

Between Grammars and Descriptive Traditions: *Polish Lexicon of Japanese Grammar Terms*

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Abstract

The Polish Lexicon of Japanese Grammar Terms was published in 2021. It constitutes an attempt at a systemic description of Japanese grammar, not emphasized by most of grammatical sources on the Japanese language. Due to limited size of the paper, being a new research paper, but at the same time introducing the methodology of the lexicon, the main concepts related to its compilation are presented on the example of the topic-prominence phenomenon in Japanese and its morphological marking.

Keywords: grammar, morphology, Japanese, topic-prominence

Streszczenie

Pomiędzy gramatykami a tradycjami opisowymi – *Polski leksykon terminów gramatycznych języka japońskiego*

Polski leksykon terminów gramatycznych języka japońskiego został opublikowany w roku 2021. Stanowi on próbę systemowego opisu gramatyki japońskiej, nieeksponowanego przez większość dotychczasowych źródeł na temat języka japońskiego. Ze względu na ograniczony rozmiar artykułu, stanowiącego nowy artykuł badawczy, a jednocześnie przedstawiającego metodologię leksykonu, koncepcje przyświecające jego kompilacji przedstawiono na przykładzie zjawiska prominenencji tropikalnej (tematycznej) w języku japońskim i jego morfologicznego znaczenia.

Słowa kluczowe: gramatyka, morfologia, język japoński, prominenecja tematyczna

1. Project outline and challenges

The Polish National Science Center (NCN) project OPUS 10, project number 2015/19/B/HS2/00147, entitled *Towards a Coherent Description of Japanese Grammar – The Polish Dictionary (Lexicon) of Japanese Grammar Terms*, was commenced in 2016 and finalized in 2021. The paper presents, in inevitably short and concise form, the outcome of the project on the background of its inter-cultural context, in terms of differentiated descriptions of varying and similar grammatical phenomena across various grammatical traditions. The phenomena recognized clearly in terms of general linguistics (topic-prominence described as an example below) may be (and actually are) rendered in various forms in actual grammars of different language codes. In this sense, grammars have citizenship, which may be an obstacle for the researchers and for the students of foreign languages.

The Japanese language, historically remaining under strong influence of Chinese (continental) culture and grammar description tradition, currently experiencing the dominance of English-centered grammatical theories, is usually the subject of descriptions of unsystemic and unparadigmatic nature. They are not compatible with the often mentioned agglutinative characteristic of the language and synthetic properties of its inflectional forms, as viewed in terms of morphological typology. The actual morphological features of Japanese, that is, its inflecting properties, are very often neglected in grammatical descriptions. The fact that Chinese language(s) and English language share many isolating and analytic features, which may be only fragmentarily and peripherally paralleled to the phenomena of Japanese, does not seem without influence on the status quo. Due to this fact, the challenge related to a coherent grammatical description of Japanese may be presented also in an inter-cultural context.

2. Existing grammatical descriptions

The most salient heritage of the classical Chinese in various languages and cultures belonging to the spectrum of its immediate influence is the ideographic writing: sinograms. They are borrowed elements in Japanese and Japanese is the only language (apart from Chinese languages) utilizing them currently. The sinograms are inherently uninflected and, for obvious reasons, lack genetic relation to the Japanese language. At the same time, they influence significantly the contents of Japanese language grammatical sources. More precisely, the “meanings” of sinograms, which are traditionally viewed by the grammarians of Japanese as present “behind the actual word forms”, seem to play much more important role in the description of Japanese than inflectional paradigms. As a consequence, the traditional

approaches (Japanese and foreign) to the grammar of the language may be summarized, in a simplified manner, as a consecutive series of “*nos*” in 2a below:

2a.

- i. No systemic functions of grammatical markers (viewed as rather ambiguous supplements to sinograms: a grapho-centered approach) are described.
- ii. No practical recognition of topic-prominence vs. subject-prominence in word forms of nominal elements (and other values and dimensions overtly marked in Japanese) is made.
- iii. As a result: a grammar of exceptions (often with no clear rules), emphasis on storytelling, not on systemic features.
- iv. As a (questionable) bonus: unintelligible (including bizarre) description concepts (relatively often based on no factual background).

