

Grammar I: Topic and Focus

■ Topic

A topic indicates what the sentence is about to describe. In Japanese it is typically expressed with *wa*, as in (1).

(1) *Koko wa Shizuoka ken desu* ‘This is Shizuoka prefecture.’

The topic is the presupposition for the sentence, and in principle it is placed early in the sentence. A topic may be what is right there, what was in the previous context, or something the listener readily recognizes.

Expressions that we cannot readily specify, such as *nani*, *dareka*, and *shiranai hito*, cannot be topics.

A sentence that includes a topic is divided into two major parts: topic and exposition. In speech, one may pause briefly right after the topic.

In a sentence that includes a topic, the topic is the introduction, and what the sentence expresses is in the exposition. Thus, one cannot place prominence on the topic in speech.

Chart 2-12 lists ways of expressing the topic in Japanese in a broader sense of the word.

Chart 2-12: Ways of Expressing the Topic and Their Characteristics

● Forms of Topic	● Characteristics
<i>wa</i>	Typical form of topic
Non-use of particle	Used in speech
<i>to iu no wa</i> , <i>to wa</i> , <i>tte</i> , etc.	Express the characteristics of the topic
<i>nara</i> , <i>dattara</i> , etc.	The topic is what the other party has brought up, and the speaker mentions something that is related to it
<i>to ieba</i> , <i>tte ittatte</i> , etc.	What has been said previously is the topic, and the speaker talks about something other than the topic
<i>(no koto) daga</i> , <i>(no koto) dakedo</i> , etc.	Function as an introduction to the topic not only of a sentence but also of a paragraph, the text, and discourse.
Predicate of an implicit-topic sentence	The predicate is the topic, and it highlights the nominative case <i>-ga</i> .

Non-use of particle in the above chart means that the topic is expressed without the use of a particle, as in (2).

(2) *Kore* __, *oishii ne* ‘This is delicious.’

The predicate of an implicit-topic sentence takes up the position where *sekininsha* ‘the person in charge’ does in (3) below.

(3) *Dare ga sekininsha desu ka* ‘Who is the person in charge?’

→ハとガ－基本的な違い *Wa* and *Ga*: Basic Differences (2-I), ハとガ－有題文と無題文 *Wa* and *Ga*: Topic-Present Sentence and Topic-Absent Sentence (2-I), ハとガ－顕題文と隠題文 *Wa* and *Ga*: Explicit-Topic Sentence and Implicit-Topic Sentence (2-I), ハとガ－文の中と節の中 *Wa* and *Ga*: In the Sentence vs. In the Clause (2-I), ツテとハ－主題のバリエーション *Tte* and *Wa*: Variations of Topic (2-I), 無助詞、格助詞の省略 Non-Use of Particles and Ellipses of Case Particles (2-I), トピック・コメント Topic and Comment (7-D)

● References

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