Split topics in Japanese

Mitsuaki Shimojo
University at Buffalo, The State University of New York

This paper presents an RRG analysis of split topics in Japanese, which have been underdiscussed despite the topic prominence of the language. Sugawara (2010) identifies split topics exemplified by (1), in which, in RRG terms, the accusative RP contains a pronominal nucleus -*no* which is coreferential with the core-external topic.

(1)   kyookasho-wa   taroo-ga   rika-no-o   katta   (Sugawara 2010: 6)
          textbook-TOP   Taro-NOM science-one-ACC   buy:PST
          'As for textbooks, Taro bought a science one.'

In the semantic representation, a split topic is a semantic argument of the verb, as shown in (2), but only the nucleus is realized as the topic. Because the same logical structure applies to the regular topic counterpart (3), the question arises as to what influences the realization of a split topic.

(2)   [**do'** (Taro, Ø)] CAUSE [BECOME **have'** (Taro, science textbook)]
(3)   rika-no   kyookasho-wa   taroo-ga   katta
          science-COP:ATT   textbook-TOP   Taro-NOM buy:PST
          'As for (the) science textbook(s), Taro bought (one/it).'

The answer to the question requires discourse-pragmatic considerations, and I argue that split topics have specific pragmatic constraints, which separate them from regular topics. Observations of discourse samples collected online show that a split topic and the *in situ* argument exhibit the properties of contrastive topic and contrastive focus respectively. Example (4) was found in a blog where the split topic 'furniture' is singled out from the previously mentioned topic set 'things I bought', and the *in situ* argument 'used one' is selected from the set 'furniture', which is provided by the linearly preceding split topic.

(4)   [The blogger mentioned things he bought for his new home, a gas range, etc., and mentioned:]
          kagu-wa   chuuko-no-o   kaimashita
          furniture-TOP used-one-ACC   buy:PST
          'As for furniture, (I) bought a used one.'

Thus, unlike a regular topic, the split topic construction exhibits layered focus structures, and this is described in (5) based on Erteschik-Shir's (2007) representation.

(5)   Split topic in a precore slot (contrastive topic)   Core argument (contrastive focus)
      [{furniture$_{foc}$, gas range, …}$_{top}$]$_{top}$ [{used$_{foc}$, brand-new}$_{top}$]$_{foc}$

While the topic and the argument each have an embedded focus, i.e. the singled out element, the topic is outside the actual focus domain of the sentence, and the argument is within the actual focus domain. Furthermore, the observation shows: (i) while a split topic is possible with a nominative argument, accusative arguments are more commonly paired with a split topic, and (ii) a split topic paired with an accusative argument exhibits a more clearly defined contrast. The latter is directly relevant to the analysis. Assuming predicate-focus structures as the unmarked focus type (Van Valin & LaPolla 1997), if a split topic and an accusative argument represent the same semantic argument, the focal (i.e. contrastive) nature of the topic is predicted by the association with the unmarked focus element. Overall, the observed topic-focus ambivalence and nominative-accusative asymmetry of split topics in Japanese align with cross-linguistic observations of the split topic/focus phenomena (Van Hoof 2006, Frascarelli 2012, Bentley et al. 2013). Lastly, the constructional schema for the split topic construction will be proposed to capture the discourse-pragmatic influence on the linking.

References:

Bentley, Delia, Francesco Maria Ciconte, and Silvio Cruschina. 2013. Micro-variation in subject agreement: the case of existential pivots with split focus in Romance. Rivista di Linguistica 25.1, 15-43.

Erteschik-Shir, Nomi. 2007. Information structure: the syntax-discourse interface. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frascarelli, Mara. 2012. The interpretation of discourse categories: cartography for a crash-proof syntax. In V. Bianchi and C. Chesi (eds.), ENJOY LINGUISTICS! Papers offered to Luigi Rizzi on the occasion of his 60th birthday. 180-191. Siena: CISCL, Università di Siena.

Hoof, Hanneke van. 2006. Split topicalization. In Martin Everaert and Henk van Riemsdijk (eds.), The Blackwell Companion to Syntax, Volume I, 410-465. Blackwell.

Sugawara, Ayaka. 2010. An analysis of split topicalization in Japanese. Linguistic Research 26, 1-10.

Van Valin, Robert D., Jr. & Randy J. LaPolla. 1997. Syntax: structure, meaning, and function. Cambridge University Press.