

Contextual Effects on Case in Japanese Copular Constructions

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Overview: This paper examines an unobserved type of case connectivity effects based on Japanese copular constructions. I observe the predicate nominal in (1) (i.e., *onigiri-o mi-ttu*) can show accusative case depending on its utterance context. The contextual variability is surprising because case assignment is generally considered to be a morpho-syntactic phenomenon.

- (1) kyoo-wa onigiri-**o** mi-ttu-dayo
 today-Top rice balls-Acc 3-CL-Cop
 ‘(lit.) Today is three rice balls.’

To reconcile contextual variability in case with morpho-syntactic case licensing, I propose different structures for (1) in different contexts. I argue the predicate (hence, XP2) in (1) is underlyingly a full clause where everything except *onigiri-o mi-ttu* is elided, and that the context indirectly affects whether the elided clause contains an accusative case assigner. Though there seems no linguistic antecedent to license such an ellipsis, I propose pro of the question type exists in the grammatical subject position (hence, XP1), and that it licenses ellipsis. This analysis supports the syntactic case assignment, requirement of linguistic antecedent, and idea that ellipsis offers a general solution to connectivity puzzles (e.g., Ross 1972, Schlenker 2003).

Observation: While (1) allows the accusative case in context (2), it doesn’t in context (3).

- (2) Ryo and Ai are father and daughter. Ryo always cooks lunch for Ai. It is 6am now. Ai has just com to kitchen, seeing Ryo preparing for making lunch. Ryo says (1) to Ai.
 (3) Ryo and Ai have long been examining when different kinds of food they put in a showcase goes bad. Ryo always checks which food is gone bad and how many they are. It is 10am. Ai has just come to the showcase. Looking at the condition of the food, Ryo says (1) to Ai.

I observe that XP2 can receive accusative case only when there is a contextually salient question which contains an accusative case-marked wh-item, and which the copular sentence answers (hence, *wh_{Acc}-question*). For example, while the wh_{Acc}-question in (4) exist in (2), it is difficult to envision a wh_{Acc}-question in (3); the most natural wh-question that is contextually salient in (3) would be (5), but its wh-item is not accusative case-marked. Thus, (5) is not a wh_{Acc}-question.

- (4) Ryoo-wa **nani-o** tukuru-no? (5) kyoo-wa **nani-ga** kusaru-no?
 R-Top what-Acc make-Q today-Top what-Nom go bad-Q
 ‘What will Ryo make?’ ‘What will go bad today?’

The remaining questions are: in (1) what assigns accusative case and how the presence of the wh_{Acc}-question in (4) affects the availability of the predicate accusative case.

Prior analyses: Prior analyses of connectivity effects do not directly explain the case puzzle in (1). One major analysis provides a semantic account for connectivity effects such as binding connectivity (e.g., Jacobson 1994). But case assignment is a morpho-syntactic phenomenon. So it does not seem to explain the case puzzle. The other major analysis solves the connectivity puzzles by proposing that some syntactic relation is obscured by the ellipsis in XP2 that takes a linguistic expression in XP1 as its antecedent. The ellipsis analysis can explain the case connectivity puzzle in the pseudo-cleft in (6) by proposing (7) as the structure of its XP2.

- (6) [_{XP1} Ryoo-ga e₁ tukuru-no]-wa [_{XP2/FocusP} onigiri-**o** mit-tu]₁-dayo
 R-Nom make-C-Top rice balls-Acc 3-CL-Cop
 ‘What Ryo will make is three rice balls.’

- (7) [_{XP2/FocusP} [onigiri-**o** mit-tu]₁ [~~Ryoo-ga~~ ~~t_i~~ ~~_____~~ **tukuru**]]

Following Sharvit (1999), Schlenker (2003), who pursues the ellipsis analysis, proposes the copula equates a question denoted by XP1 with a propositional answer denoted by XP2. Then,

given a Hamblin/Karttunen semantics of questions and Fox’s (2013) answer operator, (6) roughly means: maximally true answers to the question “what will Ryo make?” are “Ryo will make three rice balls.” In (7), *onigiri-o mit-tu* that carries new information undergoes focus movement to Spec FocusP, and Focus⁰ with an E feature licenses the ellipsis (e.g., Merchant 2004). Note that *tukutu* ‘make’ in (7) assigns accusative case to *onigiri-o mit-tu*.

