

## **Are Grammatical Terminologies Translatable?; A Debate about "Subject" in Japanese Linguistics**

**Keisuke Kasuya, Maria Kovani**

### **ABSTRACT**

There has been a long debate about the concept of "subject" in Japanese linguistics. Japanese does not have any relationships of grammatical agreement between subject and predicate and the usage of subject is usually determined by context. In fact, grammatical subjects are frequently omitted in ordinary speech. From the standpoint of functional linguistics, we could even say that the frame of "theme-rheme" is more important for Japanese than the structure of "subject-predicate" with reference to European languages. In fact, it is the frequent usage of the thematic particle –wa, (which does not designate subject but rather, topics of sentence) that characterizes the organization of words in the sentence in Japanese. Then, some scholars go so far as to assert strongly that it is necessary to abandon the term and concept of "subject" from terminologies of Japanese linguistics. According to them, the presence of subject in Japanese is not essential for a sentence to be complete; therefore, it is nothing but a "subjective complement". This debate brings the tension between universal validity and cultural background of scientific terminologies to the surface.

## **Χρήση και Μετάφραση του Όρου "Υποκείμενο" στην Ιαπωνική Γλωσσολογία**

**Κείσουκέ Κασούγια, Μαρία Κοβάνη**

### **ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ**

Ο όρος "υποκείμενο" έχει αποτελέσει συχνά αντικείμενο μελέτης στην Ιαπωνική γλωσσολογία. Σύμφωνα με τη λειτουργική γλωσσολογία το υποκείμενο διακρίνεται σε τρεις κατηγορίες: το θέμα ή αλλιώς το ψυχολογικό υποκείμενο, το γραμματικό υποκείμενο και τέλος το λογικό υποκείμενο. Το γεγονός ότι η Ιαπωνική γλώσσα δεν παρουσιάζει συμφωνία μεταξύ υποκειμένου και κατηγορήματος και ότι η παρουσία του υποκειμένου κρίνεται από το συγκεκριμένο μας οδηγούν στη διαπίστωση ότι στην περίπτωση της Ιαπωνικής η κατά τη λειτουργική γλωσσολογία δομή "θέμα-ρήμα" είναι ισχυρότερη από τη σχέση "υποκειμένου-κατηγορήματος" όπως νοείται στις Ευρωπαϊκές Γλώσσες. Προσπαθώντας να αναλύσουμε την θέση του όρου "υποκείμενο" στην Ιαπωνική γλωσσολογία παρατηρούμε ότι ενώ από την περίοδο Μείτζι και έπειτα η γενικότερη τάση που επικρατούσε στην Ιαπωνία ήταν κοινή με την αντίστοιχη δυτική αντιμετώπιση του υποκειμένου ως απαραίτητο συστατικό της πρότασης, τα τελευταία χρόνια οι απόψεις φαίνεται να δίστανται. Σύγχρονοι γλωσσολόγοι αναγνωρίζοντας την καταλύτικη για τη δομή της πρότασης δράση του μορίου wa, ως δείκτη του "θέματος" και όχι του "υποκειμένου", προτείνουν την εγκατάλειψη του όρου "υποκείμενο" στην Ιαπωνική γλώσσα θεωρώντας το κάθε άλλο παρά απαραίτητο για την ολοκλήρωση μιας πρότασης και

χαρακτηρίζοντας το ως υποκειμενικό συμπλήρωμα. Με αφορμή το ζήτημα της χρήσης ή μη του όρου "υποκείμενο" φαίνεται να έρχεται και πάλι στην επιφάνεια το δίλημμα μεταξύ παγκοσμίας ισχύος και πολιτισμικής προσαρμογής των επιστημονικών όρων.

Με δυο λόγια, εάν είναι όντως δυνατή η μετάφραση όρων από τη μία γλώσσα στην άλλη, τότε η αρχή της δυναμικής ισοδυναμίας θα μπορούσε να εφαρμοσθεί ακόμα και σε επίπεδο όρολογίας.

## **0 Introduction: Terminologies of science and their cultural background**

It is usually believed that terminologies of science have universal validity and are not affected by a particular culture. If this is true, then these terminologies are not cultural-specific; you can understand them sufficiently without making reference to any particular cultural contexts. But, artificial symbolism in natural sciences put aside, If any given technical term has been derived from its particular natural language, then, how far can it keep distance from its own cultural and linguistic background?

