

Focus Particles in Japanese Idioms and Their Interpretations

Teppei Otake and Ryohei Naya

1. Introduction

Idioms can be characterized as multi-word expressions with the property of “frozenness.” This property has the following three aspects: formal, syntactic and semantic frozenness (Ishida (2002, 2015)). Syntactic frozenness, for example, is the property of being resistant to grammatical operations such as relativization, passivization and modification by adjectives etc. (cf. Asuka (1982)). The applicability of a grammatical operation varies from idiom to idiom; some grammatical operations can be applied to a broad range of idioms and other ones are hardly applied. The latter group of grammatical operations contains focalization by focus particles. According to Asuka (1982), focalization can be applied to only a few idioms. For example, the idioms in (1) do not accept focalization by focus particles like *-wa* and *-mo*, as shown in (2).^{1, 2}

- (1) a. *asi-o arau*
 foot-ACC wash
 lit. ‘to wash one’s feet’
 ‘to wash one’s hands’
- b. *kao-ni doro-o nuru*
 face-DAT mud-ACC daub
 lit. ‘to daub mud on a face’
 ‘to bring disgrace on (someone)’
- c. *mesu-o ireru*
 scalpel-ACC insert
 lit. ‘to insert the scalpel’
 ‘to investigate and expose (something)’
- d. *mune-ga sawagu*
 breast-NOM get.agitated
 lit. ‘(one’s) breast gets agitated.’
 ‘(one’s) heart is agitated.’
- (2) a. # *Kare-wa asi-wa aratta ga, te-wa arawa*
 he-TOP foot- FOC washed but hand-TOP wash

¹ The following abbreviations are used in the glosses of examples in this paper: ACC = accusative, COP = copula, DAT = dative, FOC = focus, GEN = genitive, NEG = negative, NOM = nominative, PAST = past, POL = polite, TOP = topic.

² The mark ‘#’ indicates that the sentence or expression cannot be idiomatically interpreted.

nakatta.

NEG.PAST

‘He washed his feet, but not his hands.’

- b. # *Kare-wa kao-ni doro-mo nutta.*
 he-TOP face-DAT mud-also daubed
 ‘He also daubed mud on (one’s) face.’
- c. # *Kare-wa mesu-mo ireta.*
 he-TOP scalpel-also inserted
 ‘He also inserted the scalpel.’
- d. # *Mune-mo sawaida.*
 breast-also got.agitated
 ‘(One’s) breast also got agitated.’

(Asuka (1982:75, 76), underlining mine)

The expressions in (2) lack the idiomatic interpretations, which are observed in (1).

However, the expressions in (3) hold the idiomatic interpretations, even though they undergo focalization.

- (3) a. *Daresimo sonna koto-o iware tara,*
 anyone such thing-ACC be.said if
hara-mo tatu desyoo.
 belly-also stand COP.POL.will
 ‘Anyone will get angry if (s)he is told such a thing.’
 cf. *hara-ga tatu*
 belly-NOM stand
 ‘to get angry’
- b. *Taroo-wa Hanako-ni atama-sae agari-masen*
 Taro-TOP Hanako-DAT head-even rise-POL.NEG
ne.
 you.know
 ‘Taro can’t even say no to Hanako.’
 cf. *atama-ga agaranai*
 head-NOM rise.NEG
 ‘can’t say no (to someone)’
- c. *Taroo-wa atama-ga yoi bakari-de-naku,*
 Taro-TOP brain-NOM good only-COP-NEG

{*atama / kosi*}-mo *hikui*.

{head / waist}-also low

‘Taro is not only smart, but also gentle.’

cf. {*atama / kosi*}-ga *hikui*

{head / waist}-NOM low

‘being gentle and humble’

(Fujimaki (2009:33), with modifications)

The contrast between (2) and (3) raises the following question:

- (4) Why can focalization be applied to idioms in some cases?

This paper first aims to answer this question.

