



## Grammar and Interactional Discourse: Marking Non-topical Subject in Japanese Conversation

### インターアクションと文法：日本語の会話における「が」の非トピック明示機能

Michiko Kaneyasu  
University of Colorado, Boulder

#### Abstract

*This chapter aims to demonstrate the role of the postpositional particle ga in the collaborative organization of discourse topic in Japanese conversation. Discourse topic is not static; it is a dynamic notion that is interactionally achieved in dialogic communication under a “triadic interactional framework.” The interactional triangle involves three nodes representing the speaker, the interlocutor, and the object or event on which the conversational participants place attention. The jointly attended object or event serves as a local discourse topic and a common reference point for achieving alignment and intersubjectivity (e.g., sense of shared understanding, awareness, feeling, or perspective), which is one major goal of conversational interaction. In this study, I examine face-to-face and telephone conversations involving two human referents, and analyze the role of ga in guiding and maintaining the co-participants’ orientation to the common topic. I show that ga has the function of explicitly indicating the non-topicality of a ga-marked subject which participates in a sequence of actions expressed by upcoming predicate(s), and thereby contributes to the collaborative achievement of discourse topic. These findings shed light on the interplay between grammar and interaction.*

#### 要旨

本章では、日本語の会話の中でのトピックの協同的確立において後置詞「が」がどのような役割を果たしているのかを考察することを目的とする。トピックは静的な

ものではなく「三項関係的な相互行為の枠組み」に基づいた対話において相互的に築きあげられる動的な概念である。相互行為の三項関係は話者、対話者、そして二者が共同注意を向ける対象の三点で結ばれている。共同注意の対象は会話のトピックとしてだけでなく相互主観性(理解・認識・感情・観点などの共有感)を達成する為の指示対象としての役割も果たす。本研究では、一つ以上の指示物が存在する対面会話と電話会話を分析し、「が」には主語の非トピック性、そしてその主語がこれから述べられる述語の表す行為や事態と結びつくことを明示する働きがあり、トピックの相互的達成に重要に関わっていることを明らかにする。本研究結果は文法とインターアクションの密接な相互関係性を示唆している。

## Introduction

The postpositional particle *ga* is one of the most discussed topics in the field of Japanese linguistics (e.g., Kuno, 1972, 1973; Tsutsui, 1983; Masunaga, 1988; Shibatani, 1990; Noda, 1996; Ono, Thompson, & Suzuki, 2000). The particle is most widely accepted as a grammatical subject marker, indicating the subject of a transitive or intransitive predicate. At the same time, the function of *ga* as a marker of new information is also recognized and discussed by a number of linguists (e.g., Kuno, 1972, 1973; Hinds & Hinds, 1979; Hinds, 1983; Iwasaki, 1985; Shibatani, 1990; Lambrecht, 1994).

Kuno (1972) first identified the correlation between *ga*-marking and new information, claiming that “[*ga*] as subject marker in [a] matrix sentence always signals that the subject conveys new, unpredictable information” (p. 273).<sup>1</sup> The following example illustrates the unpredictability requirement for *ga*-marking (Kuno, 1972, p. 277):

- (1) *gootoo ga boku no ie ni haitta.*

‘A robber broke into my house.’

*sono gootoo \*ga/wa boku ni pisutoru o tsukitsukete kane o dase to itta.*

‘The robber pointed a gun at me, and said, “Give me money.”’

In (1), there is only one robber under discussion and the referent has been introduced into the discourse in the first sentence, hence the subject of the predicates ‘pointed a gun and said...’ in the second sentence is given. This is why the use of *ga* after *sono gootoo* ‘the robber’ results in ungrammaticality. However, as Maynard (1981, p. 115–116) shows in the modified example below, given the appropriate context, the use of *ga* following given information is grammatically acceptable.

- (2) *gootoo ga boku no ie ni haitta.*

‘A robber broke into my house.’

*sono gootoo ga boku ni pisutoru o tsukitsukete kane o dase to itta.*

‘The robber pointed a gun at me, and said, “Give me money.”’

*sono toki tomodachi no Yamanaka-san ga heya ni haitte kita.*

‘Then my friend Yamanaka came into the room.’

*Yamanaka-san wa doa no soba ni atta raihuru o tsukamu to atarikamawazu uchidasita.*

‘As soon as (he) grabbed the rifle by the door, Yamanaka began to shoot wildly.’