In his article titled "Categories of thought and Language", Emile Benveniste, well known French comparative linguist, said that Aristotelian categories of thought (ten abstract modes of predication based on ontology, which are considered to contribute to organize human experiences a priori) were not abstracted from logic of thought, but, rather, from the grammatical structure of language. Benveniste states;

Aristotle thus posits the totality of predictions that may be made about a being, and he aims to define the logical status of each one of them. Now it seems to us ---- and we shall try to show ---- that these distinctions are primarily categories of language and that, in fact, Aristotle, reasoning in the absolute, is simply identifying certain fundamental categories of the language in which he thought. (Benveniste 1971:57)

Then, it turns out that Aristotelian categories are nothing but reflections of "the language in which he thought", that is, Greek. Benveniste follows.

He was thus bound to reflect unconsciously the distinction which the language itself showed among the main classes of forms, since it is through their differences that these forms and

these classes have a linguistic meaning. He thought he was defining the attribute of objects but he was really setting up linguistic entities. (Benveniste 1971:61)

Benveniste's considerations help us to pay attention to the problem of cultural background of grammatical terminologies most of which were derived from logic. In this paper, we deal with the notion of "subject" in the Japanese language and examine what problem lies in the concept itself.

### 1 The concept of "subject" in functional linguistics

What is "subject"? There have been countless discussions about "subject" in various fields of study to be summarized in a brief definition. Having said this, it is important to set up a theoretical perspective which is relevant, in order to proceed with such a discussion. From the standpoint of functional grammar, which is most congruent with our concern, M. A. K. Halliday observes that the concept of subject can be divided into three categories as below (Halliday 2004:55-56).

- (1) Psychological subject; that which is the concern of the message
- (2) Grammatical subject: that of which something is being predicated
- (3) Logical subject: the doer of the action

In some cases these three aspects coincide in one word, but in other cases separate words are assigned each of the three subject roles. For example, in the following sentence, three functions are conflated in one word, "the duke".

the duke	gave my aunt the teapot
psychological subject	
grammatical subject	
logical subject	

In the following clause, which is derived from the first sentence, each function is distributed to three different words.

the teapot	my aunt	are given by	the duke
psychological subject	grammatical subject		logical subject

Halliday says that we should not consider these three functions as sub-division of one comprehensive notion: "They have to be interpreted as what they really are ---- three separate

and distinct functions. There is no such thing as a general concept of 'Subject' of which these are different varieties. They are not three kinds of anything; they are three quite different things."(Halliday 2004:57) And he renames psychological subject as "theme", grammatical subject as "subject", logical subject as "actor". These remarks are so important that we can set them as the starting point of our discussion, though we can put side "actor" because it is an extra-linguistic state of affairs. In the following section, the focus is put on the contrast between "theme" and "subject" in Japanese.

## 2 Theme and Rheme in Japanese

Halliday gives the following definition of "theme"; "The Theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that which locates and orients the clause within the context. The remainder of the message, the part in which the Theme is developed, is called in Prague school terminology Rheme."(Halliday 2004:64) According to Halliday, every language has certain procedures to organize messages into thematic structure but the method is different according to languages. For example, in English, "the theme is indicated by position in the clause. In speaking or writing English we signal that an item has thematic status by putting it first,"(ibid.) But there are languages which utilize other tools for marking theme. Here, Halliday properly remarks that "in Japanese, for example, there is a special postposition *-wa*, which signifies that whatever immediately precedes it is thematic."(ibid.) What does "whatever immediately precedes" mean? Please see the examples below.

Watashi -wa gakkou -ni iku.

I(pron.) particle school particle go

I go to school

Kyou -wa gakkou -ni iku.

today particle school particle go

(I) go to school today.

These two sentences have in common; "*gakkou ni iku*" which means "go to school" ("*ni*" is a postpositional particle of locative). The pronoun "*watashi*" before the particle "*-wa*" is the subject in the first sentence, but "*kyou*"(today) is not in the second. But, both words before *-wa* function as "theme", topics to be talked about. In this way, whatever word precedes *-wa* can become "theme" of the sentence. Furthermore, note that no word for grammatical subject can be found in the second sentence. It does not mean that it is an incomplete sentence nor some word of

subject is eliminated. In Japanese there is nothing missing in this sentence. This point is so important that we would like to discuss it in detail later on.

Certainly the particle “-*wa*” can designate the subject, but not in all cases. And other particles also are used for indicating grammatical subject, from which a very subtle distinction of meaning arises. The contrast of –*wa* and –*ga* is a well known example. For example, see these sentences.