These features of Japanese grammars are going to be presented in the following sections. Due to limited volume of this paper, special emphasis is going to be put on point 2 above and on description of topic-prominence in grammatical marking of nominal elements.

3. No nominal inflection: particles or post-positions?

Sinograms, in general terms, mark the lexical stems of nominal and verbal word forms. The grammatical markers are written with syllabograms, historically derived from sinograms, but carrying only phonetic information. While Japanese verbal elements are typically described as conjugated (with various degree of consequence in classifying their grammatical markers as synthetic or analytic), the nominal lexical stems are perceived as forming analytic noun phrases with grammatical markers differentiated as particles or post-positions. The 3a presents the instance of marking the nominal element *kore* with the marker of the topic *-wa*.

3a.

kore-wa

this.thing-TOP

是 (これ) は

Kore, contemporarily written in syllabary (as *これ*), less often with a single sinogram (是), is in fact perceived as identical with the sinogram, uninflected and equipped with analytic grammatical markers in its actual syntactic usage. The number of grammatical markers is

unclear and their actual functions are usually not described in terms of a finite paradigm, instead being analysed as separate and irregular “meanings”. Such meanings are separated for a grammatical element itself, also as entries in the dictionary sources, rather than for its regular form resulting from connection to a lexical element, the grammatical markers in fact being described instead of nouns. What could be described as a regular declensional form of case of a nominal element is hence viewed as an analytic construction with grammatical marker separate from lexical elements, not opposed to other nominal word forms in with marking of values other than topic.

Topic marking, with the topical element opposed to the rheme/comment element, is not unknown in the morphological typology of languages of the world. There are sources describing topic-prominent grammatical marking in Japanese as co-existing with subject-prominent marking (Li, Thompson 1976). The basic scheme of topic-prominent marking, often co-existing with prosodic marking of sentence stress (the latter in many languages not being recognized in terms of grammar) is as in 3b below (*cf.* Jabłoński 2022: 99).

3b.

as to the THEME/TOPIC,	it is RHEME/COMMENT.
old/given information	new/emphasized information

Actually, both the theme/topic and the rheme/comment in 3b may concurrently undergo the process of rhematization, in which one element is emphasized, the other element being consequently attenuated, with appropriate marking. Such phenomena may also occur in languages without topic-prominence, in which they are marked solely by sentence stress or other means, not traditionally considered grammatical.

3b, despite certain superficial similarities, is radically different from 3c, the subject-prominent marking, with the central element of the utterance (predication scheme) opposed to the predicate, to which also other elements, as objects, may connect, as in its schematic extension 3d, in which only a direct object is indicated, for simplicity. Also the elements of this scheme may undergo the process of topicalization of rhematization, this, however, not being marked with grammatical means in the subject-prominent languages – or being marked secondarily to the subject and other element marking.

3c.

SUBJECT	is/does PREDICATE.
protagonist/agent	activity/status/features

3d.

SUBJECT	is/does PREDICATE	(to an) OBJECT
protagonist/agent	activity/status/features	the affected of a (transitive) activity

The above schemes, while revealing certain proximity and similarity, apply to heterogeneous modes of predication. It is not an overstatement to conclude in this place that the differences between them constitute probably one of inter-cultural barriers most difficult to cross in the grammatical descriptions of languages varying in this respect.

4. No systemic values: storytelling?

As indicated in 2a.iii above, quite much of the discussion on Japanese grammar is devoted to (often: quite impressive) storytelling instead of systemic features. A good example may be the source by Tokieda (1941: 237), in which it is claimed that the lexical content of the alleged noun phrase with a particle or post-position is an idealized objective expression, while the particle or post-position is selected according to some subjective rules, probably unique to Japanese and related to expressing the emotion of a speaker. Tokieda uses a slightly different wording for this and provides different examples, but in a schematic perspective 4a may be given in this place for an example of a typical sentence with the nominal predicate taught at the basic level of Japanese language education for foreigners.

4a.

<i>Kore-wa</i>	<i>hon</i>	<i>de-s-u.</i>
this-TOP	book(0)	be(COP)-POL-NPST
是(これ) は本です。 ‘[This] is [a] book.’		

