

FOCUS-AFFECTED READINGS OF WEAK NPS AND INFORMATION UPDATING

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In this study, I base my analysis on a semantic restriction on the occurrence of weak NPs along the line of Milsark (1974, 1977). I will argue that a quantificationally weak NP must receive focusing for felicity of discourse information when it provokes a conflict with a property-denoting predicate. The main question I will discuss is illustrated in the following Japanese examples.

(1) Property-denoting sentence with a weak NP subject:

a. without an accent on the subject:

Keikan-ga aikokuteki-da.

policeman-NOM patriotic -Copula

Intended: ‘A/some policeman is patriotic,’ [“#”: semantic infelicity]

b. with some accent on the subject:

KEIKAN-ga aikokuteki-da.

‘It is a policeman/policemen who is/are patriotic.’

(2) Inalienable possession with double-nominative (DN I-POSS)

a. without an accent on either nominative NP:

#Otona-ga ashi-ga hayai.

Adult-NOM foot-NOM quick

Intended: ‘Adults are quick in walking/running.’

b. with some accent on the first nominative NP:

OTONA-ga ashi-ga hayai.

‘Adults are quick in walking/running.’

In (1), I observe that focus apparently affects the restriction on a weak NP co-occurring with a property-denoting predicate. The weak existential subject becomes acceptable with focus in (1b). Capital letters indicate prosodic prominence by means of accents. One and the same structure can be either felicitous or infelicitous in Japanese, depending on the focus assignment on a subject. A sentence is acceptable only when it is accompanied by an additional accent on a subject NP, as in (1b). Also in (2) with what is called Inalienable Possession with double-nominative (hereafter DN I-POSS), we see a similar contrast. Overall, the felicity contrast observed in both (1) and (2) is derived from one and the same structure, dependent on prosodic prominence, so structural or semantic representation alone cannot explain the observed phenomena.

The main points are the following: first, prosodic prominence of focusing saves an otherwise infelicitous utterance such as (1a) and (2a); second, in the observed constructions, focusing occurs as the process of information updating at the level of discourse representation, which is separate from that of structural representation. With the discourse representation, hearers can identify which part of an utterance represents a valid contribution to their information state at the time of utterance. Therefore, a weak

In (4), existential quantification is viable only with *-ga* in (4a). For purposes of information updating, it is contradictory that the indefinite entity newly introduced with *aru* ‘some’ would need to be the topic introduced in the previous discourse. Thus, it seems that a new entity is introduced existentially by the subject NP marked with *-ga*. In addition, some kind of individuation is inherent to *ga*-marked NPs, as in (5).

- (5) Mori {#-wa /-ga} akai.
 forest {-TOP/NOM} red
 ‘{#Forest / the forest I see} is red.’

In (5), the reading only indicates the existence of a single forest or of forests that are individually recognizable.¹ The color of a forest would usually not be red in itself, so the sentence depicts a particular scene, but does not depict a general property of forests that would be represented with *-wa*. The generic reading with *-wa* that would generally be acceptable in the subject position is not possible, as observed with the infelicity of *-wa* in (5). Therefore, the *ga*-marked subject represents existential individuation. In the next section, I will discuss how an existential subject with *-ga* can be connected to the prosodic contrast observed in (1) and (2).

2. SEMANTIC GENERALIZATION ON WEAK NPS AND FOCUSING

It has been argued that existential subject NPs are quantificationally weak and are subject to some restriction. Milsark (1974, 1977), Ladusaw (1994), and Herburger (1997) argue that weak NPs cannot co-occur with property-denoting or characterizing predicates. According to this generalization, only strong NPs may appear as the subjects of such predicates. The following contrast illustrates the generalization.

- (6) Existential (non-quantificational) sentence
 a. There is/are {a/some/several/few/Ø} wolf/wolves at the door. – weak NPs
 b. *There is/are {the/all/every/those/John’s} wolf/wolves at the door.
 (7) a. *A man was intelligent. – weak, existential NP + property-denoting VP
 b. Everyone was intelligent. – strong NP + property-denoting VP

Weak NPs are illustrated in (6a). In the existential construction, only weak NPs can occur, whereas strong quantificational NPs cannot. On the other hand, a property predicate, *be intelligent*, does not allow a weak NP to co-occur in the sentence in (7a), while a strong NP, *everyone*, can co-occur. This is in fact parallel to the contrast between *-ga* and *-wa* in Japanese. It turns out that, although (1a) with *-ga* repeated below as (8a) is not acceptable without an additional accent, (1b) repeated as (8b) is felicitous with *-wa* with or without an accent.

