校に行けません。
[Kodomo ga byooki da kara] gakkoo ni ikemasen.
 Because my child is sick, (I) cannot go to school.
- (f) 子供は [病気だから学校に行けません]。
Kodomo wa [byooki da kara gakkoo ni ikemasen].
 My child cannot go to school because he/she is sick.