Based on explanation by Tokieda (ibid.), the objective element *kore* is subjectively perceived as topic, the element *hon* ‘book’ not being marked, probably to its purely objective function in the construction of the nominal predicate. Such explanation, in which the forms like *kore-wa* are usually described as topics, not as subjects, despite the fact that they may mark both topic only

and topic and subject simultaneously, may be effective at the initial level of study, until another marker *-ga*, combining the marking of subject and/or rheme, usually neutralized in English translation, as in 4b below, is introduced.

4b.

Kore-ga hon de-s-u.
this-NTOP book(0) be(COP)-POL-NPST
 是 (これ) が本です。 [**This**] is [a] book.'

To explain *-ga* as the marker of subject does not seem effective, since both *-wa* and *-ga* markers may mark the sentence subject and the difference between them is based on topic-prominence, not on subject-prominence. Additionally, it is not only the two markers which may mark the relevant subject/topic/rheme oppositions in contemporary Japanese.

5. No topic-prominence: double subject or omnipresent case drop?

A characteristic example of a workaround explanation in terms of subject-only marking is present in another source (Shibatani 2005: 202–203) in which an allegedly „incomplete” sentence of Japanese (5a) is opposed versus an allegedly complete one (5b). As can be seen, the *-ga* markers in both sentences (including the two instances in the latter) are, due to the implementation of a characteristic mental shortcut, originally glossed as NOM (and oversimplification with identifying it with sentence subject only, perhaps also based their initial or preceding position in the linear structure of the sentence), which results in the fact that the issues of topic/subject prominence are „lost in translation”. The actual translations provided by the source are supplemented by alternative (and more adequate) translations (in bold) below, with the topic/rheme marking taken into account.

5a.

Ashi-ga naga-i.
 leg-NTOP long-NPST
 (orig.: leg-NOM) ‘[TOPIC obvious] Legs are long.’
 ‘[**SOMEONE has**] **long legs.**’

5b.

Ken-ga *ashi-ga* *naga-i.*

Ken(PN)-NTOP leg-NTOP long-NPST

(orig.: Ken-NOM) (orig.: leg-NOM) ‘Ken [has] long legs.’

‘[It is] Ken [who has] long legs.’

In fact, 5a is a typical sentence of Japanese, with an obvious (and often omitted) topic and the element *ashi-ga* (lexical nominal stem with grammatical marker *-ga*) being its subject, the predicate being the predicative adjective *naga-i* ‘[be] long’. This is not the example of the nominal predicate construction, since Japanese predicative adjectives are verbal elements and may function as standalone predicates. In addition, 5b is not a typical sentence of Japanese, since the two NTOP elements, quite contrary to the traditional native Japanese approach to the notion of the so-called “double subject”, cannot serve as its concurrent subjects in general terms. The element *ashi-ga* is the subject of the predicate *naga-i*, similarly as in 5a. The other element glossed as NTOP, *Ken-ga*, in the rheme, which makes it possible to recognize the sentence 5b as marked, being the answer to the question to be rendered in its English version as: *Who has long legs?* rather than to its partial, unmarked counterpart: *Does Ken have long legs?*

Another, more typical (actually: most typical) sentence of Japanese could be 5c, with the TOP element marking the topic and the NTOP element being the subject of the predicate. Both in 5b and in 5c a compatibility with the initial scheme of topic-prominence marking given above in 3b may be observed. The first nominal element, *Ken*, may be marked as topic or rheme, not as the sentence subject (in other words, the sentence *Ken is long.* – with the element *Ken* as the subject of the predicate *naga-i*, is incorrect and absurd). The second nominal element, *ashi*, belongs to the rheme/comment part, not to the theme/topic part, not being an alternative subject, as the traditional Japanese approach could suggest, but the only possible subject of the predicate *naga-i*.

5c.

Ken-wa *ashi-ga* *naga-i.*

Ken(PN)-TOP leg-NTOP long-NPST ‘Ken [has] long legs.’

‘As to Ken, [he has] long legs.’

