

Simple Questions in Japanese Are Not That Simple^{*}

Shin Watanabe

1. Introduction

This article is about Japanese questions. It serves to complement a theory that I developed elsewhere (Watanabe (2002)). I review the previous research in section 2 as a starting point. Then section 3 makes observations that the previous work does not capture: *Yes-no* questions are ill-formed when nominative subjects occur (e.g., **Taro-ga moo kita ka*': Taro-NOM already came Q) (Miyagawa (1987:365-366)). It is also shown that such examples are remedied by replacing *wa* (topic marker) for *ga* (e.g., *Tom-wa moo kita ka*') or inserting *no* (nominalizing complementizer (Kuno (1973))) (e.g., *Taro-ga moo kita no ka*'). Section 4 proposes an account in terms of two known properties of Japanese. First, sentences with nominative subjects can represent two information structures: either the nominative subject or the whole proposition (=S) is a focus (Kuno (1973)). Second, focus placement is severely restricted in Japanese *yes-no* questions: The focus of *yes-no* question does not extend beyond the verb, *no*-clause, few others immediately preceding *ka* (Kuno (1980, 1982, 1983)). It also follows from the account that *yes-no* questions with *no* and those without it invite different ranges of answers.

2. Background

In Watanabe (2002), a range of facts about Japanese questions are shown to fall under the following generalizations:

- (1) (slightly revised: also see Miyagawa (1987), Takahashi & Nakayama (1995) and Ueyama (2002))

a. *Da* [neutral/non-polite, non-past copula] cannot occur in direct *yes-no* questions.

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- b. Questions ending with *desu*[↗] are marginal to varying degrees.
- c. Matrix *wh*-questions which speakers utter to elicit an answer are unacceptable, when *ka* occurs and is not immediately preceded by a polite form of a verb.

Let me provide a brief review of some key observations, starting with the declarative sentences in (2):

- (2) a. Kyoo-wa nichiyooobi desu.
 today-TOP Sunday BE_(polite)
 'Today is Sunday.'
- b. Kyoo-wa nichiyooobi da.
 today-TOP Sunday BE_(non-polite)
 'Today is Sunday.'

(2a-b) are identical except that *desu* (polite, non-past copula) appears in the former while *da* (neutral/non-polite, non-past copula) in the latter. This seemingly trivial difference brings about interesting contrasts in the corresponding *yes-no* and *wh*-questions.

First consider (2a-b)'s respective *yes-no* questions:

- (3) a. Kyoo-wa nichiyooobi desu ka[↗]
 today-TOP Sunday BE_(polite) Q
 'Is today Sunday?'
- b. ??Kyoo-wa nichiyooobi desu[↗]
 today-TOP Sunday BE_(polite)
 'Is today Sunday?'
- (4) a. *Kyoo-wa nichiyooobi da ka[↗]
 today-TOP Sunday BE_(non-polite) Q
 'Is today Sunday?'
- b. *Kyoo-wa nichiyooobi da[↗]
 today-TOP Sunday BE_(non-polite)
 'Is today Sunday?'

Idealized *yes-no* questions in Japanese are formed either by adding the sentence-final particle *ka*, which has a sharply rising pitch, to a corresponding declarative sentence. In case there is no question particle, the final syllable has a rising pitch.

Second consider (5) and (6), where *nichiyooobi* (Sunday) is replaced by *nan-yooobi* (what day):

- (5) a. Kyoo-wa nan-yoobi desu ka↗
 today-TOP what-day BE_(polite) Q
 ‘What day of the week is today?’
 b. ??Kyoo-wa nan-yoobi desu↗
 today-TOP what-day BE_(polite)
 ‘What day of the week is today?’
- (6) a. *Kyoo-wa nan-yoobi da ka↗
 today-TOP what-day BE_(non-polite) Q
 ‘What day of the week is today?’
 b. Kyoo-wa nan-yoobi da↗
 today-TOP what-day BE_(non-polite)
 ‘What day of the week is today?’

(5b) is marginal on a par with (3b). (6a) is in violation of (1c); *ka* is preceded by *da*, a neutral/non-polite copula (=verb). (5a) in contrast does not violate (1c), for *desu* (polite copula) comes before *ka*. Since *ka* is not present, (1c) applies to neither (5b) nor (6b).