- a. *Watashi wa Mary desu.*
- b. *Watashi ga Mary desu.*

Apparently, these two sentences have the same syntactic structure; “*watashi*” is the first person singular pronoun, “*desu*” is the copula in Japanese. and “*wa*” and “*ga*” are grammatical particles. And “*watashi*” is the subject of both sentences, but the meaning of the two sentences is different. According to some scholars’ view, a noun before “*wa*” is the old information already shared by a speaker and a hearer, while a noun before “*ga*” is the new information that a speaker wants to convey to a hearer. Using Halliday’s terminologies, it could be said that a noun before “*wa*” is the theme and a noun before “*ga*” is the rheme. That is to say, “*watashi*” is the theme and “*Mary*” is the rheme in the first sentence, while “*Mary*” is the theme and “*watashi*” is the rheme in the second. The relationship between theme and rheme can be reversed or changed by using different particles. It can be illustrated as below.

Watashi - <i>wa</i>	Maria desu
Theme	Rheme

Watashi – <i>ga</i>	Maria desu
Rheme	Theme

Thus, though they have the same syntax structure, the pragmatic meanings of these two sentences are entirely different.

### 3 The Debate about “Subject” in Japanese linguistics

Then, is it possible to speak about “subject” in Japanese in the same manner as we do in the grammar of European languages? In Japan, since the Meiji era, most grammarians have considered “subject” as an indispensable element of a sentence. But, faced with great difference between Japanese and European languages, some linguists are inclined to think it is not

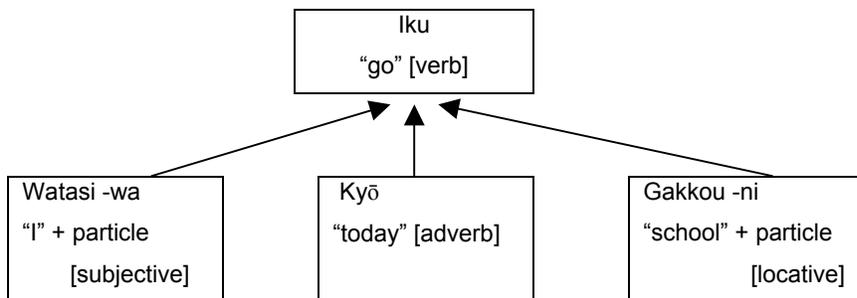
necessary to use the concept of "subject" in Japanese grammar. Among them the most famous is Akira Mikami. Mikami wrote a book entitled "*Zō wa hana ga nagai*", that means "An Elephant has a long nose". What is the question in this simple sentence? Its grammatical construction is as following.

Zō            -wa        hana    -ga        nagai"  
elephant   particle   nose   particle   long

In Japanese, there is no distinction between singular and plural noun, and a single adjective can be a predicate of a sentence. A predicate of this sentence is "*nagai*" that means "long". Then, what word is subject? "*Elephant*" or "*nose*"?

Mikami thought "subject" exists only in languages that demand the grammatical agreement of person and number between subject and predicate. But Japanese does not have such relationship of agreement at all. Therefore, Mikami observes, it is not necessary to use the term of "subject" in the Japanese grammar. According to him, in the sentence pattern like "*Zo wa hana ga nagai*", "NP+wa" is theme and "NP+ga" is subjective case. Neither is "subject" in the sense of European languages. Literally translated this sentence could be put like this: "As for an elephant the nose is long".

The argument of Mikami is very clear and elucidating. According to Mikami, in Japanese the thematic structure is often more important than the relationship between subject and predicate, and a subject does not have any prevalent status over other parts of a sentence. In a sense the subject is nothing but a complement of that sentence. For example, the structure of the sentence, "*watashi wa kyō gakkou ni iku*" (I go to school today), can be illustrated as below.



In this sentence, "I", "today" and "to school" are all complements that modify the predicate verb "go". So far as they are complements, it is possible to add or omit them according to contexts.

Mikami criticized severely the prevailing view that Japanese indicating no subject is an irrational language. Different languages use different modes of signification according to their linguistic structures. Some languages process given information through definite grammatical procedures, while others can do the same thing in the pragmatic manner, with the reference to the context. Mikami states that without any context it would be impossible to say which is the correct translation of an English phrase such as; "You are very kind" among four following French expressions; "Tu es très gentil". "Tu es très gentille". "Vous êtes très gentil". "Vous êtes très gentille". In fact, English does not have any grammatical rules which could determine the familiarity between speaker and hearer and the gender of subject in utterances, and leaves all of them to the reference to contexts. Nevertheless, nobody would consider English as an irrational language. According to Mikami, it is the same with subject in Japanese; it can be uttered or omitted depending on the context in which the utterance occurs. It is in this sense that the subject in Japanese exists only as a complement which can be added or omitted if necessary, not as a grammatical category which is indispensable for a sentence to be complete.