The incompatibilities in the explanation provided by sources similar in their content to the one by Shibatani may be solved in various ways. The morphological approach, with coherent description of all adnominal grammatical markers, mapped on actual grammatical oppositions of a language, within a finite paradigm of declension, is a tool of description widely used in general linguistics. This does not seem to be the way of approach adopted by most Japanese and non-Japanese sources up to date. The characteristic distrust towards the actual grammatical features of Japanese nominal elements may be observed also in other sources. One of recent, otherwise very insightful, sources on the history of Japanese grammar, neglects almost completely the adnominal grammatical markers, claiming that they are all subject to case drop with apparently no “core arguments” of a sentence being marked (Frellesvig 2010: 410–411). This elucidation is supplemented by an example of a language pun. A similar approach towards English, usually not proposed, could be to present famous examples of a “woodchuck sentence” or a “buffalo sentence” as solely representing the English grammatical rules. Also in this instance, the topic-prominent properties of the Japanese sentences and utterances seem to be completely neglected.

6. No name, no nominal predicate: nominal conjugation?

The traditional approach of the grammarians of Japanese towards the nominal phenomena is reflected by numerous doubts on the very definition of nominal elements of the language. It is especially visible in several definitions utilized by non-Japanese grammarians, explaining that noun is allegedly the element „plucked from a nuclear sentence” (Martin 1975: 29) or that it is „an uninflected word that occurs before the copula” (Bloch 1970: 56; Miller 1967: 335). Interestingly enough, such definitions are usually not applied to English nominal elements.

As probably most bizarre description of nominal phenomena in Japanese, the one provided by a Japanese researcher brought up in the American grammatical tradition may be quoted. In addition to some rather marginal comments on Japanese adnominal markers as “post-positions”, it states the following: “What further separates Japanese nouns from English nouns is that Japanese nouns are associated with a conjugational paradigm” (Tsujimura 1996: 126–127). It is illustrated by example sentences with the construction of the nominal predicate similar to 4a above, with different forms of the copula described as the alleged conjugational forms of nominal elements, which constitutes a serious violation of basic rules of general linguistics. Were the Japanese nouns conjugable, it is their forms, not the forms of copula, that would inflect throughout the examples. Needless to say, the phenomenon is almost not different at all from

the English construction of the nominal predicate – which the author of the source seems to ignore. While it could have probably been more effective for a student or a foreign researcher of Japanese grammar, the competence in which Tsujimura surely possesses, to get to know more of its features actually different from English, such as topic-prominence in grammatical marking, it seems to be more tempting to focus on illusionary differences instead.

7. Proposed approach

As shown in the preceding sections, the English/Chinese-centered isolating/analytic approach to the phenomena of Japanese grammar is not compatible with the agglutinative/synthetic morphological typology of the Japanese language. It is especially visible in the instance of topic-prominence in Japanese, the related oppositions of theme/topic and rheme/comment being marked with unambiguous grammatical markers, but at the same time being explained by workarounds or neglected in many grammatical sources on the language. It seems justified to argue that a certain grammatical barrier of inter-cultural nature cannot be overcome in this way.

There are tools from the area of general linguistics that may come in handy in this respect. The agglutination is a morphological phenomenon, a subtype of inflection. This view is neither shared nor even understood by the representatives of the isolating/analytic approaches. While it can be argued that the morphological approach does not explain certain phenomena, the tradition of such methodological attitude to the phenomena on the level of word forms of inflected elements has in practice been for long and for many reasons absent from the area of linguistic description of Japanese. Still, the morphological marking of certain phenomena of the language may be described with the actual reasons behind it, with semantics and syntax phenomena as its possible extensions. Grammatical dimensions and systemic rules should be described as primary and possible exceptions – as significant but secondary. Such approach is utilized in the paradigmatic description of Japanese nominal declension pattern in the lexicon (Jabłoński 2021a: 153 ff.) and in the other monograph compiled within the grant project (Jabłoński 2022: 54 ff.), with 15 morphological cases, including main and related cases as well as primary and secondary case forms (with allomorphic markers). The topic-prominence related phenomena are described additionally on the basis of systemic oppositions between the related cases (Jabłoński 2022: 98 ff.), as in Table 7a below. One grammatical marker marks only one case, but one declensional form may take more than one marker, which is compatible with the agglutinative properties of Japanese. The table contains the single-marker nominal word forms, the multi-marker forms to be described as their systemic extensions.