- (8) a. without an accent on the subject: [= (1a)]
 # Keikan-ga aikokuteki-da.
 policeman-NOM patriotic -Copula
 Intended: ‘A/some policeman is patriotic.’

- b. [Kind-NP Subject-*wa*] + property-denoting predicate
 Keikan/KEIKAN-wa aikokuteki da.
 ‘Policemen are patriotic.’ or ‘It is policemen who are patriotic.’

The weak NP generalization suggests that a *ga*-marked subject is not compatible with a property-denoting predicate due to its existential nature. The infelicity of (8a) is then derived from a general semantic incompatibility between a weak, existential *ga*-marked subject and a property-denoting predicate such as *aikokuteki-da* ‘be patriotic.’

Now the next question to ask is how the infelicity of (8a) is improved with focusing. Focusing can be understood as dividing a relevant propositional content into two components: a focused part and a defocused part. These convey new information and presuppositions in discourse, respectively. New information semantically corresponds to a *variable* that must be identified with respect to the presupposed proposition ‘Some entity is patriotic’ which is given in the preceding discourse. Because some additional discourse information is needed for felicity in (8a), such a presupposition evoked and dichotomized out of the utterance by means of focusing saves an otherwise semantically unacceptable utterance.

McNally (1998) argues that, in a weak existential sentence, a subject may not be referential, so that the introduction of a new discourse referent requires the existence of a particular sort of eventuality from the sentence in which the referent is introduced. Now this is one of the main points of the study. When the utterance in (1b) is accompanied by focusing of the subject, the defocused predicate component is now understood to evoke a presupposition that represents the existence of a particular eventuality in the preceding context, namely a presupposition that ‘some X is patriotic.’ Through this evoked presupposition, some individual is necessarily contained in the eventuality mentioned in prior discourse. Namely, *some entity that is patriotic exists*. In the process of information updating, property-denotation is reduced to the presupposition due to focusing on the weak NP *keikan* ‘policemen’ in (1b) thereby turning its entity to new information as the referent of a variable. Therefore, the weak NP generalization is still relevant but overridden by the prosodic highlighting of focusing in discourse processes.

In the following English example (9),

- (9) Shirts must be worn. (a sign at a restaurant entrance)
 a. If you want to enter this restaurant, you must wear a shirt.
 b. The only thing you can do with a shirt is to wear it.

[Krifka et al.1995: 24, (44b)]

I assume that reading (a) is the more natural interpretation, whereas reading (b) is less favored and seems pragmatically odd. This contrast is reminiscent of the acceptability difference between the two readings of Japanese *ga*-marked subjects. In (10), the Japanese counterpart of (9), when the subject is focused, there arises a narrow focus on the subject. As a result, the proposition is divided into two components.

- (10) Shatu-ga chakuyosare-nakereba naranai.
 shirts-NOM worn-be -must
 a. SHATU-ga chakuyo-sare-nakereba naranai.
 b. #Shatu-ga CHAKUYO-sare-nakereba naranai.

In (10a), *syatu-ga* is a focus and informationally (discourse-)new, while the remaining component is presupposed. The entity of the existential subject is licensed by the presupposed eventuality and then highlighted. In other words, a shirt exists in the eventuality of being worn. When the predicate *chakuyosare* is focused in (10b), by contrast, sentential focus emerges. However, in spite of the focused modal ‘must be worn’ which should evoke some salient event of shirts being worn, shirts are things to be worn by default without the need for an external discourse condition. Thus, reading (b) is odd.

In essence, with focusing on a weak NP in a property-denoting sentence, the existence of an eventuality can be evoked. Then the weak NP obtains a referent through the evoked eventuality. Otherwise the utterance would not be felicitous. This kind of focusing manifests itself through prosodic prominence in Japanese and by other means in different languages. In the next section, I will extend the prosodic highlighting of focusing to the construction of DN I-POSS given in (2).

3. INALIENABLE POSSESSION AND FOCUSING IN INFORMATION UPDATING

As I mentioned in an introductory paragraph, DN I-POSS examples also provide the same felicity contrast as the one in (1).

- (11) DN I-POSS [= (2)]
 a. without an accent on either nominative NP:
 #Otona-ga ashi-ga hayai.
 Adult-NOM foot-NOM quick
 Intended: ‘Adults are quick in walking/running.’
 b. with some accent on the first nominative NP:
 OTONA-ga ashi-ga hayai.
 ‘Adults are quick in walking/running.’

