

Japanese particles, *-ga* and *-wa*, as a pragmatic unit: Evidence from child language

Research on nominative case marker *-ga* and topic marker *-wa* has been notably prominent in Japanese linguistics. However, the grammatical status of those particles has not been clearly ascertained yet. Past studies have revolved around understanding the distinction and dichotomy between *-ga* and *-wa*. While studies on their syntactic status (Miyagawa, 1989; Whitman 2001) and their discourse functionality (Kuno 1973; Hinds and Hinds, 1978) have been debated, no definitive account in syntax has been agreed upon and discourse frameworks only provide anecdotal explanations. This paper adds a new set of facts and a different perspective to these literatures.

Since existing work on the acquisition of particles only focuses on a certain group of particles, such as the case markers, *-ga*, *-o*, *-ni*, and Sentence Final Particles (SFPs) (Mayes and Ono 1993, Morikawa 1997, Shirai et. al.), a comprehensive examination of particle acquisition of three Japanese children was done. It reveals that children acquire particles in groups according to different functions. One of the most intriguing discoveries from the study is that that *-ga* and *-wa* are acquired more or less simultaneously; hence suggesting that *-ga* and *-wa* should be best understood as a linguistic unit. This acquisition sequence cannot be explained when *-ga* and *-wa* are viewed as unrelated elements as we traditionally viewed. In this paper, I examine an explanation of why children acquire *-ga* and *-wa* together, and we provide a possible explanation for the order of acquisition of all particles.

Transcriptions from CHILDES (MacWhinney 2000) of longitudinal corpora of conversations between three Japanese children and their mothers (Miyata 2004a,b,c) were examined. Looking at 68,261 child and 94,878 adult utterances (children's age between 1;03 and 3;01), we established the frequency of particle use in adult and children's speech, and identified the timing of the particles' first emergence in the children's speech.

The data indicates that children uniformly acquired basic particles in a certain order (completing acquisition around MLU (m) 3.0) in spite of different adult input. They first acquire the illocutionary function particles, SFPs (*-ne*, *-yo*, and *-ka*, which express confirmation, emphasis, and question respectively), conjunctive particles (such as *-to* and *-mo*), case markers, and then post-positions (such as *-de* and *-kara*) at the later stage.

-ga and *-wa* emerge right after SFPs at almost the same time for all three children. This result does not fit into the generalizations described above since *-wa* is not linked to illocutionary acts, nor it is conjunctive. As already noted, it is not clear that *-ga* and *-wa* are even syntactically related (although they can mark the subject NP). We offer an explanation for why (i) *-ga* and *-wa* should appear together and (ii) why they should appear immediately after the acquisition of SFPs.

I adopt Fiengo and McClure's (2002) application of Austin's (1953) speech act theory in which *-ga* and *-wa* are the markers of different speech acts, i.e. they have a pragmatic function. In Austin's theory, a simple sentence such as "That flower is a cherry blossom" can be used to answer a number of different kinds of questions. Compare (1) and (2).

- (1) What do you call that flower?
- (2) Which of these flowers is a cherry blossom?

In (1), a flower exists, but its identity is unknown. Austin would say that in the answer "That flower is a cherry blossom," the predicate "is a cherry blossom" must be produced to identify the item in question. In contrast in (2), the questioner has a particular kind of flower in mind, but does not know which item is of the right type. Here, Austin would say that in the answer "That flower is a cherry blossom," the item of the right type (i.e. a cherry blossom) must be produced to match the stated predicate.

In Japanese, on the other hand, the item "that flower" can be realized with either *-ga* or *-wa* since both particles can mark the subject NP. However, only *-wa* marks the item in the

answer to (1) while *-ga* marks the item in the answer (2), i.e., *-ga* and *-wa* as a pair identify the direction of item or predicate produced. This suggests that *-ga* and *-wa* perform complementary functions with respect to speech acts. Importantly, and in contrast to past proposals, this explanation does not require reliance on previous context or underlying syntactic structure to explain the nature of *-ga* and *-wa*.

Once *-ga* and *-wa* are considered a linguistic pair, it is no longer a surprise that children acquire them simultaneously in the early stage of particle acquisition. *-ga* and *-wa* are acquired together immediately after SFPs, as an extension of SFPs. Data from our research clearly show that children used SFPs accurately (99% of accuracy for all overt particles) to express basic illocutionary acts, statements and questions, indicating that they understand the grammatical use of SFPs. Further, in the initial stages of *-ga* and *-wa* acquisition, children have an overly restricted hypothesis which links the particles directly to the basic illocutionary acts. Analysis reveals that children use *-ga* exclusively to form statements and *-wa* primarily to form questions at the earliest stages. That is, children initially (although inaccurately) learn *-ga* and *-wa* as indicators of basic illocutionary acts – making statements and questions. This is presumably because the need to learn “how to talk” is the fundamental driving force of language acquisition at initial stage of language acquisition. Of course, the children’s initial hypothesis of linking *-ga* and *-wa* to particular illocutionary acts is inaccurate in terms of adult speech. In adult speech, any subject NP in statement or question can be marked with *-ga* and *-wa*, and *-ga* and *-wa* are chosen to indicate direction of item or predicate.

The children’s hypothesis is inaccurate not because it is overly general, but because it is too narrow. The children must learn adult usage of *-ga* and *-wa* eventually and indeed the data shows the deterioration of too narrow hypothesis for *-wa* after a few months from the first emergence. Nonetheless, the fact that the children acquired *-ga* and *-wa* together provides an evidence that *-ga* and *-wa* are a linguistic unit, specifically a pragmatic unit based on the fact the children learned as an extension of illocutionary acts related particles, SFPs.

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