Table 7a. The proposed nominal case paradigm of Japanese (with proposed English, Latin and Japanese terms for the case forms, the main cases being marked by asterisks, the secondary case forms in brackets, the four cases primarily opposed as to topic-prominence marking greyed out). Source: the author.

EN	LA	JP	Case form(s)
*NOMinative	<i>nominativus</i>	主格 <i>shukaku</i>	<i>NO</i> (morphological zero)
THEmative	<i>propositivus</i>	題格 <i>daikaku</i>	<i>Nwa</i>
RHEmative	<i>nucleativus</i>	指格 <i>shikaku</i>	<i>Nga</i> (<i>Nbakari, Ndake, Nhodo, Nkoso, Ngurai, Nnomi, Nshika</i>)
DISTinctive	<i>distinctivus</i>	中格 <i>chūkaku</i>	<i>Nmo</i> (<i>Ndatte, Nsae, Nsura</i>)
ENUmerative	<i>comitativus</i>	連格 <i>renkaku</i>	<i>Nto</i>
EXEmplificative	<i>exemplificativus</i>	例格 <i>reikaku</i>	<i>Nya</i> (<i>Ndano, Nnado, Nnanka, Nnante, Nnari, Nyara</i>)
INTerrogative	<i>dubitativus</i>	疑格 <i>gikaku</i>	<i>Nka</i>
VOCative	<i>vocativus</i>	呼格 <i>kokaku</i>	<i>Nyo</i>
*GENitive	<i>genetivus</i>	属格 <i>zokkaku</i>	<i>Nno</i>
*ACCusative	<i>accusativus</i>	对格 <i>taikaku</i>	<i>N'o</i>
*INStrumental	<i>instrumentalis</i>	具格 <i>gukaku</i>	<i>Nde</i>
*LOCative	<i>locativus</i>	点格 <i>tenkaku</i>	<i>Nni</i> (<i>Ngoro, Nnite</i>)
TERminative	<i>terminativus</i>	限格 <i>genkaku</i>	<i>Nmade</i>
ALLative	<i>allativus</i>	寄格 <i>kikaku</i>	<i>N'e</i>
ABLative	<i>ablativus</i>	離格 <i>rikaku</i>	<i>Nkara</i> (<i>Nyori</i>)

8. Proposed solutions

That the grapho-centered approach to sinograms should be considered a dominating trend in Japanese linguistics is a fact. It may be viewed as a „natural” legacy of the cultural sphere of languages with borrowings from classical Chinese. The isolating approach, related to it, may further be described as resulting from a „natural” attitude in grammars of English (serving as the *lingua franca* of contemporary linguistics), with isolating properties prevailing over morphological ones. Agglutinative facts seem to be largely neglected in both approaches to Japanese language. At the same time, there seem to exist no obstacles to describe them according to purely systemic rules. The arguments supporting this hypothesis were presented in the sources

compiled and issued within the project, as mentioned in section 9 below. For various reasons, clear also probably to a reader without fluency in Japanese, the morphological approach as such cannot explain everything, being based on necessary and inevitable abstractions and simplifications. At the same time, it seems to be more justified to explain the *-wa* as an unambiguous marker of topic, within the topic-prominence marking frame, than to assume *a priori* that only the subject of a Japanese sentence should be marked with grammatical means, often reduced to default recognition of a “nominative case” glossed as NOM. Subject belongs to a different frame of marking than theme/rheme (topic/comment), largely incompatible with the language facts of contemporary Japanese.

