Wa and ga

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Ma and Ga

Tokyo
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William Imbrie
PREFACE

During a furlough in 1884 I wrote a monograph on Wa and Ga, in theory the same as the present one. There were however certain sentences which I could not then satisfactorily adjust to the theory, and the manuscript was laid aside until the summer of 1900 when it was in part rewritten.

Some months ago I was invited by Mr. Frank Muller, the Foreign Director of The Japanese Language School, to "give an informal talk to the students on any subject"; and in response to that invitation I presented a brief outline of the monograph. Since then it has been again rewritten; and it is now published in the hope that it may be of service to new students of the language, especially to those among them who have come to Japan to make known the Gospel of Christ.

I take great pleasure in acknowledging my indebtedness to my old friend and colleague Dr. Ibuka, for his pains-taking assistance; and in particular for his revision of the examples in accordance with the footnote on page four.

In conclusion it should be said that the monograph deals only with the language as it is spoken.

William Imbrie.

Tōkyō, September 9th, 1914.
The correct use of Ga and Wa* is one of the puzzles in Japanese. For this there is a reason.

In English, to a degree of which we are unconscious, shades of thought are expressed by emphasis and tone. We say, The letter has come; the letter has come; the letter has come; the letter has come; and each sentence has a shade of meaning of its own. So true is this that to a Japanese much of our speech seems a succession of ridges. Compared with English, Japanese is a level plain.

What in English is accomplished by emphasis and tone is in Japanese in great part accomplished by the use of the particles Ga and Wa. These are two very different methods; and the difficulty is to relate them, a difficulty greatly increased by the fact that both methods are used instinctively.

The question of Ga and Wa is essentially one of subject and predicate. When what may be called the centre of gravity in the thought of the sentence is in the subject, Ga is used; conversely Wa is used when the centre of gravity is in the predicate.

* This is the order of treatment in the monograph; but the usual order in naming the particles in Japanese is Wa and Ga, and for that reason it has been followed in the title.
In English, predicate follows subject directly: i.e. no grammatical particle is inserted showing the relation between them: Cæsar conquered Gaul. In Japanese it is otherwise. Constantly in Japanese subject and predicate are connected by Ga or separated by Wa. If the difference between them may be expressed in terms of punctuation, Ga is a hyphen and Wa a colon or dash.

**GA.**

Ga, like No, is a genitive or possessive particle, and as such serves three analogous purposes.*

1. To connect two nouns when the second is qualified, specialized, particularized, by the first. For example: Senjō ga Hara, The Moor of the Battlefield. Not the Moor of the Mountain or the River or the Barrier, nor moor without any qualification whatever; but a particular moor: Battlefield Moor: more literally, Battlefield’s Moor; Senjō *ga* Hara.†

2. To connect a noun with an adjective following when the adjective is qualified, specialized, particularized, by the noun. There are in Japanese many combinations corresponding to such combinations in English as, Slow of

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* Ga is also used to connect a clause with what follows, the clause supplying a qualification necessary to a complete statement of the facts in the case. It is then commonly rendered into English by Although or but. This use of the particle however occasions no difficulty and requires only a passing reference.

† Compare Hill of Sion, Sion Hill, Sion’s Hill.
speech, sure of foot, dull of hearing. For example: Sei ga takai, Tall of stature. Not tall without qualification, but a particular kind of tall: Stature tall; more literally, stature’s tall; sei ga takai.

In passing it should be said, as confirmatory of the genitive character of the particle, that when these combinations are used attributively Ga generally gives place to No, the other genitive particle: Ano hito wa sei ga takai, That man is tall. Sei no takai hito, A tall man.

3. To connect subject and predicate when the purpose of the sentence is to direct attention to the subject as that by which the predicate is qualified, specialized, particularized. This is the key to the use of Ga as distinguished from Wa.

The connection of subject and predicate in a genitive construction is foreign to English;* but it is one of the marked characteristics of Japanese. We say, Who came? A Japanese says, Dare ga kimashita ka? Whose came? We say, I came. A Japanese at times says, Watakushi ga kimashita, My came. To this however it should be added that to most Japanese the possessive force of Ga when connecting subject and predicate is very faint, and to many inappreciable.

Most sentences in which subject and predicate are connected by Ga may be divided into four classes.

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* Compare however the following use of the participle as a verbal noun: John’s signing the Magna Charta. Washington’s crossing the Delaware. His saying so.
CLASS I.

Subject and predicate are connected by Ga, when the subject is one of the interrogative pronouns. These are Dare, donata, dochira, dore (with its adjective form dono) and nani: Who? which? what? Doko, Where? (what part of?) when the subject, is also followed by Ga.

Obviously the centre of gravity in the thought of such sentences is in the subject.