Watanabe (2002) proposes to derive (1a) from the following:

Da expresses the speaker’s commitment to the truth of the propositional content of the sentence which it occurs in.

Should *da* appear in a *yes-no* question, the speaker necessarily contradicts himself by both strongly affirming and questioning its propositional content. (4a) is unacceptable due to this contradiction; *da* expresses the speaker’s commitment to the truth of the propositional content of this question (i.e., *Today is Sunday*) and *ka* immediately questions the same proposition. Informally (4a) is paraphrased: *I know that today is Sunday and I ask you whether today is Sunday*. This is obviously odd.

(1b) is mysterious in nature at this time. Sentences ending with *desu* fluctuate in acceptability with many variables such as discourse situations and the gender, the age, the education level, etc. of the speaker. For me (a male in the late 30s), (3b) and (5b) are rather strange in a null discourse. Yet, a couple of months ago, I found myself violating the constraint at a subway station. I asked a station employee: *Aoyama-gakuin-wa kono deguchi desu* (Aoyama-gakuin-TOP this exit BE_(polite); ‘For Aoyama-gakuin, is this the right exit?’) Also, it seems perfectly natural for a well-educated female in

her 30s to utter questions like (3b) and (5b).

According to Miyagawa (1987:363), (1c) follows because in *wh*-questions, *ka* must have an immediate, c-commanding *licenser* at LF. (6a) is excluded for the lack of such a licenser. In (5a), on the other hand, *desu* is raised at LF to the position where it can license *ka*. *Desu* has the “performative” function of marking the entire sentence for politeness. It is therefore reasonable to hypothesize that this copula has scope over its sentence at LF.

3. New Data and A New Puzzle: *Ga, Wa, No*-clauses and Patterns of Answers

In Japanese, declarative sentences are often followed by *no desu*, *no da* or *no* (= *it is that...*). The declarative sentence in (7a), for example, appears with *no desu* in (7b), *no da* in (7c) and *no* in (7d):¹

- (7) a. John-ga ano hon-o katta.
 -NOM that book-ACC bought
 ‘John bought that book.’
 b. John-ga ano hon-o katta no desu.
 -NOM that book-ACC bought C BE_(polite)
 ‘It is_(polite) that John bought that book.’
 c. John-ga ano hon-o katta no da.
 -NOM that book -ACC bought C BE_(non-polite)
 ‘It is_(non-polite) that John bought that book.’
 d. John-ga ano hon-o katta no.
 -NOM that book-ACC bought C
 ‘(It is) that John bought that book.’

These can be turned into *yes-no* questions by adding either *ka* or simply *?*:

- (8) a. *John-ga ano hon-o katta ka?
 -NOM that book-ACC bought Q
 ‘Did John buy that book?’

[N.B. To the best of my knowledge, Shigeru Miyagawa (1987:365) is the first to observe this fact; his example is *Hanako-ga kuru ka?* (Hanako-NOM come Q; ‘Will Hanako come?’)]

¹ The *no*({*desu*, *da*}) pattern is known to have complex pragmatic/semantic properties. I refer the reader to Kuno (1973; Chapter 19) for details. I assume *no* is a complementizer henceforward.

- b. *John-ga ano hon-o katta↗
 -NOM that book-ACC bought
 ‘Did John buy that book?’
- (9) a. John-ga ano hon-o katta no desu ka↗
 -NOM that book-ACC bought C BE_(polite) Q
 ‘Is_(polite) it that John bought that book?’
 b. ??John-ga ano hon-o katta no desu↗
 -NOM that book-ACC bought C BE_(polite)
 ‘Is_(polite) it that John bought that book?’
- (10) a. *John-ga ano hon-o katta no da ka↗
 -NOM that book-ACC bought C BE_(non-polite) Q
 ‘Is_(non-polite) it that John bought that book?’
 b. *John-ga ano hon-o katta no da↗
 -NOM that book-ACC bought C BE_(non-polite)
 ‘Is_(non-polite) it that John bought that book?’
- (11) a. John-ga ano hon-o katta no ka↗
 -NOM that book-ACC bought C Q
 ‘(Is it) that John bought that book?’
 b. John-ga ano hon-o katta no↗
 -NOM that book-ACC bought C
 ‘(Is it) that John bought that book?’

