

■ Basic Word Order

The sequence in which sentential elements are arranged to create meaningful sentences is called word order. There are largely two types of word order in Japanese: (1) the word order to configure sentential components and (2) the word order to sequence sentential components.

(1) is for configuring case components and predicates. The rules are relatively strict so that non-sentences such as **tarō-wa-ni-* (instead of *tarō-ni-wa*) and **ika-naku-takatta* (instead of *iki-taku-nakatta*) would not occur. In configuring case components, the sequence goes as follows: *tarō-ni* (case particle) –*wa* (*kakari* particle) –*ne* (interjection). In some cases the case particles and adverbial particles may change places, as in *hanako-dake-ni/hanako-ni-dake* ‘for Hanako only’.

In configuring the predicate, the sequence goes as follows: *ika-se* (causative) –*taku* (wish) –*nakat* (negative) –*ta* (past) –*darō* (inference) –*ka* (interrogative) –*ne* (asking for agreement). *Reru*, *-te iru* (passive), and *-te shimau* (aspect), *-te yaru* (giving and receiving) appear between the verb and wish, as in *arui-te i-tai* ‘want to be walking’. Auxiliary adjectives, *yasui* ‘have the tendency for’ and “*nikui* ‘not inclined to,” adjectival predicates, and noun predicates come before the negative *nai*, as in *iki-yasuku-nai* ‘not easy to go’, and *utsukushiku-nakat-ta* ‘was not beautiful’. The hearsay *sōda* appears in the same position as inference. However, there are instances where the past and inference may change places, as in *it-ta-rashii/iku-rashikat-ta* ‘seems to have left/looked like [someone was] going’.

(2) In sequencing the sentential components, the restriction on the sequence of modifying components and modified components is strict, so that **hon-bokuno* (instead of *bokuno hon*) would not occur. Among modifying components, longer components tend to come earlier than shorter components, but the restriction is not too stringent: both *Tarō wa — kamisori de — hige o — zorizori to — sotta* ‘Taro briskly shaved his beard with a razor’ and *Tarō wa — zorizori to — hige o — kamisori de — sotta* are both acceptable.

General rules are that interjections and conjunctions appear at the head of the sentence, *wa* of topic precedes *ga* of subject, and the nominative case *ga* precedes *o* of object. We can surmise that the basic sequence may be [haling/interjection → preparing situation/topic → subject → object → verb].

De of location, and also time expressions, are interpreted differently according to the position in which they appear. When the place is specified before the subject, it tends to be interpreted as the location where an incident occurred, whereas if the place is specified after the subject, it is interpreted as the location the subject chose for an activity. Example: *Kinō → Nakano-ku de → wakamono ga → asa hayaku kara → kōen de → haihin de → ie o → tsukurimashita* ‘Yesterday → in Nakano Ward → young people → from early morning on → in the park → with discarded material → a house → built’. It is hard to place the case *de* before the *de* of location if it is the *de* of instrument, as in **haihin de → kōen de*.

Of adverbs, modality adverbs tend to be placed at the head of the sentence or near the subject, adverbs of manner come before or after the object, and adverbs of result come directly before the verb.

Specific word order goes with specific types of sentences. For example, in sentences that express transportation, the item to be transported tends to precede the destination, as in *Tarō ga gakkō ni iku* 'Tarō goes to school', and *Nimotsu o sōko ni hakobu* 'We carry the cargo to the warehouse', while in sentences of existence and production, the location tends to precedes the item in question, as in *Ekimae ni kōban ga aru* 'There is a police box in front of the station', and *Niwa ni koya o tateta* 'I built a shed in the yard'. In sentences where there is a receiver, the receiver tends to precede the item that changes hands, as in *Hanako ni tegami o watasu* 'I hand the letter to Hanako'.

→文の成分 Components of Sentences (2-C), 格 Case (2-D)

- References

Saeki, Tetsuo (1975) *Gendai nihongo no gojun* (Word Order of Contemporary Japanese). Kasama Shobo.

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