In addition, we focus on an interesting fact regarding the relationship between interpretations of idioms and focus particles. The fact can be seen in the following examples:

- (5) a. *Kare-wa* *gyanburu-kara* *asi-o* *aratta*.
 he-TOP gambling-from foot-ACC washed
 b. # *Kare-wa* *asi-o* *gyanburu-kara* *aratta*.
 he.TOP foot-ACC gambling-from washed
 ‘He washed his hands of gambling.’
- (6) a. *Kare-wa* *gyanburu-kara* *asi-sae* *aratta*.
 he-TOP gambling-from foot-even washed
 b. ? *Kare-wa* *asi-sae* *gyanburu-kara* *aratta*.
 he-TOP foot-even gambling-from washed
 ‘He even washed his hands of gambling.’
- (7) a. *Kare-wa* *gyanburu-kara* *asi-o* *arai-sae-sita*.
 he-TOP gambling-from foot-ACC wash-even-did
 b. *Kare-wa* *asi-o* *gyanburu-kara* *arai-sae-sita*.
 he-TOP foot-ACC gambling-from wash-even-did
 ‘He even washed his hands of gambling.’

The sentence in (5b), which is derived by scrambling *asi-o* in the object position in (5a), cannot be idiomatically interpreted. However, although the same operation is involved, the situation is different in (6), where the focus particle *-sae* is attached to *asi*. More specifically, the sentence in (6b) is more acceptable than the sentence in

(5b). Furthermore, when *-sae* is attached to the verb *arai* as in (7), the sentences are acceptable as an idiom, whether the scrambling is involved or not.

The examples in (5)-(7) indicate that the sentences with the focus particle *-sae* are more acceptable as idioms. This fact is interesting given that idiomatic interpretations are normally prevented by focus particles, as shown in (2). In (6b) and (7b), the focus particle *-sae* seems to ensure the idiomatic interpretation. This opposite situation raises the following question:

- (8) Why is it that focus particles ensure the idiomatic interpretations in some cases?

In this paper, we aim to answer the questions in (4) and (8).

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 will briefly introduce the elements that focus particles can focalize. Section 3 will address the first question and Section 4 the second one. Section 4 will conclude this paper.

2. Focus Particles and the Focalized Elements

This section touches upon the elements that can be focalized by focus particles. According to Numata (2009:37), focus particles focalize the elements that clearly express the contrasting relationship with other elements in context. A typical case is that a focus particle focalizes the element that it attaches to. For example:

- (9) <Taroo>-ga kite, <Ziroo>-mo kuru.
 Taro-NOM come Jiro-also come
 ‘Taro comes and Jiro also comes.’ (Numata (2009:37))

In the context of (9), *Taroo* and *Ziroo* are in a contrasting relationship and *Ziroo*, to which the focus particle *-mo* is attached, is focalized. In what follows, the elements in a contrasting relationship are marked by angle brackets.

Focus particles can also focalize larger elements. Let us observe the following example:

- (10) <Tya-bakari non-de>, <sigoto-o si> nai.
 tea-only drink-COP work-ACC do NEG
 ‘(He) only drinks tea and doesn’t work.’ (Numata (2009:68))

In this example, although the focus particle *bakari* is attached to *tya*, it is not the

focalized element. The element focalized here is the phrase *tya-bakari nomu*, which contrasts the phrase *sigoto-o si(nai)*.

The elements that are in a contrasting relationship are determined in the context. Thus, focalized elements can be ambiguous. One of such ambiguous examples is shown below:

- (11) *Hanako-wa byooiin-ni-mo itta.*
 Hanako-TOP hospital-to-also went
 ‘Hanako also went to the hospital.’ (Masuoka (1991:177))

In this example, the focus particle *-mo* is attached to *byooiin-ni*. This sentence is ambiguous in two ways according to the element focalized by *-mo*. To clarify this point, let us observe the following sentences:

- (12) a. *Hanako-wa <tosyokan-ni> itta ga, <byooiin-ni>-mo*
 Hanako-TOP library-to went but hospital-to-also
itta.
 went
 ‘Hanako went to the library but she also went to the hospital.’
 b. *Hanako-wa <igakusyo-o yonda> ga,*
 Hanako-TOP medical book-ACC read but
<byooiin-ni-mo itta>.
 hospital-to-also went
 ‘Hanako read a medical book but she also went to the hospital.’

In the context of (12a), the contrasting elements are the places where Hanako went, i.e. *tosyokan-ni* ‘to the library’ vs. *byooiin-ni* ‘to the hospital.’ In this case, *-mo* focalizes *byooiin-ni* and the sentence is interpreted as ‘Hanako went to the library. In addition, she went to the hospital.’ In the context of (12b), the contrasting relationship is observed in what Hanako did, i.e. *igakusyo-o yomu* ‘to read a medical book’ vs. *byooiin-ni iku* ‘to go to the hospital.’ In this case, *-mo* focalizes the predicate *byooiin-ni iku* and the sentence is interpreted as ‘Hanako read a medical book. In addition, she went to the hospital.’ In this way, what a focus particle focalizes depends on the context to a great extent.

