

## Article 1: Topic and Subject

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### 1. What is a Topic?

Most Japanese sentences have a topic. The topic appears at the head of the sentence and indicates what is being discussed in the sentence. Sentence (1) below, for example, establishes 東京 as the topic and then discusses it, stating that it is 日本の首都.

(1) 東京は 日本の首都です。 Tokyo is the capital of Japan.

Similarly, sentences (2) and (3) below discuss the topics この部屋 and わたし respectively.

(2) この部屋は 静かです。 This room is quiet.

(3) わたしは 先週 ディズニーランドへ 行きました。

I went to Disneyland last week.

The topic of a sentence is marked by the particle は. This means that a sentence with a topic is composed of two main parts, one before the は (the topic) and the other after it (the discourse).

(1) 東京は 日本の首都です。  
topic discourse

### 2. What is a Subject?

The subject of a sentence is the most important element for the sentence's predicate (a verb, adjective or noun + です). For example, with verbs such as 飲みます (drink) or 走ります (run), the subject is whoever is doing the drinking or running; with verbs such as います or あります (be, exist), it is the person or thing that exists; with verbs such as 降ります (rain) or 吹きます (blow) it is the event's principal actor (i.e. whatever is raining or blowing); with adjectives such as 大きいです (big) or 有名です (famous) or nouns such as 学生です (student) or 病気です (illness), it is the possessor of the attribute mentioned; and with adjectival predicates such as 好きです (like) or 怖いです (fear), it is the experiencer of the feeling mentioned. Thus, all of the noun phrases underlined in the examples below are subjects.

In sentences that do not have a topic, the subject is marked by the particle が.

(4) 太郎が ビールを 飲みました。 Taro drank some beer.

(5) 机の 上に 本が あります。 There is a book on the desk.

(6) きのう <sup>あめ</sup>雨<sup>が</sup> <sup>ふ</sup>降りました。 It rained yesterday.

### 3. How Do Topics and Subjects Relate to Each Other?

Although topics and subjects are different concepts, they are closely related. In most sentences with a topic, the topic is also the subject. For example, <sup>たなか</sup>田中<sup>さん</sup>、<sup>さとう</sup>佐藤<sup>さん</sup> and わたし in sentences (7), (8) and (9) below are all topics (because they are all marked with は), but at the same time they are also subjects (because they are each the possessor of an attribute or the experiencer of a feeling).

(7) 田中<sup>さん</sup>は <sup>ゆうめい</sup>有名<sup>です</sup>。 Mr. Tanaka is famous.

(8) 佐藤<sup>さん</sup>は <sup>がくせい</sup>学生<sup>です</sup>。 Ms. Sato is a student.

(9) わたしは <sup>いぬ</sup>犬<sup>が</sup> <sup>こわ</sup>怖い<sup>です</sup>。 I'm scared of dogs.

Although it is relatively common for the topic and subject of a sentence to coincide like this, sometimes they do not. In sentence (10) below, for example, <sup>ほん</sup>この本 is the topic (because it is marked with は), but (because it is <sup>たなか</sup>田中<sup>さん</sup> who performs the action of <sup>か</sup>書きます) <sup>ほん</sup>この本 is not the subject.

(10) この本<sup>は</sup> <sup>たなか</sup>田中<sup>さん</sup>が <sup>か</sup>書きました。 Mr. Tanaka wrote this book.

Sentence (10) can be thought of as being sentence (11) with <sup>ほん</sup>この本<sup>を</sup> taken as the topic.

(11) <sup>たなか</sup>田中<sup>さん</sup>が この本<sup>を</sup> <sup>か</sup>書きました。 Mr. Tanaka wrote this book.

(12) この本<sup>を</sup> <sup>たなか</sup>田中<sup>さん</sup>が <sup>か</sup>書きました。 Mr. Tanaka wrote this book.

In other words, <sup>ほん</sup>この本 has moved to the head of the sentence, and is marked with は to indicate that it is the topic. However, because <sup>を</sup>を and <sup>は</sup>は cannot be used together when this is done, <sup>を</sup>を is eliminated and only <sup>は</sup>は remains, forming sentence (10).

Note that, although <sup>が</sup>が and <sup>を</sup>を cannot be combined with <sup>は</sup>は, other particles can, so sentences like (13) and (14) are possible.

(13) 田中<sup>さん</sup>には <sup>わたし</sup>わたしが <sup>れんらく</sup>連絡<sup>します</sup>。

I will get in touch with Mr. Tanaka.

(14) 山田<sup>さん</sup>からは <sup>へんじ</sup>返事<sup>が</sup> <sup>き</sup>来<sup>ません</sup>でした。

No reply came from Ms. Yamada.

### 4. Sentences with and without Topics

Although most Japanese sentences have topics, some do not. In a sentence with a topic, the subject is marked by は, and in a sentence without a topic, it is marked by

が. Some examples of the use of topic-less sentences are given below.

1) When describing an event exactly as seen, heard, etc.

A sentence without a topic is used when describing an event exactly as perceived by any of the five senses:

(15) あっ、雨が降っています。 Oh, it's raining.

(16) ラジオの 音が 小さいです。 The radio's [too] quiet.

(17) (窓の 外を見て) 月が きれいだなあ。

(*looking out of a window*) The moon's lovely, isn't it?

2) When communicating an event objectively, or at the start of a story

A topic-less sentence is also used in these cases:

(18) きのう 太郎が 来ました。 Taro came yesterday.

(19) 来週 パーティーが あります。 There's a party next week.

(20) むかしむかし ある ところに おじいさんと おばあさんが いました。

Long, long ago, in a certain place, there was an old man and an old woman.

## Article 2: Clauses

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A clause is the form that a sentence takes when it is part of a longer sentence.

For example, in (1) and (2) below, the sentences 田中さんがここへ来ました and あした雨が降ります have become part of a longer sentence, taking the underlined forms.

(1) 田中さんがここへ来たとき、山田さんはいませんでした。

When Ms. Tanaka arrived, Mr. Yamada wasn't here.

(2) あした雨が降ったら、わたしは出かけません。

If it rains tomorrow, I'm not going out.

A clause that forms part of a longer sentence in this way is called a subordinate clause, while the part of the sentence left behind if the subordinate clause is removed is called the main clause.

A subordinate clause amplifies the meaning of the main clause. For example, the subordinate clause in example (2) limits what is said in the main clause by specifying あした雨が降ったら as a condition of my not going out.

In Japanese, a subordinate clause usually precedes the main clause.

The subject of a subordinate clause is marked by が, not by は, except when the clause is a ～が or a ～けど clauses.