What we observe here is mostly predictable. (9b) is marginal, because it is a question ending with *desu* (i.e., by (1b)). (10a-b) are ruled out, because they are *yes-no* questions with *da* (i.e., by (1a)).

The unacceptability of (8a-b) is problematic. In the absence of *da* and *desu*, (1a-b) are not applicable. (1c), a condition on *wh*-questions, does not apply either. It is instructive to observe that replacing *wa* (topic particle) for *ga* (nominative case particle) significantly improves the examples in (8), as in (12):

- (12) a. John-wa (?ano hon-o) katta ka↗
 -TOP (?that book-ACC) bought Q
 ‘Speaking of John, did he buy (?that book)?’
 b. John-wa (?ano hon-o) katta↗
 -TOP (?that book-ACC) bought
 ‘Speaking of John, did he buy (?that book)?’

This improvement indicates that the nominative NP in (8a-b) has a crucial bearing on their unacceptability.

Furthermore, observe that *yes-no* questions invite different ranges of answers depending on whether *no* (*desu*) (*ka*) occurs. Thus, (12a-b), on one hand, can elicit (13a-b), but not (14a-b); (9a) and (11a-b), on the other, can elicit (14a-b), not (13a-b):

- (13) a. Un, katta yo.
 yes bought I-tell-you
 ‘Yes, (he) bought (it).’
 b. Iya, kaw-ana-katta yo.
 no buy-NEG-PAST I-tell-you
 ‘No, (he) didn’t buy it.’
- (14) a. Un, John da yo.
 Yes BE_(non-polite) I-tell-you
 ‘Yes, it’s John (who bought it).’
 b. Iya, Taro da yo.
 No BE_(non-polite) I-tell-you
 ‘No, it’s Taro (who bought it).’

To summarize, the following observations remain unaccounted for in this section:

- (I) (8a-b) are unacceptable.
 (II) (8a-b) improve if *ga* is replaced by *wa*, as in (12a-b).
 (III) *Yes-no* questions without *no* (*{ka, desu ka}*) (e.g., (12a-b)) and those with it (e.g., (9a) and (11a-b)) invite different ranges of responses. This fact is summarized in table 1.

	<i>John-wa ano hon o katta {ka, desu ka}</i> (=(12a-b))	<i>John-ga ano hon-o katta no</i> (<i>{ka, desu ka}</i>) (=(9a) and (11a-b))
<i>Un, katta yo.</i> (=(13a))	√	*/??
<i>Iya, kaw-ana-katta yo.</i> (=(13b))	√	*/??
<i>Un, John da yo.</i> (=(14a))	*	√
<i>Iya, Taro da yo.</i> (=(14b))	*	√

Table 1. Answers elicited by (12a-b) and (9a, 11a-b)

4. An Account

4.1. Two Generalizations

In this section, I offer an explanation of (I)-(III) in terms of (15) and (16). These generalizations are simplified based on their originals in Watanabe (1995):

(15) Sentences with nominative subjects potentially represent two information structures:

(i) the subject is a focus, or

(ii) the whole statement (=S) is a focus.

In *yes-no* questions, however, nominative subjects are likely foci for pragmatic reasons. (Cf. Kuno (1973), Takami (1997))

(16) *The focus of yes-no question* cannot extend leftward beyond verbs, adjectives, predicate nominals, or *no*-clauses either immediately preceding (*desu*) *ka* and/or at the sentence final position.

(Cf. Kuno (1980, 1982, 1983), Takubo (1985), Kuwabara (2001))

In (15), the tendency is captured for nominative subjects to be a focus of *yes-no* questions. Compare (17) with (18):

(17) Taro-wa Hanako-to Kyoto-e itta no[?] (Takami(2000):8)
 -TOP -with -to went C

‘Is it that Taro went to Kyoto with Hanako?’

(18) Taro-ga Hanako-to Kyoto-e itta no[?]
 -NOM -with -to went C

‘Is it that Taro went to Kyoto with Hanako?’