In what follows, we will examine the two questions raised in Section 1 based on the elements that focus particles can focalize.

3. Focus Particles in Idioms and their Interpretations

This section considers the first question raised in Section 1:

- (13) Why can focalization be applied to idioms in some cases? (= (4))

To examine this question, let us first consider the following example, which cannot be interpreted as an idiom due to a focus particle:

- (14) # *Kare-wa asi-wa aratta ga, te-wa arawa*
 he-TOP foot-FOC washed but hand-TOP wash
nakatta.
 NEG.COP.PAST
 ‘He washed his feet, but not his hands.’
 (= (2a))

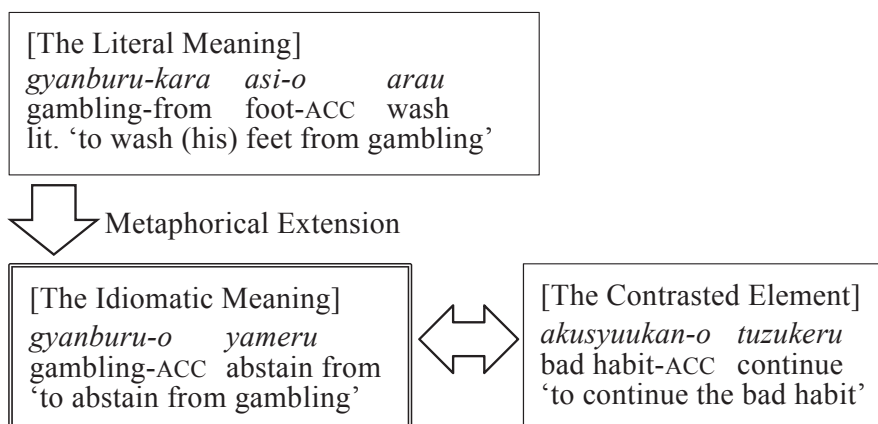
In this example, the focus particle *-wa* is attached to *asi*, which is in the contrasting relationship with *te* (*asi* vs. *te*). That is, *asi* in (14) is literally interpreted as a body part. As a result, the phrase *asi-wa aratta* cannot have a metaphorical meaning that is required for the idiomatic interpretation. Therefore, the phrase cannot be an idiom.

Next, let us consider the idioms that can include focus particles. For example, the following sentence contains the focus particle *-wa*, but it is easily interpreted as an idiom (*asi-o arau* ‘wash one’s hands (of)’):

- (15) *Kare-wa gyanburu-kara asi-wa aratta ga, sono*
 he-TOP gambling-from foot-FOC washed but that
akusyuukan-o tuzuketeiru.
 bad habit-ACC be.continuing
 ‘He washed his hands of gambling but he continues the bad habit.’

In this example, the focus particle is attached to *asi*. However, *asi* is not the focalized element in this context; the focalized element here should be contrasted with ‘continuing the bad habit’ but *asi* has nothing to do with it. What is contrasted with ‘continuing the bad habit’ is the meaning of the idiom *asi-o arau* ‘wash one’s hands,’ i.e. ‘refusing to have anything more to do (with gambling).’ The figure in (16) shows the relationship among the literal meaning, the idiomatic meaning and the contrasted element:

(16)



As the double line border in (16) indicates, the focus particle *-wa* in (15) focalized the idiomatic meaning, which is metaphorically extended from the literal meaning, because it is this meaning that can be contrasted with 'to continue the bad habit.' This is not strange given the nature of focus particles we observed in Section 2; they can focalize the elements that are contrasted with other elements in the contexts.

Based on the above discussion, we can answer the question in (13) as follows:

- (17) The focalization can be applied to idioms when focus particles focalize the idiomatic meanings that are extended from the literal meanings and that can be contrasted with some other elements.

That is, focus particles can appear in idioms if it is contextually ensured that the idiomatic interpretations as a whole is contrasted with some other elements. This means that if the contrasting relationship can be ensured by a given context, the examples with focus particles that have not been considered as idiomatic can be acceptable as idioms. For example, Asuka (1982) points out that the example in (18) cannot be accepted as an idiom.

