

## On the *GA/WO* Alternation in Japanese Passives\*

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### 1. Introduction

In this paper I will focus on the following examples and examine their properties.

- (1) a. *Watashi-no roba-ga koros-are-ta.*  
 I-Gen donkey-Nom kill-Pass-Past  
 'My donkey was killed.'
- b. *Watashi-no roba-wo koros-are-ta.*  
 I-Gen donkey-Acc kill-Pass-Past

(Teramura (1982:244))

The example in (1a) is a Japanese passive sentence, where the passive suffix *-(r)are* is used. As the example in (1b) shows, the accusative case particle *wo* can be used instead of the nominative case particle *ga*, although the same passive verbs are used in the above sentences. This observation leads to the following two questions: (i) why can the accusative case particle be used in (1b) and (ii) are there any semantic differences between them?

Section 2 will be devoted to a general discussion of passive constructions in Japanese and it will be argued that they could be classified into three types: the direct passive, the indirect passive and the possessive passive. In section 3 I will examine some basic properties of the accusative case particle *wo* in Japanese, summarizing that the higher the transitivity is, the more likely it is that the accusative particle will be used. Then, I will show that the sentence in (1b) has several different properties from those of the three types.

The goal of this paper is to determine under what circumstances the accusative case particle is allowed to be present in the passive construction like the example in (1b).

### 2. Basic Properties of Japanese Passives

I will consider some structural and semantic properties of Japanese passives in this section in brief. This section consists of two subsections. Section 2.1 will deal with the direct passive and the indirect passive and section 2.2 will pay attention to the possessive passive.

#### 2.1 *Direct Passive and Indirect Passive*

In past studies of the Japanese passive (Shibatani 1985, Wierzbicka 1988, Tonoike 1991, Kortandt 1992, Washio 1995, Yoshikawa 1995, and Oshima 2002), it has been assumed that there are two or more types of passives in Japanese. The argument patterns of each passive type are sketched out below, with corresponding active sentences (if any).

- (2) a. Kabin-ga John-ni kowas-are-ta (direct passive)  
       vase-Nom John-Dat break-Pass-Past  
       b. John-ga kabin-wo kowashi-ta (active)  
       John-Nom vase-Acc break-Past

The example in (2a) is a direct passive sentence, which has the corresponding active sentence in (2b). As the examples show, the direct passive has the basic characteristics of a crosslinguistically canonical passive, involving promotion of an object of the stem verb to the subject and demotion of the subject of the stem verb into a peripheral function marked by an oblique case, *ni*. In the event described in (2a) both participants (*kabin* and *John*) are directly involved, and the directly affected argument becomes nominative.

The example in (3) is called indirect passive.

- (3) Hahaoya-ga kodomo-ni nak-are-ta (indirect passive)  
       Mother-Nom child-Dat cry-Pass-Past

(Yoshikawa (1995:123))

The example has no corresponding active sentence and describes the situation where the mother was affected by the event of crying. The indirect passive is characterized by the following properties: (i) it does not have the corresponding active sentence at all, (ii) it usually implicates an adversative effect caused by the event on the referent of the subject, (iii) the nominative NP is not directly involved in the event described by the stem verb, and (iv) the stem verb can be intransitive or transitive.<sup>1</sup>

- (4) Watashi-wa suri-ni saifu-wo sur-are-ta  
       I-Top pickpocket-Dat wallet-Acc steal-Pass-Past

(Yoshikawa (1995:124))

The example in (4) is an indirect passive sentence where the stem verb is transitive. This type of passives is sometimes referred to as the possessive passive and will be discussed in the next subsection.

According to Muraki (1992) and Washio (1995), the *zibun*-test shows a structural difference between the direct and indirect passives.<sup>2</sup> Consider the

following examples.