[N.B. Foci are given in boxes.]

Taro-wa (*Taro*-TOP) occurs in (17), while *Taro-ga* (*Taro*-NOM) in (18). If (17) is read without emphatic stress, *Kyoto-e* is normally interpreted as a focus. (Generally, the focus immediately precedes the verb in Japanese (Kuno (1978: 60))). In the most natural reading in (18), however, *Taro-ga* is rendered as a focus.

As stated in (15), sentences with nominative subjects have the potential to represent two distinct information structures. Either the *NP-ga* (e.g., (19B)) or the whole statement is the focus (e.g., (20B)):

(19) A: Dare-ga Hanako-to Kyoto-e itta no[?]
 who-NOM -with -to went C

‘Who went to Kyoto with Hanako?’

B: Taro-ga Hanako-to Kyoto-e itta n da yo.
 -NOM -with -to went C BE I-tell-you

'Taro went to Kyoto with Hanako.'

(20) A: Nani-ga atta no[?]
 what-NOM happened C

'What happened?'

B: Taro-ga Hanako-to Kyoto-e itta n da yo.
 -NOM -with -to went C BE I-tell-you

'Taro went to Kyoto with Hanako.'

Why do *yes-no* questions with an NP-*ga* disfavor the whole-statement focus? A likely cause is pragmatic. The whole-statement focus may presuppose more elaborate discourse situations, which are not met in a null discourse context when sentences are presented for judgments. In the potentially ambiguous *yes-no* question in (18), say, *Taro-ga*'s focus reading is straightforward and easily available. Informally, the pragmatic presupposition is that the speaker believes that someone (probably, Taro) went to Kyoto with Hanako and thinks the hearer knows who it is. The whole-statement focus in (18) is noticeably harder to obtain. Here the content is more complex: The speaker reasons that something in the discourse has been caused because Taro went to Kyoto with Hanako and confirms his thought with the hearer. Notice that this presupposes a more specific pragmatic context. This, I believe, tends to discourage the whole-statement focus reading of this sentence. This explanation can be confirmed by comparing (18) with examples whose pragmatic requirements are more naturally satisfied in a real world discourse, such as (21):

(21) Okusan-ga uwaki-demo shita no[?]
 wife-NOM affair -or-something did C

'Did your wife have an affair?'

It is easy to imagine that the speaker notices the hearer's low mood and (jokingly) attributes it to his wife's affair. But this is rather a special situation; the pragmatic awkwardness of the whole-statement focus in (18) is more typical.

The generalization in (16) encapsulates contrasts such as the following:

(22) a. Odotta ka[?]
 danced Q

‘(Did you) dance?’

- b. *Hanako-to odotta ka[?]
 -with danced Q

‘(Did you) dance with Hanako?’

- c. [_{CP} e_I Hanako-to odotta no] ka[?]
 -with danced C Q

‘(Is it) that (you) danced with Hanako?’

(22a) is fine, since *odotta* (‘danced’) directly precedes *ka*. By contrast, (22b) is ruled out, since *Hanako-to* (‘Hanako-with’) is not left-adjacent to *ka*. The focus reading of *Hanako-to* is fine in (22c). The PP occurs in the *no*-clause which directly precedes *ka*.

Watanabe (1995) attributes (16) partially to the assumption that *ka* (or its covert counterpart: ϕ) base-generates in the position adjoined to the left-adjacent verb or *no*-clause, as in (23):

(23) a. [_v [_v itta] ka/ ϕ]

b. [_{CP} [_{CP} ... no]ka/ ϕ]

(Cf. Takubo(1985), Kuwabara(2001))

I further suggest that the focus domain of *ka* is the domain *seg(ment)-commanded* (Watanabe (1991)) by *ka/ ϕ* , taking this to be a restriction on *association with focus*.² In (23a), *itta* is *seg-commanded* by *ka/ ϕ* . In (23b), [_{CP}...*no*] and an entity inside it are *seg-commanded* by *ka/ ϕ* .