Mr. Yamada—Tarō,* Dare ga sō itta ka? Who said so?
Mr. Yamada—Mr. Nakano. Dare ga iin ni narimashita ka? Who is on the committee?

* Few foreigners ever master the degrees of courtesy employed by Japanese in speaking to each other or of others; and properly to illustrate correct usage it would be necessary to construct a number of connected conversations with that purpose in mind. The examples given in the present monograph are independent sentences; but, with the exception of a few quotations, they are supposed to be taken from the ordinary conversation of an educated family in Tōkyō today. To which it may be added that this differs somewhat from that of old Japan.

Mr. and Mrs. Yamada are the father and mother; Tarō, the eldest son, a young man of twenty; Matsu, Kiku and Ito, daughters respectively, eighteen, fifteen and twelve; Jirō, the second son, a little boy of nine. Mr. and Mrs. Nakano and Mr. and Mrs. Okada are friends of the family. Gōto is the man servant and Fusa the maid; Kuma the dog and Tama the cat.

Mr. Yamada—Tarō. indicates that Mr. Yamada is speaking to Tarō. The quotations referred are taken from Kyū Dōwa, Shingaku Michi no Hanashi and Kōeki Mondō. These are given without names preceding them.

The general principles underlying courtesy in conversation are clear; but hard and fast rules governing every sentence can not be laid down. The same persons speaking to each other do not always use the same forms. Circumstances and feelings alter cases.

The short forms are less courteous than the long ones; but they are also
Mr. Nakano—Mrs. Yamada. Donata ga o ide nasaremasu ka? Who can go?

Mr. Nakano—Mr. Yamada. Dochira ga ato de shuppan ni narimashita ka? Which was printed last?

Mrs. Yamada—Mr. Yamada. Dochira ga yoroshū gozaimasu ka? Which is the better? Which do you prefer?

Tarō—Jirō. Dochira no inu ga hoeta no* ka? Which dog barked?

Jirō—Tarō. Dore ga ichiban hayai no ka? Which is the fastest?

Tarō—Gotō. Dono hako ga ichiban yokei ni hairu darō? Which box holds the most?

Mr. Yamada—Matsu. Nani ga kita no ka? What has come?

Ito—Matsu. Nani ga Tōkyō no meibutsu desu ka? What is the meibutsu of Tōkyō?

Matsu—Kiku. Doko ga sakete iru no ka? Where (what part of it) is it torn?

Kiku—Jirō. Doko ga itai no ka? Where does it hurt?

less formal, and Mr. Yamada may use them is speaking to Mrs. Yamada without discourtesy.

Three words occur in the examples to which reference may be advisable. Yo calls attention and adds positiveness. Ne is sometimes equivalent to Is n’t it so? or How about it? But often it merely softens the preceding statement or question, making it less assertive. Ne occurs much more frequently in the conversation of women and children than in that of men, who sometimes use na instead. E following ka at the end of a question makes the question less sharp.

A few examples are repeated with a different speaker in order to exhibit the form in which the second speaker would express himself. But of course it is not to be inferred that a different form would not be used by a different speaker, or by the same speaker speaking to a different person, simply because the example is not repeated.

*Hoeta no ka? is more familiar than hoeta no desu ka?
Ito—Mr. Yamada. O senaka no doko ga o itô gozaimasu ka? Where does your back pain you?

**CLASS II.**

Subject and predicate are connected by Ga, when the purpose of the sentence is to indicate, or (in questions) to determine, which one of a number is the subject by which in fact the predicate is qualified.

Mr. Yamada—Mrs. Yamada. Kore ga byōin da. *This* is the hospital. Indicating which one of a number of buildings.

Ito—Matsu. Are ga Asama Yama desu ka? Is *that* Asama Yama? Pointing to one of two or more peaks.

Mr. Nakano—Mr. Yamada et al. Watakushi ga mairimashō. *I* will go. Some one is to go and I will be the one.

Mr. Satō—Mr. Yamada. Watakushi ga Satō de gozaimasu, *I* am Mr. Satō. Indicating which one of a number of strangers who have sent in their cards bears that name.

Tarō—Mrs. Yamada. Watakushi ga mairimashō ka? Okkasan ga o ide nasaimasu ka? Shall *I* go? or will *you*? Which one of us?

Mrs. Nakano—Fusa. Matsu Ko San ga o uchi desu ka? Kiku Ko San ga o uchi desu ka? Is Miss *Matsu* at home? or Miss *Kiku*? Which one of them?

Fusa—Jirō. Watakushi ga o kutsu wo nugase te agemashō ka? Shall *I* take of your shoes for you? Or will you do it yourself? Which one of us?

Matsu—Ito. Kishū mikan ga Nihon ichi desu. The *Kishū* oranges are the best in Japan. Answering the question, Which are the best?

Ito—Jirō. Sore ga uchi no neko desu yo. *That* is our cat. That one.