- (18) # *Mune-mo sawaida.*
 breast-also got.agitated
 '(One's) heart also got agitated.' (= (2d))

However, we can find the following example:

- (19) <mune-mo sawagi> <kokoro-mo kuruu> bakari de-atta
 breast-also agitated heart-also go crazy a lot of was
 kareno seinenzidai
 his youth
 ‘his youth, when his heart often became agitated and went crazy’
 (Toson Fujimura *Shinsei*, brackets ours)

In this example, the idiomatic interpretation can be contrasted with the other element (i.e. ‘his heart got agitated’ vs. ‘his heart went crazy’). Thus, the idiomatic interpretation can be focalized by the focus particle *-mo*.

4. Idiomatic Interpretations Ensured by Focus Particles

This section considers the second question raised in Section 1:

- (20) Why is it that focus particles ensure the idiomatic interpretation in some cases? (= (8))

To answer this question, let us consider the following examples, which are repeated from (6):

- (21) a. *Kare-wa gyanburu-kara asi-sae aratta.*
 he-TOP gambling-from foot-even washed
 b. ? *Kare-wa asi-sae gyanburu-kara aratta.*
 he-TOP foot-even gambling-from washed
 ‘He even washed his hands of gambling.’
 (= (6))

In (21a), which can be assumed to be the base structure of (21b), the focus particle *-sae* is attached to *asi*, but it can focalize the idiomatic meaning of *asi-o arau* ‘wash one’s hands’ (Suppose that the man in question got rid of a bad habit, for example). We assume that this focalized meaning is maintained even after scrambling. That is, once the range of the elements focalized by a focus particle is defined, the focus particle keeps focalizing the same range. Therefore, the sentence in (21b), where *asi-sae* is moved from the object position, can also be interpreted idiomatically. In this sense, the focus particle ensures the idiomatic interpretation of the expression.

The same is true for the case of (22), which is repeated from (7).

- (22) a. *Kare-wa gyanburu-kara asi-o arai-sae-sita.*
 he-TOP gambling-from foot-ACC wash-even-did
- b. *Kare-wa asi-o gyanburu-kara arai-sae-sita.*
 he-TOP foot-ACC gambling-from wash-even-did
 ‘He even washed his hands of gambling.’
- (= (7))

The sentence in (22b) can be assumed to be derived from (22a). The focus particle *-sae* in (22a) focalizes the idiomatic meaning, as with the case of (21a). Once this focalized range is defined, it resists changing; as a result, the idiomatic interpretation can be observed in the sentence in (22b).

We can now answer the question in (20) as follows:

- (23) Focus particles can ensure the idiomatic interpretation in some cases because a range of the elements that they focalize resists changing.

That is, once a focus particle takes the idiomatic meanings as the range that it focalizes, the range resists changing.

5. Conclusion

We have addressed the two questions about focus particles and idiomatic interpretations: (i) why can focalization be applied to idioms in some cases? and (ii) why is it that focus particles ensure the idiomatic interpretation in some cases?

In this paper, we have shown that focus particles can appear in idioms when they focalize the idiomatic meanings that can be contrasted with some other elements. We have also shown that once such focalized meanings are determined, they are maintained as the focalized elements even after scrambling.

REFERENCES

- Asuka, Hiroomi (1982) “Nihongo Doosi Kan’yooku-no Kaisoosee (Hierarchy of Verbal Idioms in Japanese),” *Gengo* 11, 72-81.
- Fujimaki, Kazuma (2009) “Kan’yooku-ni Okeru Toritate (Focalization in Idioms),” *Scientific Approaches to Language* 8, 27-42.
- Ishida, Priscilla (2002) *Nihongo Kanyooku-ni kansuru Kenkyuu: Kan’yooku-no Tokusei to Imi-o Tyuusin-ni* (A Study of Japanese Idioms: With Special Reference to the Properties and Semantics of Idioms), doctoral dissertation, University of Tsukuba.
- Ishida, Priscilla (2015) *Nihongo-kara Mita Nihongo to Eego-no Kan’yooku* (Japanese and English Idioms as Seen from Japanese), Kaitakusya, Tokyo.

Masuoka, Takashi (1991) *Modality-no Bunpoo* (Grammar of Modality), Kurosio, Tokyo.

Numata, Yoshiko (2009) *Gendai Nihongo Toritatesi-no Kenkyuu* (A Study of Focus Particles in Modern Japanese), Hituzi, Tokyo.

(Teppei Otake)

Doctoral Program in Literature Linguistics

University of Tsukuba

teppeihtake@gmail.com

(Ryohei Naya)

Doctoral Program in Literature Linguistics

University of Tsukuba

naya.ryohei@gmail.com