However, nominative-genitive case conversion called *Possessor Ascension* is not acceptable, when the first nominative *-ga* is replaced with possessive *-no*. In (12), the sentence is not acceptable even with a prosodic prominence on the first NP. It turns out that there are different kinds of DN I-POSS and the second kind of example is given in (13). In contrast to (12), the possessive *-no* is acceptable in (13b).

- (12) #OTONA -no ashi-ga hayai.
 Adult-GEN foot-NOM quick
 Intended: ‘Adults are quick in walking/running.’
 (13) a. OTONA-ga ashi-ga nagai.
 Adult-NOM foot-NOM long
 ‘Adults {are long-legged/have long legs}.’

- b. OTONA-no ashi-ga nagai.
 Adult-GEN foot-NOM long
 ‘Adults {are long-legged/have long legs}.’

When I subcategorize (11) and (13) into two separate groups, A and B respectively, it seems that the relation of a possessor to its part in group A is more intensional or of internal property than in group B. More examples demonstrate it in (14) and (15).

(14) Group A of DN I-POSS – of internal/inherent properties

- a. (Being a winner at a musical contest)
 SEITO{-ga/#-no} hana-ga takai
 students{NOM/#-GEN} nose-NOM high
 ‘Students are proud (of it).’
- b. TENSU{-ga/#-no} hara-ga kuroi.
 Shopkeeper{NOM/#-GEN} abdomen-NOM black
 ‘Shopkeepers are scheming.’

(15) Group B of DN I-POSS – of physical properties

- a. SEIJIKA{-ga/-no} koe-ga urusai.
 Politician {NOM/-GEN} voice-NOM noisy
 ‘Politicians’ voice is too loud.’
- b. TITI{-ga /-no} hyoujyou-ga kurai.
 Father{NOM/-GEN} facial expression-NOM gloomy
 ‘Father has a gloomy look.’

It seems that being fast in action or running in (11) is not taken just as the property of one’s leg. The unacceptability of possessive pre-modifiers on the second NP in (12) suggests that the NP cannot be referential.²

In fact, Vergnaud and Zubizarreta (1992) argue that there are two types of inalienable constructions in French as well. They argue that what they call the External Possessor Construction (EPC) can only denote a *type*, whereas the Internal Possessor Construction (IPC) can denote either a type or a *token*. A type is understood to represent a general property of entities that is intensional in the sense that the represented property is not referential, while a token refers to some entity that is referential. This seems to explain the following fact in (16).

- (16) a. Le médecin leur a radiographié l’estomac/*les estomacs (à toutes).
 The doctor to them X-rayed the stomach-SG/*the stomach-PL (to all)
 ‘The doctor X-rayed their stomachs.’
- b. Le médecin a radiographié [leur estomac/leur estomacs].
 The doctor to them X-rayed their stomach-SG/their stomach-PL
 ‘The doctor X-rayed their stomachs.’

An NP such as stomach, which is inherently singular in the sense that the normal individual has only one stomach, can only appear in the singular when used in the EPC in (16a), but may appear in either the singular or the plural in the IPC in (16b). This

seems to parallel my discussion of the inalienable possession and endorse the extended inalienability of internal property in Group A in contrast to the physical characteristic observed in Group B. Now my point is the following. In (11) and Group A, the apparent subject cannot be associated with possessor ascension. The entity of the first subject NP is separate from the rest of the proposition, while the remaining portion *ashi-ga hayai* is property-denoting as a whole, with the second NP functioning as premodifier, i.e. part of the predicate, because it indicates the extended internal property of the first possessor NP.³

Given this, the following contrastive examples can be accounted for.

- (17) a. *Ashi-ga hayai.* --- the second NP of (11) as a subject [Group A]
 Legs-NOM fast
 b. *Ashi-ga nagai.* --- the second NP of (13) as a subject [Group B]
 Legs-NOM long
- (18) a. *OTONA-ga hayai.* --- the first NP of (11) as a subject [Group A]
 Adults-NOM fast
 b. *#/?OTONA-ga nagai.* --- the first NP of (13) as a subject [Group B]
 Adults-NOM long

As the felicity of (17b) indicates, the second NP of Group B is physically the direct subject of its predicate, so that the sentence ‘legs are long’ is meaningful without the first NP. On the other hand, as the infelicity of (18b) in Group B indicates, the first possessor NP ‘adults’ cannot be separate from the second NP and therefore cannot be directly associated with being long. The possessor alone is not physically associated with being long, since it is not separable from its physical part indicated by the second NP. In contrast, in (18a) of Group A, the first NP is separated from the rest, and thus can be a subject.