- (5) a. Hanako<sub>i</sub>-wa Taro<sub>j</sub>-ni zibun<sub>i/\*j</sub>-no heya-de nagur-are-ta  
 Hanako-Top Taro-Dat self-Gen Room-in hit-Pass-Past  
 b. Hanako<sub>i</sub>-wa Taro<sub>j</sub>-ni zibun<sub>i/j</sub>-no heya-de nak-are-ta  
 Hanako-Top Taro-Dat self-Gen room-in cry-Pass-Past

(Muraki (1991:19))

The example in (5a) is a direct passive sentence. *Hanako* can be the antecedent of *zibun* but *Taro* cannot, which shows that *ni*-phrase in the direct passive is not a structural subject. The example in (5b), on the other hand, is an indirect passive sentence. Either of the NPs (*Hanako* and *Taro*) can be the antecedent of *zibun*. The *zibun*-test shows that the *ni*-phrase of the indirect passive is a structural subject (alongside with the topic phrase), in contrast to the *ni*-phrase in the direct passive.

A further difference might be clear when Japanese passive constructions are compared with English passives. Direct passive constructions in Japanese can be translated into English passive constructions, as the example in (6a) shows, which is a translation of the Japanese sentence in (2a). Indirect passive constructions, on the other hand, could not be put into English passive constructions. Instead, they may correspond to the constructions *have* + NP + {infinitive verb / past participle / present participle}, according to Yoshikawa (1995). For example, the sentence in (3) could be put into the English sentence in (6b).

- (6) a. The vase was broken by John.  
 b. The mother had her child cry on her. (Yoshikawa (1995:124))

In (6b) the semantic role of experiencer is assigned to the subject. It is reasonable to assume that the same semantic role is assigned to the subject of the indirect passive sentence in (3).

In summary, the following are basic properties of the indirect passive, though they are not exhausted.

- (7) a. The indirect passive does not have the corresponding active sentence.  
 b. The nominative NP is not directly involved in the event described by the stem verb and its semantic role is an experiencer.  
 c. *Zibun* can be bound by the *ni*-marked NP in the indirect passive,

creating an ambiguity of the sort observed, though no such ambiguity is observed in the direct passive.

## 2.2 Possessive Passive

In this subsection I will discuss some properties of the possessive passive. First, the *zibun*-test shows that the possessive passive is a subpart of the indirect passive.

(8) a. John<sub>i</sub>-ga Mary<sub>j</sub>-ni zibun<sub>i/j</sub>-no heya-de kodomo-wo  
 John-Nom Mary-Dat self-Gen room-in child-Acc  
 nagur-are-ta  
 hit-Pass-Past

b. John<sub>i</sub>-ga Mary<sub>j</sub>-ni zibun<sub>i/j</sub>-no heya-de nagur-are-ta  
 John-Nom Mary-Dat self-Gen room-in hit-Pass-Past

(Washio (1995:57))

The example in (8a) is a possessive passive sentence and it allows two readings for *zibun*. The example in (8b) is a direct passive sentence and it allows only one reading for *zibun*.

Second, the semantic role of experiencer is assigned to the subject of the possessive passive. Then, the Japanese example in (9a) is translated into the English sentence in (9b), according to Yoshikawa (1995).

(9) a. Hanako-wa Taro-ni saifu-wo nusum-are-ta  
 Hanako-Top Taro-Dat Wallet-Acc steal-Pass-Past

b. Hanako had my wallet stolen by Taro.<sup>3</sup>

The example in (9a) can be paraphrased into 'Hanako was affected by the circumstance in which Taro stole her wallet.'

The above properties of the possessive passive are shared with the indirect passive. However, one of the basic properties different from those of the indirect passive is that the NPs in *wo*-phrases have certain semantic relation with the nominative NPs: body-parts, possessions, relatives and friends (cf. Muraki 1991, Tonoike 1991).