Mikami was a teacher of mathematics in high school for a long time and pursued the study of grammar outside academia. Owing to it, his writings had been ignored by academic linguists and grammarians. But, presently, the originality of his theory is recognized and highly appreciated by a lot of linguists and teachers of Japanese (e.g. Kanaya 2002).

In the next section, we deal with some examples concerning translation of the Japanese subject.

#### **4 Translatability of Japanese subject: some examples**

In the Greek language the subject is usually a noun in the nominative case, but more than often other words, such as pronouns, numerals, sentences or even adverbs are also used as subjects. The verb accords in person and number with the subject, that is the nominative part of the sentence (eg. *Ο Γιάννης είναι ψηλός. Ο Γιάννης και ο Κώστας είναι ψηλοί*). The subject is eliminated when it is a pronoun of the first or second person, since it is revealed by verb's ending. It is explicitly stated only for the reason of emphasis. Moreover, the subject in third person of singular/plural may be eliminated when allowed, which means either when it is revealed by the context itself, or when it is indefinite/general (e.g. people, things), or when it is

expressed by the verb (e.g. verbs describing natural phenomena, such as to snow). The subject is not indicated at all when the verb is impersonal. Some impersonal verbs are preceded by personal pronouns in the genitive case but their subject is actually the noun that follows (eg. *Μου αρέσουν τα ταξίδια.*). In this kind of syntax, the normal position for the subject is after the verb but there are cases where the subject may be found before the personal pronoun. It is also possible to use a secondary clause as a subject (eg. *Μου αρέσει να ταξιδεύω.*), in this case its verb should have as the subject, the personal pronoun of the main sentence (eg. *Μου αρέσει να ταξιδεύω.: Εγώ = Subject of the second clause*).

In other words, it is not always necessary to state the subject, unless demanded for coherence. Therefore, it is clear that its presence depends on pragmatic factors and sentence structure.

Keeping in mind the above general characteristics of the subject in Greek, we will try to see how we can translate the Japanese subject into Greek. Even though in Greek the subject is usually revealed by a verb's ending, in Japanese there is not such a rule, but there are other words, grammatical particles, indicating the subject of the sentence such as *-wa*, *-ga*, *-mo*, *-nara*, etc.. The only problem is what we consider as subject in Japanese. A simple definition is: the person, the thing or the situation to which the sentence is referred. For instance, in the following example *watashi wa tanaka desu* [= I am Tanaka] the subject is *watashi* [I] as shown by the word *-wa* and as expressed by the context. In this case, the translation into Greek poses no problems, since the subject of the sentence is the same as the subject of the verb. But, in the phrase, *kono tegami wa, watashi ga kakimashita* [= I wrote this letter] even though the subject of the verb is *watashi* [I] the subject of the sentence is the word *tegami* [letter]. In other words, the formal subject of the last sentence might be *watashi*, but the semantic subject is *tegami*.

To be more specific, in this example the word *wa*, introduces the theme of the sentence, while the word *ga* shows the subject of the verb, in other words, the formal subject of the sentence. When translating from Japanese into Greek the translator will probably transform the first subject into direct object and keep the second subject as the subject of the translated sentence. Therefore, the most common translation would be "I wrote this letter". The truth is that the syntax SVO can be changed into the form of SOV in Japanese; *watashi wa/ga kono tegami o kakimashita* (= I wrote this letter.). Therefore, instead of two subjects SSV the author of the original could easily have used the form SVO.

The most important difference between the two Japanese phrases lies not in syntactic but rather in the semantic and stylistic order. Let's see again the two examples:

- a. *Kono tegami wa, watashi ga kakimashita.*
- b. *Watashi wa/ga kono tegami o kakimashita.*

"kono" is a demonstrative, "tegami" means "letter", "kakimashita" is the past tense of the verb "write". In the example (a) the sentence is nothing more than an explanation about the letter's author, while in the example (b) the sentence offers information about the subject I, specifying what I did (as the subject). If we translate both examples into the form SVO, the intention of the original (example a) to put more emphasis on the letter than the subject I, will not be conveyed. If we would like to put emphasis on the word letter we could use passive form, where the subject *tegami*, will be put as the subject and the subject *watashi* will become an agent. But, since the passive form exists also in Japanese, if the intention of the original was to emphasize on the word letter by using passive voice, example (a) would be written as *kono tegami wa (watashi ni yotte) kakaremashita* (= This letter is written by me). Therefore, by choosing the passive form when translating the example (a) our goal is partly achieved: keeping letter in the S position, but at the same time we make a syntactic and mainly stylistic change.