Note that a weak NP restriction involves property-denotation. This schema applies to Group A because of the internal property those predicates indicate. Therefore, it seems that Group A is most relevant to the meaning shift of weak NPs by focusing, as in (18a). Now Group A parallels the examples in (1). Consequently, in the process of information updating, property-denotation is reduced with focusing to the presupposition of an eventuality in which a referent of the weak NP in Group A is necessarily contained for felicity of discourse information, as in (11b).⁴ It seems clear that weak-strong NP semantic generalization is still relevant but overridden by focusing at the level of discourse information.

4. CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

In this study of two constructions, I have argued that a weak NP must receive focusing for felicity of discourse information when it provokes a conflict with a property-denoting predicate. The main points are: first, prosodic prominence of focusing saves an otherwise infelicitous utterance; second, in the observed constructions the focusing occurs as the process of information updating at the level of discourse representation, which is separate from that of structural representation. Only with the discourse representation dealing with focusing, can the observed contrast be readily

accounted for. Concerning the DN I-POSS, I have discussed how prosodic elements affect the semantic restriction on weak NPs in discourse, but the structural problems regarding the double nominative of the construction still remain open, given my suggestion that the I-POSS ought to be divided into two subgroups. However, I have to wait for future research into this issue. Finally, in Japanese, properties of *-ga* turn out to underlie the characterization of weak NPs on the one hand and of discourse-new information on the other hand.

Notes

1. Note that a noun is not accompanied by an article or a plural formative in Japanese, so an NP indicating a kind or a category can, in theory, represent either a generic entity, a particular individual, or particular individuals. Despite that, only the existential individuation is accepted.

2. The given contrast seems to raise a problem with the hierarchy of inalienable possession discussed in Haiman (1985), Nichols (1988), and Tsunoda (1996). They generally take body parts alike as being the highest in the hierarchy of inalienable possession. Therefore, the above contrast cannot be accounted for, since *ashi* ‘leg/foot’ in both (14) and (15) belong to the one and same hierarchical category, “body parts.” The possessor ascension cannot then be understood to apply uniformly to any I-POSS examples, as has been assumed.

3. Also in another example of inalienable modifiers, Tremblay (1996) demonstrates that an inalienable modifier introduced by the object of dative *à* may not be referential: it can take a bare NP but not a DP introduced by a possessive pronoun, whether co-indexed or not.

- (i) a. *le/un petit garçon à lunettes roses*
 the/a little boy DAT glasses pink
 ‘the/a little boy with pink glasses’
 b. **le/un petit garçon_i à ses_{i/j} lunettes roses*
 the/a little boy DAT his glasses pink
 ‘the/a little boy with his pink glasses’

The data seems to indicate that the object of dative *à* may be a type, but not a token.

Such a contrast is also reminiscent of those observed in Romanian inalienable constructions. Manoliu-Manea (1996) observes two kinds of inalienable possession: whole-centered and part-centered. If the discourse is whole-centered, then the whole, being both topical and central, corresponds to the subject, while the part is expressed by a locative prepositional phrase.

4. Nichols and Tsunoda extend their hierarchy argument to possessor ascension examples.

- (i)a. John kissed Mary's lips.
- b. John kissed Mary on the lips.

Pragmatic differences between these two examples are discussed in Wierzbicka (1979) and elsewhere. Aside from that, however, it has been claimed, as in Tsunoda and also implicitly in Hyman (1977:107), Fox (1981: 324-5) and Durie (1987: 388), that a syntactic hierarchy is at work in the example (i) above. The claim is that inalienable possession in the direct object is higher in hierarchy than in the intransitive subject or transitive subject, due to the different degree of affectedness on possessors, and thus the possessor raising of direct object is more readily acceptable. In fact, English ascension examples observed in their discussions are exclusively those of direct object. Again in Japanese examples that I have shown, however, the hierarchy has nothing to say about the contrast indicated between (14) and (15); first, as Tsunoda suggests concerning the possessor ascension in Japanese, Malagasy, and Cebuano languages, syntactic hierarchy seems to favor the subject as higher in the hierarchy than other syntactic positions, and second the given contrasts in Japanese both belong to one and the same hierarchical category: i.e. body parts in an intransitive subject position.

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