(10) a. Hanako-wa Taro-ni hoho-wo nade-rare-ta.  
 Hanako-Top Taro-Dat cheek-Acc touch-Pass-Past

b. Hanako-wa Taro-ni saifu-wo nusum-are-ta  
 Hanako-Top Taro-Dat wallet-Acc steal-Pass-Past

c. Hanako-wa Taro-ni ootoo-wo nagur-are-ta  
 Hanako-wa Taro-ni brother-Acc hit-Pass-Past

(Muraki (1991:13))

For instance, *saifu* is Hanako's possession in (10b). That is why this type of passive is called possessive passive. The above examples show that the possessive passive requires certain semantic relations between NPs in the nominative / topic phrases and those in the accusative phrases.

However, this is not the whole story. Consider the following example, cited from Wierzbicka (1988:288)

- (11) John-wa kodomo-ni tabako-wo suw-are-ta  
 John-Top child-Dat cigarette-Acc smoke-Pass-Past

In this example *kodomo*, a common noun, is used in the dative phrase instead of a proper noun. The example has three alternative interpretations below, according to Wierzbicka (1988).

- (12) a. John's child was smoking cigarettes and John was affected by the event.  
 b. A child was smoking John's cigarettes and John was affected by the event.  
 c. A child was smoking cigarettes near John and he was affected by the event.

The 'possessive' relation between the topic and the accusative phrases holds only in the second interpretation in (12): cigarettes are John's possessions. In the first interpretation the relation between the topic phrase and the accusative phrase does not hold. Instead, the relation between the topic phrase and the dative phrase holds (father-child relation), and in the third interpretation there is no such relation among the phrases.

If Wierzbicka's observation is on the right track, then, the possessive passive might be not an adequate term, because the 'possessive' relation does not always hold. However, it is adopted here for want of something better. In this section, it has been observed that the possessive passive is a subclass of the indirect passive and that there is some preference that the 'possessive' relation holds. In the next section, I will consider some semantic properties of the example in (1b).

### 3. On the *GA/Wo* Alternation

In this section I will examine some properties of the accusative case particle *wo* in Japanese in brief and consider some semantic properties of the

example in (1b).

The transitive construction in English takes the form of a sentence pattern where the verb is immediately followed by a noun with no preposition or other material, as the example in (13a) indicates. In Japanese, on the other hand, the transitive construction takes the form of a sentence containing a noun phrase followed by the accusative case particle *wo*, as the example in (13b) shows.<sup>4</sup>

- (13) a. John broke the vase.  
       b. John-ga   kabin-wo   kowas-ita.  
           John-Nom   vase-Acc   break-Past

It is generally agreed that the prototypical transitive event is described in the sentence where the accusative case particle is used, as the following examples show.

- (14) a. John-ga   hito-wo   koros-ita  
           John-Nom   person-Acc   kill-Past  
       b. John-ga   kikai-wo   soosa-sita  
           John-Nom   machine-Acc   operate-Past  
       c. John-ga   hon-wo   ka-ita  
           John-Nom   book-Acc   write-Past

The above clauses are high in transitivity in the sense of Hopper and Thompson (1980) because they are satisfied with several high components (action, telic, volitional, and so forth).<sup>5</sup> Then, *wo*-phrases appear in the examples in (14).

The next examples are cited from Jacobsen (1992:31).

- (15) a. Sake-wo   konomu  
           wine-Acc   like  
       b. Sake-ga   suki-da  
           wine-Nom   like-copula

According to Jacobsen (1992), *konomu* is often interpreted as a conscious preference for the object, whereas *sukida* expresses an involuntary liking. It might be obvious that the example in (15a) preserves an affinity with prototypical transitive events by virtue of its intentional character. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the accusative case particle *wo* appears in the sentences characterized as high in transitivity.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, the focus of the discussion is on the role played by the degree of transitivity of the verb in influencing the choice of the accusative case particle: the higher the transitivity is, the more likely it is that the accusative

particle will be used.

Next, I will examine the examples in (1) and point out that the example in (1b) behaves differently from the passives mentioned in the previous section.