4.2. An Account for (I)

First let us consider (I). (8a-b) are unacceptable, or more generally, *yes-no* questions without *no* are unacceptable when nominative subjects appear. (8a-b) are repeated below:

(8) a. *John-ga ano hon-o katta ka[?]
 -NOM that book-ACC bought Q

‘Did John buy that book?’

b. *John-ga ano hon-o katta[?]
 -NOM that book-ACC bought

‘Did John buy that book?’

Note that (15) and (16) irresolvably crash here. By (15), either *John-ga* or

² The definition of *seg(ment)-command* is given in (i):

(i) *Seg(ment)-command*: α *seg(ment)-commands* β iff α does not dominate β and every segment that dominates α dominates β .

the entire statement (=S) is a focus, as paraphrased in (24):

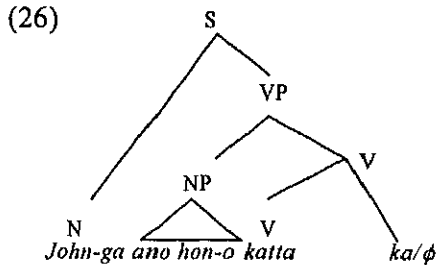
- (24) a. Is it JOHN who bought that book? [subject focus]
 b. Is it because JOHN BOUGHT THAT BOOK?
 [sentence focus]

These readings, however, offend (16); The condition demands that *katta* ('bought') be a focus, as in (25):

- (25) Did John BUY or NOT BUY that book? [verb focus]

This conflict between (15) and (16) explains the unacceptability of (8a-b).

To put this account in structural terms, I assume (8a-b) have the following syntactic representation:



Ka or its covert form (ϕ) is adjoined to *katta*. Either *John-ga* or the whole-statement (=S) must be rendered as a focus. In *yes-no* questions, furthermore, one of these potential foci must be seg-commanded by *ka / phi* for 'association with focus'. Obviously this is not met in (26). Hence (8a-b) are ruled out.

4.3. An Account for (II)

Second let us turn to (II). (8a-b) would improve if *ga* is replaced by *wa*, as in (12a-b).

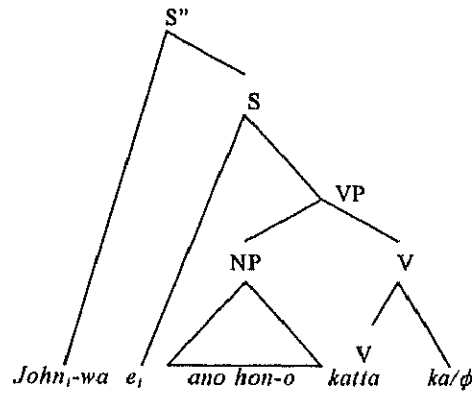
- (12) a. John-wa (?ano hon-o) katta ka[?]
 -TOP (?that book-ACC) bought Q
 'Speaking of John, did he buy (?that book)?'
 b. John-wa (?ano hon-o) katta[?]
 -TOP (?that book-ACC) bought
 'Speaking of John, did he buy (?that book)?'

This fact follows, because (15) and (16) no longer crash. An NP-*ga* not present, (15) does not apply. That is, (12a-b) do not represent a subject or S focus reading. Hence *katta*, as in (25), is free to be a focus in conformity to (16):

- (25) Did John BUY or NOT BUY that book? [verb focus]

(12a-b) have the following structure:

(27)



John-wa is directly dominated by S'' (Kuno and Takami (1993)) and coindexed with the empty category (=e) in the subject position. (27) represents a traditional *topic-comment* form; *John-wa* is the topic (i.e., old and salient information) and the rest (=S) is its predication. In sentences with a topic *wa* phrase, any word or phrase in the S have the potential to be a focus, allowing *katta* to be a focus in (27). The *association-with-focus* relation is established between *ka/phi* and *katta*, since *the former* seg-commands *the latter*. So *katta*'s focus reading is rightly captured in (27).

4.4. An Account for (III)

Finally let us turn to (III). Recall that (12a-b) can elicit (13) but not (14) whereas (9a, 11a-b) can elicit (14) but not (13). (12a-b) are repeated as (12):

- (12) John-wa (?ano hon-o) katta (ka)[?]
 -TOP (?that book-ACC) bought Q
 'Speaking of John, did he buy (?that book)?'