In general, the clausal ellipsis as in (7) requires a linguistic antecedent (e.g., Hankamer and Sag 1976). In (6), XP1 involves the linguistic antecedent *Ryoo-ga e_i tukuru*. Thus, the ellipsis in XP2 is licensed under semantic identity with it (e.g., Merchant 2004). But Schlenker’s analysis does not directly solve the puzzle in (1); (1) lacks a sentential subject, so it seems to lack a linguistic antecedent to license ellipsis involving an accusative case assigner. This problem raises a question as to whether we should suspend the linguistic antecedent requirement. However, I propose a resolution, which accounts for the contextual variability in case at the same time.

Proposal: Following Schlenker, I assume the copula equates XP1 and XP2 as a question-answer pair. But to solve the “antecedent problem,” I propose (8) as the structure of (1) in context (2).

(8) *kyoo-wa* [XP1 **pro**] [XP2/FocusP [*onigiri-o* mi-ttu]_i [*Ryoo-ga* ~~t_i~~ *tukuru*]]-dayo
 today.-Top rice balls-Acc 3-CL R-Nom make-Cop
 ‘Today, [XP1 what Ryo will make] is [XP2/FocusP [three rice balls]_i Ryo will make t_i].’

kyoo-wa is a topic. XP1 is a covert free variable pronoun receiving its denotation from the wh_{Acc}-question in (4). XP2 is a proposition answering the question denoted by *pro*. In this hypothesis, the context determines the presence of a wh_{Acc}-question, which assigns its denotation to *pro* in XP1, and the *pro* licenses the ellipsis in XP2 that involves an accusative case assigner. This is how the “antecedent problem” is solved and the contextual variability in case is explained. Note that ellipsis in (8) is valid just like in (6)/(7); in both, the same expression elides under semantic identity with XP1 meaning *[[what will Ryo make?]]*. Admittedly, the ellipsis and movement in (8) are obligatory, which is not ideal. However, obligatory ellipsis and movement are attested cross-linguistically (e.g., Napoli 1983, Merchant 2004, Nakano 2008).

Presence of question-denoting pro: On the assumption that the copula is a two-place predicate, (8) requires an argument besides XP2. But it should not be *kyoo-wa*; one reason among others is that the unstressed *-wa* makes the phrase look like an aboutness topic (e.g., Miyagawa 2017). Then, since the lack of linguistic antecedent eliminates the possibility of XP1 being an elided phrase, it is reasonable to assume *pro* in XP1. Moreover, *pro* in (8) can be overtly realized as XP1 in (6). Also, *pro* can receive its denotation from a contextually salient wh-question in general in Japanese; *pro* in (9) denotes *[[who is this wrestler?]]* as is supported by the fact that the wh-question can replace *pro* (A nominal *kono resuraa-no hito* “person of this wrestler” can also replace *pro*, but it is assumed to be a concealed question *[[who is this wrestler?]]*).

(9) [Ryo and Ai came to see a wrestling match. Seeing a masked wrestler whose face is mostly hidden, Ai says, “I think I have seen the person of this wrestler.” Then, she turns to Ryo, wondering if he knows who the masked wrestler is. Seeing Ai’s inquisitive look, Ryo says:]
boku-wa pro/[CP kono resuraa-ga dare-da-ka] siranaiyo
 I-Top this wrestler-Nom who-Cop-Q don’t know
 ‘I don’t know *pro*/[who this wrestler is].’

Although an overt pronoun *sore* ‘it’ cannot replace *pro* in (8), this is not problematic; no overt pronoun can replace *pro* of a question type when there is no linguistic antecedent (e.g., *pro* in (9)), and an overt pronoun often cannot replace non-individual-denoting *pro* in Japanese.

References: Fox, D. (2013). Mention-some readings. Jacobson, P. (1994). Connectivity. Hankamer, S. and I. Sag. (1976). Anaphora. Merchant, J. (2004). Fragments. Miyagawa, S. (2017). Topicalization. Nakano, C. (2008). Negation. Napoli, J. (1983). Ellipsis. Ross, J. (1972). Act. Schlenker, P. (2003). Equations. Sharvit, Y. (1999). Connectivity.