It is clear that in the above example syntactic equivalence can't be achieved, one of two subjects must change syntactic role. Therefore, our attention should be directed mainly towards finding a stylistic equivalent, respecting the active voice used on the original and the desire to emphasize on the word letter. While searching for a stylistic equivalent we should be guided by the context. For instance, if the example (a) is part of a dialogue between John and Mary and serves as Mary's answer to John's question "Who wrote this letter?" (= *Kono tegami wa, dare ga kakimashita ka.*) a suggestion would be to translate it by the phrase like "This letter? I wrote it!".

## 5 Conclusion

Then, following the theory of Mikami, is it necessary to completely abandon the "subject" from Japanese linguistics? As a linguist says (I'ori 2003), the use of the term "subject" does not cause any problem if one keeps in mind the important fact that Mikami pointed out: in Japanese a subject is nothing but one of complements of a sentence. In this sense, we should adopt a nominalistic perspective concerning terminologies, which does not assume any abstract entities for grammatical concepts. By doing this, it is possible to modify the outlines of theoretical

concepts according to languages to be described. We need not take on an essentialist view that might consider the same universal categories to be applicable for all languages.

Languages are historical products that develop continually under their own cultural circumstances. The most abstract meta-language can not erase its original historicity. Does this mean that terminologies are culture-specific? This is not always so. As it is known, translation is not just a mechanical transposition of words, but dynamic process in the historical context between source language and target language. If it is possible to translate terminologies into other languages, it means that the principle of dynamic equivalence in translation is applicable not only to ordinary expressions but also to terminologies of science. Thinking in this way, we could say the historicity of a language is not a negative restraint but rather a favorable condition that makes possible the translation of terminologies.

## 6 References

- [1] Benveniste, Emile 1971. *Problems in General Linguistics*, University of Miami Press.
- [2] Halliday, Michael A.K. 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Third Edition, Hodder Education.
- [3] I'ori, Isao 2003. "Zou wa hana ga nagai" *Nyūmon* (Introduction to "Elephants have long noses"), Kuroshio Shuppan.
- [4] Mikami, Akira 1960. *Zou wa hana ga nagai* (Elephants have long noses), Kuroshio Shuppan.
- [5] Mikami, Akira 1963. *Nihongo no ronri* (Logic of Japanese), Kuroshio Shuppan.
- [6] Kanaya, Takehiro 2002. *Nihongo ni Syugo wa Iranai* (The Japanese language does not need any subject), Kodansha.

## Glossary

Agreement (between subject and verb)	Συμφωνία
Complement	Συμπλήρωμα
Context	Συγκείμενο
Copula	Συνδετικό Ρήμα
Essentialism	Ουσιοκρατία
Function	Λειτουργία
Functional linguistics	Λειτουργική Γλωσσολογία
Nominalism	Ονοματοκρατία
Object	Αντικείμενο
Particle	Μόριο
Person	Πρόσωπο
Pragmatics	Πραγματολογία

Predicate  
Pro-drop  
Pronoun  
Rheme  
Semantics  
Subject  
Syntax  
Term  
Terminology  
Theme  
Translation

Κατηγορημα  
Παράλειψη Υποκειμένου  
Αντωνυμία  
Ρήμα  
Σημασιολογία  
Υποκειμενο  
Σύνταξη  
Όρος  
Ορολογία  
Θέμα  
Μετάφραση

### **Keisuke Kasuya**

Professor, Graduate School of Language and Society, Hitotsubashi University  
2-1 Naka, Kunitachi-shi, Tokyo, Japan, P.C. 186-8601  
Tel. +81 42 580 8645  
E-mail: cs00190@srv.cc.hit-u.ac.jp

### **Maria Kovani**

Student of the doctoral course of the Graduate School of Language and Society, Hitotsubashi University  
1-14-23-207 Naka, Kunitachi-shi, Tokyo, Japan, P.C. 186-0004  
Tel.: +81 80 56 42 74 96  
E-mail: makovani@hotmail.com