In more precise terms, in the proposed approach, the Japanese unit *Nwa* (consisting of nominal lexical stem *N* + grammatical marker of topic *-wa*) is described as a synthetic form of the themative case (THE). Within the morphological case paradigm, it is opposed primarily to the nominative case *NO* (NOM, a main case marked with morphological zero) and to two other related cases of NOM, the rhemative case *Rga* (RHE) and the distinctive case *Rmo* (DIS) (cf. Jabłoński 2022: *ibid.* and Table 7a above). The latter two cases, RHE and DIS, reveal also alternative, secondary forms (with secondary markers, allomorphs, in brackets in Table 7a above), showing certain functional differentiation due to semantic and syntactic grounds. The relations between cases and their primary functions in topic-prominence marking were also shown by respective case terms proposed in the description, provided in Table 7a. According to the basic prerequisite of the paradigmatic approach (case values mark valid systemic oppositions between word forms) and to the recognition of topic-prominence as basic for Japanese, subject-prominence co-existing with it, the fundamental oppositions of case marking are related mainly to the topic-prominence and marking the values of theme (topic) and rheme (comment). Necessary remarks on the co-occurring subject-prominence marking were provided in descriptions of each case. Regardless of detailed solutions proposed, each marker, primary or secondary, marks only one case, according to the basic rule: *one marker = one case* (not necessarily valid in reverse). As a result, a complete set of markers related to the topic-prominence marking in a nominal paradigm of declension was presented, which is the primary concern of the morphological approach. Additionally, the markers and forms have been arranged in systemic order, with instances showing functional affinity grouped under respective cases, as their primary and secondary markers. Also the oppositions of secondary importance (as relation of the terminative case *Rmade*, its function primarily being described within the time and place marking, to the locative case *Rni*), and other regular oppositions between case forms to be described on the basis of their morphological marking, such as related to perceptivity – the

source of information and time and space marking) have been analysed within the proposed paradigm of declension.

Agglutination can and should be described as a sub-type of inflection. Accordingly, writing is secondary to language, especially if not related to the typological properties of the code. At the same time, it has to be taken into account that the description of Japanese grammar in the lexicon compiled within the project cannot and should not dispense tacitly with non-morphological approach to the grammar of the language. The isolating and analytic grammars still remain popular and the traditional terminology is used in Japan, especially in Japanese school grammar. A coherent proposition of contemporary approach to the grammatical description of Japanese should take into account various approaches to be further explained and verified systemically. This is attempted on the basic assumption of balancing the syllabic (grapho-centered, popular) approach against non-syllabic (phono-centered, adequate) description, implemented also in the description of Japanese verbal elements.

9. Conclusion

Topic-prominence is but one of the phenomena that are usually not described systemically in up to date and contemporary grammars of Japanese. Needless to say, it is probably not possible to provide a description of grammar based solely on systemic features. At the same time, it should remain clear that it is the systemic background of certain paradigmatic oppositions that should be explained in the first place in terms of linguistics viewed as a universal science, not as dealing with infinite lists of lexical oppositions between ambiguously defined “post positions” or “particles”. Both the morphological characteristics of (predominantly agglutinative) Japanese language and the regularity of morphological oppositions (manifested in the *lexical stem+grammatical marker* forms) seem to support this direction and methodology of approach to the actual language facts. For this reason, as a rule, all oppositions manifested in the regular structure of grammatical markers, also regarding the features not marked in other languages, with inevitably different grammatical features, have been taken into account above. As such, topic-prominence marking is an example of a regular opposition marked in a grammatical manner in contemporary Japanese.

The theoretical and practical steps mentioned above may contribute to significantly better recognition of actual properties of Japanese language as viewed in the context of inter-cultural dependencies between the basic notions and investigation traditions of heterogeneous linguistic research environments. Although genetically and geographically not related to many languages

contemporarily revealing the inflecting phenomena, it may hence be effectively described as based on certain homogeneous typological features regarding the approach to the patterns of inflection. This constitutes a kind of missing link in the linguistic reflection tradition of Japan, so far rather deprived of the opportunities of contact with inflecting traditions of description throughout its history. While it is but a pure hope that (or even a pure guess whether) the link is ever going to be practically utilized in actual descriptions and comparative research on Japanese grammar, the basic notions related to the morphological approach have hence been defined and made available for the public.¹

Glossing

0 – zero marking

COP – copula

NOM – nominative case

NPST – non-past

NTOP – non-topic/theme

PN – proper name

POL - polite

TOP – topic/theme

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¹ The tangible outcome of the project is the three volume lexicon, issued in its hard copy and in the electronic version in Polish (Jabłoński 2021a). As an additional result, two English monographs devoted to the method of coherent morphological approach to the nominal elements of Japanese were issued. The first contains the description of the nominals of the language in the Japanese and non-Japanese sources up to date (Jabłoński 2021b). The second monograph presents a proposition of the paradigmatic, morphological approach to the model of declension in Japanese (Jabłoński 2022). Both monographs in English are available in free access from the author's and lexicon's pages in social media and from the web service of the publishing company.

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