(16) a. *Watashi-no roba-ga koros-are-ta.* (= 1a)

b. *Watashi-no roba-wo koros-are-ta.* (= 1b)

(17) *Watashi-wa John-ni roba-wo koros-are-ta.*

The example in (16a) is a typical direct passive sentence in Japanese and the one in (17) is a possessive passive sentence, where the possessor of the donkey is expressed in the topic phrase. The question is whether the example in (16b) is a possessive passive sentence or not. I will refer to the example in (16b) as the genitive passive for convenience, because the genitive phrase is used in the sentence.

The *zibun*-test suggests that the genitive passive does not belong to the indirect passive because of the lack of ambiguity in the following example. As I have mentioned in the preceding section, there is ambiguity in the interpretation of *zibun* if the sentence in question is the indirect passive construction.

(18) *John<sub>i</sub>-ni watashi<sub>j</sub>-no roba-wo zibun<sub>i/j</sub>-no heya-de koros-are-ta*

*John-Dat I-Gen donkey-Acc self-Gen room-in kill-pass-past*

Several Japanese informants agree that *zibun* does not refer to *John* but the speaker.<sup>7</sup> There is no ambiguity in the interpretation. However, *watashi* cannot be an antecedent of *zibun* in (18) because the pronoun does not c-command *zibun*. This observation suggests that the structure of the genitive passive is different from that of the possessive passive.

Then, observe the following sentences.

(19) a. *John-ga watashi-no roba-wo koros-ita*

*John-Nom I-Gen donkey-Acc kill-past*

b. *Watashi-no roba-ga John-ni koros-are-ta*

*I-Gen donkey-Nom John-Dat kill-Pass-Past*

c. *Watashi-no roba-wo John-ni koros-are-ta*

*I-Gen donkey-Acc John-Dat kill-Pass-Past*

The example in (19a) is an active sentence and that in (19b) is the corresponding passive sentence, where the *ga-ni* pattern appears. Interestingly enough, the *wo-ni* pattern is also possible, as the example in (19c) shows. As the above examples show, the genitive passive has the corresponding active sentence too

and the passive should be a subclass of the direct passive.

However, the genitive passive is different from the direct passive in that only first-person pronouns (*watashi* and *watashi-tachi*) are used in the genitive passive, as the following examples show.

- (20) a. Anata-no roba-ga koros-are-ta.  
 You-Gen donkey-Nom kill-Pass-Past  
 b. Kare-no roba-ga koros-are-ta.  
 He-Gen donkey-Nom kill-Pass-Past  
 c. Dareka-no roba-ga koros-are-ta.  
 Someone-Gen donkey-Nom kill-Pass-Past
- (21) a.??Anata-no roba-wo koros-are-ta.  
 You-Gen donkey-Acc kill-Pass-Past  
 b.??Kare-no roba-wo koros-are-ta.  
 He-Gen donkey-ACC kill-Pass-Past  
 c.??Dareka-no roba-wo koros-are-ta.  
 Someone-Gen donkey-Nom kill-Pass-Past

The examples in (20) are fully acceptable where the nominative case particle *ga* appears. Our informants agree that the examples in (21) are less acceptable where *anata-no* (your), *kare-no* (his), and *dareka-no* (someone's) are used instead of *watash-no* (my).

The above observation suggests that the interpretation of (16a) should be neutral while the speaker should play some important role in the interpretation of the example in (16b).

The above suggestion is supported by the following sentences.

- (22) a. Uchi-no ko-ga shika-rare-ta  
 I-Gen child-Nom scold-Pass-Past  
 b. Uchi-no ko-ga shika-rare-nakat-ta  
 I-Gen child-Nom scold-Pass-Neg-Past
- (23) a. Uchi-no ko-wo shika-rare-ta  
 I-Gen child-Acc scold-Pass-Past  
 b.??Uchi-no ko-wo shika-rare-nakat-ta  
 I-Gen child-Acc scold-Pass-Neg-Past

The examples above show that the genitive passive is not used in negative sentences. The example in (22a), which is a direct passive sentence, can be negated as the example in (22b) shows. On the other hand, the example in

(23b) is much less acceptable than the one in (23a) because the event of scolding did not happen and the speaker was not affected. Then, it is logical to assume that the event should have stronger impact on the speaker in the interpretation of the genitive passive.

