

## ■ *Wa* and *Ga*: Basic Differences

Differentiating *wa*, as in (1), and *ga*, as in (2), is considered one of the most difficult aspects of Japanese language acquisition.

(1) *Ano hito wa shachō san desu* ‘That person is the company president.’

(2) *Ano hito ga shachō san desu* ‘That person is the company president.’

*Wa* is a particle of topic, that is, it expresses what the sentence talks about. *Ga* is a case particle like *o* and *ni*, and marks the subject of an action or state, namely, the nominative case.

In order to explain how to differentiate *wa* and *ga*, we need to examine the four points listed below.

- (a) Topic-present sentence vs. Topic-absent sentence
- (b) Explicit-topic sentence vs. Implicit-topic sentence
- (c) In the sentence vs. In the clause
- (d) Comparison and Exclusion

(a) Topic-present sentence vs. Topic-absent sentence

Most sentences are topic-present sentences that include *wa*, as in (3). However, if the sentence describes a one-time event or a temporary state, it becomes a topic-absent sentence as in (4).

(3) *Watashi wa Kyōto ni sunde imasu* ‘I live in Kyoto.’

(4) *Kinō Hokkaidō de jishin ga arimashita* ‘There was an earthquake in Hokkaido yesterday.’

(b) Explicit-topic sentence vs. Implicit-topic sentence

When the predicate contains what the speaker wants to convey or ask, the topic is explicit and *wa* is used, as in (5). When the nominative case contains what the speaker wants to convey or ask, the topic is implicit, and *ga* is used, as in (6).

(5) *Kore wa nan desu ka* ‘What is this?’

(6) *Dare ga sonna koto o ittandesu ka* ‘Who in the world said such a thing?’

(c) In the sentence vs. In the clause

Unlike in a sentence, in principle *wa* does not appear in a subordinate clause. An item marked with *wa* in an isolated sentence will take on *ga* marking when that sentence is embedded as a subordinate clause, as in (8).

(7) *Watashi wa kōkōsei desu* ‘I am a high school student.’

(8) *Watashi ga kōkōsei no toki, chichi ga nakunarimashita* ‘My father died when I was a high school student.’

(d) Comparison and Exclusion

*Wa* is used when there is contrast, as in (9), but *ga* is used when there is a meaning of exclusion, as in (10).

(9) *Watashi wa kyōikugaku wa benkyō shimashita ga shinrigaku wa benkyō shiteimasen* ‘I studied pedagogy, but I haven’t studied psychology.’

(10) *Watashi no uchi de wa otōto ga ichiban se ga takai desu* ‘In my family my younger brother is the tallest.’

→ハとガー基本的な違い *Wa* and *Ga*: Basic Differences (2-I), ハとガー有題文と無題文 *Wa* and *Ga*: Topic-Present Sentence and Topic-Absent Sentence (2-I), ハとガー顕題文と陰題文 *Wa* and *Ga*: Explicit-Topic Sentence and Implicit-Topic Sentence (2-I), ハとガー文の中と節の中 *Wa* and *Ga*: In the Sentence vs. In the Clause (2-I), ハとガ対比と排他 *Wa* and *Ga*: Comparison and Exclusion (2-I)

● References

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