As discussed earlier, *katta* is necessarily a focus in this question:

- (25) Did John BUY or NOT BUY that book? [verb focus]

Hence (13a-b) are natural, cooperative responses:

- (13) a. Un, katta yo.
 yes bought I-tell-you
 'Yes, (he) bought (it).'
- b. Iya, kaw-ana-katta yo.
 no buy-NEG-PAST I-tell-you
 'No, (he) didn't buy it.'

(9a, 11a-b) are repeated as (28):

- (28) a. ((9a) and (11a) are collapsed together.)
 [CP John-ga ano hon-o katta no] (desu) ka[?]

- NOM that book-ACC bought C BE_(polite) Q
 ‘(Is_(polite) it) that John bought that book?’
 b. (=11b) [_{CP} John-ga ano hon-o katta no] ʔ
 -NOM that book-ACC bought C
 ‘(Is it)that John bought that book?’

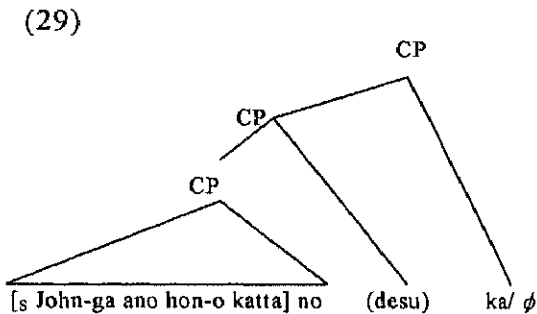
By (15), the questions are two-way ambiguous in terms of information structure:

- (24) a. Is it JOHN who bought that book? [subject focus]
 b. Is it because JOHN BOUGHT THAT BOOK? [sentence focus]
 [N.B. (24b) is hard to obtain in a null discourse.]

Both are fine with respect to (16); the foci *John* and [_S *John-ga ano hon-o katta*] occur within the *no*-clause immediately preceding (*desu*) *ka* in (28a) and at the sentence final position in (28b). (24a), where *John* is a focus, is their dominant reading. (24b) is discouraged in a null discourse where the examples are likely presented for judgments.³ (24a) being a primary reading, the observation is readily understood that (14a-b) are preferred responses for these questions.

- (14) a. Un, John da yo.
 Yes BE_(non-polite) I-tell-you
 ‘Yes, it’s John (who bought it.)’
 b. Iya, Taro da yo.
 No BE_(non-polite) I-tell-you
 ‘No, it’s Taro (who bought it.)’

(29) shows (28a-b)’s syntactic structure:



Desu is adjoined to the *no*-clause. *Ka/φ* is adjoined to this amalgam or the *no*-clause. *Ka/φ* seg-commands the *no*-clause and everything therein.

³ Required is the following situation: (i) The speaker makes a certain observation in the immediate discourse, and (ii) guesses that the observation is explained by assuming that *John bought that book*, and (iii) confirms this reasoning with the respondent.

Either *John* or the S can be a focus in principle, though the latter is difficult for pragmatic reasons.

5. Concluding Remarks

I started with a review of Watanabe (2002), its data and generalizations about Japanese questions. The following facts called for further elaboration:

- (30) a. *Yes-no* questions without *no* are ill-formed when nominative subjects appear.
 b. Such questions would improve when *ga* is replaced by *wa*.
 c. *Yes-no* questions with *no* and those without it invite different ranges of answers.

An account has been put forth in terms of:

- (31) a. In sentences with nominative subjects, either the subject or the whole statement (=S) is a focus.
 b. In *yes-no* questions, the focus must be seg(ment)-commanded by *ka* or its covert form.

There is nothing new about the first constraint. It basically restates Kuno's (1973) *exhaustive listing* and *neutral description*. The second one works in conjunction with the proposed phrase-structure where *ka/ϕ* is adjoined to a verb or a *no*-clause. This may look odd under the popular view where *ka/ϕ* is regarded as a complementizer. I, however, see no problem. If Fukui (1986) is correct, Japanese does not have functional categories, including C's, to begin with.

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The English Department
Chikuro Hiroike School of Graduate Studies
Reitaku University
e-mail: swatan03@reitaku-u.ac.jp