This is also supported by the following sentences, where *fukum-are-teita* is used instead of *koros-are-ta*.

- (24) a. *Watashi-no roba-ga (sono risuto-ni) fukum-are-teita.*  
 I-Gen donkey-Nom the list-Dat include-Pass-Past  
 b. \**Watashi-no roba-wo (sono risuto-ni) fukum-are-teita.*  
 I-Gen donkey-Acc the list-Dat include-Pass-Past

*Fukumu* is a stative verb and it does not describe events. The example in (24a) is a direct passive sentence and it is acceptable because its interpretation does not require the speaker to be affected by the event. On the other hand, the example in (24b) is unacceptable. The speaker does not receive any impact by experiencing events, because *fukumu* does not mean events.

In summary, it would be reasonable to assume that the genitive passive has the following properties:

- (25) a. The genitive passive is a subclass of the direct passive.  
 b. The speaker plays an important role in the interpretation of the genitive passive.

#### 4. Conclusions

I have arrived at the following conclusions: (i) the genitive passive is a subclass of the direct passive because it shares two properties with the direct passive: both of them have the corresponding active sentences and there is no ambiguity in the interpretation of *zibun* and (ii) the speaker plays an important role in the interpretation of the genitive passive. Then, only first-person pronouns can be used in the passive and the genitive passive cannot be used in negative sentences. Finally the genitive passive is much less acceptable when the clause is characterized as low in transitivity.

However, much work remains to be done on the properties of Japanese passives, which have a number of other interesting properties.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The indirect passive does not always require negative affectedness, as the following example shows.

- (i) Takao-ga sensei-ni musuko-wo home-rare-ta  
 Takao-Nom teacher-Dat son-Acc admire-Pass-Past

(Washio 1995:61)

Furthermore, Kortandt (1992) claims that the meaning 'negatively affected' is not part of the meaning of the Japanese passive but results from the combination of two distinct features, which may be called 'affected' and 'undergoing'. See Kortandt (1992).

<sup>2</sup> According to Washio (1995), the following conditions on the antecedent of *zibun* are assumed.

- (i) it must be [+animate]  
 (ii) it must c-command *zibun*  
 (iii) it must be the grammatical subject.

<sup>3</sup> Washio (1995:6) notes that the English construction in question is ambiguous: passive reading and causative reading and he develops an analysis of the Japanese passive as a mirror image of the causative. The Japanese passive shares a basic conceptual structure with the causative, both representing an affecting relation between the referent of the sentence subject and the event described by the stem verb. The difference between the passive and the causative consists in the direction of the effect and the suppression of the causer of the event.

A minimal pair of examples with causatives versus possessive passives has been presented in Washio (1995:6)

- (i) a. John-ga Mary-ni tokei-wo nusum-ase-ta  
 John-Nom Mary-Dat watch-Acc steal-Cause-Past  
 b. John-ga Mary-ni tokei-wo nusum-are-ta  
 John-Nom Mary-Dat watch-Acc steal-Pass-Past

It is also noted that the English sentence in (ii) below is ambiguous. The sentence can either mean that John made Mary steal his watch or that he was affected by the circumstance that Mary stole his watch.

- (ii) John had his watch stolen by Mary.

Thus, the two instances differently expressed in (i) can be captured by one English construction. However, Oshima (2002) attempts to refute this argument. See Oshima

(2002).

<sup>4</sup> There are differences between Japanese and English in the syntactic transitivity, as Jacobsen (1989) points out. The examples in (i) are the ones where an English clause receives a canonical transitive expression but its Japanese counterpart does not, and the examples in (ii) where the opposite situation obtains.

- |      |    |                           |                             |
|------|----|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (i)  | a. | yama ga mieru             | see a mountain              |
|      | b. | ongaku ga kikoeru         | hear music                  |
|      | c. | hen na nioi ga suru       | smell something funny       |
|      | d. | isha ni soudan suru       | consult a doctor            |
|      | e. | tomodachi ni au           | meet a friend               |
|      | f. | hanako to kekkon suru     | marry Hanako                |
|      | g. | hoteru ga umi ni men suru | The hotel faces the sea.    |
|      | h. | e ga gakubuchi ni au      | The picture fits the frame. |
| (ii) | a. | tomodachi wo matsu        | wait for a doctor           |
|      | b. | apaato wo sagasu          | look for a friend           |
|      | c. | ongaku wo kiku            | listen to music             |
|      | d. | e wo miru                 | look at a picture           |

(Jacobsen (1989:231-232))

<sup>5</sup> Transitivity, according to Hopper and Thompson (1980), is characterized as a complex scalar notion derived from the presence or absence of a series of components in the table below.

Ten components of transitivity

	High	Low
A. Participants	2 or more participants, A and O	1 participant
B. Kinesis	action	non-action
C. Aspect	telic	atelic
D. Punctuality	punctual	non-punctual
E. Volitionality	volitional	non-volitional
F. Affirmation	affirmative	negative
G. Mode	realis	irrealis
H. Agency	A high in potency	A low in potency
I. Affectedness of O	O totally affected	O not affected
J. Individuation of O	O highly individuated	O non-individuated

(Hopper and Thompson (1980:252))

'A' in the table stands for Agent and 'O' stands for Object, which refer to the two participants in a two-participant clause. In the table transitivity is broken down into the ten components, each focusing on a different facet in a different part of the clause. That allows clauses to be characterized as more or less transitive. Put another way, transitivity is regarded as a continuum.

<sup>6</sup> However, the accusative case particle can be used in the following examples, which are low in transitivity.

- (i) a. Joheki-ga machi-wo kakonde-iru  
       walls-Nom city-Acc surround  
       b. Kono shugo-ga itsutsu-no yoso-wo fukunde-iru  
       this set-Nom five-Gen member-Acc contain

(Jacobsen (1989:224))

Predicates like *kakomu* and *fukumu*, expressing a static relation between two entities, seem to represent a case where the object is unaffected, no intentionality is present, and the subject is not a volitional being.

In order to deal with the case where transitivity is extremely low, Jacobsen (1989) proposes the following scale.

- (ii) Dominance <-----> Symmetry  
       NP ga NP wo                    NP ga NP ni                    NP ga NP to

(Jacobsen (1992:35))

In the following examples the nominative/accusative marking is reversed and their meanings are quite different. In this sense the nominative noun phrase represents an entity which is dominant with respect to the entity represented by the accusative noun phrase.

- (iii) a. A ga B wo fukumu  
       b. B ga A wo fukumu

(Jacobsen (1989:224))

'A' contains 'B' in (iiia) while 'B' contains 'A' in (iiib), which represents an asymmetrical relation between the nominative and the accusative phrases.

Noun phrase arguments in comitative constructions, on the other hand, can be interchanged without affecting the truth value of the proposition expressed, as the examples in (iv) show.

- (iv) a. A ga B to chigau  
       A-Nom B-with differ  
       b. B ga A to chigau  
       B-Nom A-with differ

(Jacobsen (1989:224))

This observation indicates that the asymmetrical relation between two arguments plays more

important role when I deal with the sentences characterized as low in transitivity.

<sup>7</sup> The informants are from Sendai, Hiroshima, Oita and Kumamoto, respectively. They have also judged whether the examples below are acceptable or not. One informant has told me that the example may be acceptable if he imagines that the speaker was affected by the circumstance in which the donkey was on the list.

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