Example (2) differs from (1) in that the writer introduces a third participant *Yamanaka-san* into the discourse and subsequently marks it with *wa*. Maynard (1981, 1987) argues that

<sup>1</sup> According to Kuno (1972), *ga*-marked NP in subordinate clauses can represent either new or old information.

the function of *wa* is to mark thematic information, while the function of *ga* is to mark non-thematic, subordinate information in narrative discourse (see also Noda, 1996). The acceptability of *sono gootoo ga* in the second sentence in Example (2) is counter-evidence against Kuno's claim that *ga* always marks new or unpredictable information.

My conversational data basically supports Maynard's claim that *ga* marks a non-topical subject in discourse involving two or more persistent referents.<sup>2</sup> However, the notion of topic that is relevant to written narratives seems to diverge from one that is relevant to conversational discourse. Maynard defines topic (or what she terms 'theme') as "the conceptual framework within which the story is told, presented and performed" (Maynard, 1981, p. 124). In written narratives, the topic is the central character from whose point of view the entire story is told. As I will discuss in the section on local discourse topic below, the notion of global discourse topic is suitable to the organization of written narratives whereas unplanned spontaneous spoken discourse, such as that found in conversation, requires a more open and labile notion of topic. Real-time production and comprehension of utterances in conversational discourse place a higher cognitive load on the participants in terms of how much information they can process at a time. Another important characteristic of conversation is its interactional nature. That is, the conversational participants do not just exchange information about a certain topic but they share their feelings, opinions, evaluations, and so on, with their co-participants concerning a given topic.

The primary finding in this study is that speakers use *ga*-marking to locally indicate the non-topicality of the *ga*-marked referent, and by doing so, they make sure that the co-participants' attentions are directed to the discourse topic. Securing joint attention is a prerequisite for collaborative sharing of the conversational participants' points of view in ongoing discourse. *Ga*-marking thus contributes to achieving successful dialogic interaction.

Let us look at an initial example to explore this function of *ga* in conversation. In the following excerpt (3), Hiro is telling his friend Jun about a Japanese fast food restaurant, Yoshinoya, and its first franchise restaurants in the U.S., In line 5, a former employee is introduced into the discourse with *ga*. Despite its given information status, the employee is marked by *ga* again in line 7.

(3) *ga*-marking in conversation (ja\_4573)<sup>3,4</sup>

1. Hiro: *de denbaa kara hajimete:, jukken gurai tsukuttan da kedo, kekkyoku nanka*  
'So (Yoshinoya) began (its overseas expansion) in Denver, and built about ten  
*anmari umaku ikanakute:,*  
restaurants, but it didn't go very well in the end.'

<sup>2</sup> The referent persistence is often equated with the notion of topicality (Givón, 1983; Clancy & Downing, 1987). See the section on referent persistence vs. topicality for further discussion on the correlations between the two concepts.

<sup>3</sup> The data source for each excerpt is indicated in the parentheses. See the section on data for more information about the data used in the present study.

<sup>4</sup> The segments from conversations provided in this study are transcribed based on the transcription system of Du Bois, Schuetze-Coburn, Cumming, and Paolino (1993), and the intonation unit (IU) is the basic unit of transcription and of analysis. The following intonation contours mark the end of each IU: [.] falling intonation; [,] continuing intonation; [?] rising intonation. Due to space limitations, in some cases, multiple IUs are presented on single lines. Other transcription conventions used in this study are listed in the Appendix.

2. Jun: *un.*  
'Yeah.'
3. Hiro: *de hikiharaao to shita toki ni;*  
'and when they were about to move out,'
4. Jun: *un.*  
'Uh huh.'
- 5.→Hiro: *ano:: soko de hataraiteta hitori no hito ga, zenbu yoshinoya kara jukken*  
'Ummm one of the employees who worked there bought all the ten restaurants  
*kaitottan desu yo.*  
from Yoshinoya.'
6. Jun: *a honto:.*  
'Oh, really.'
- 7.→Hiro: *hai. de sono hito ga ima moritatete:, kaisha no namae kaete,*  
'Yes. And that person has now revived (the company), and changed the company's name,'

The *ga*-marking in line 7 neither functions to introduce a new referent, nor is it employed just to indicate the grammatical subject of the predicate. As will be shown in the rest of this chapter, *ga*-attached given referents (i.e., those that are previously introduced) recurrently appear in the discourse environment in which there are two persistent referents. In the excerpt (3) above, for example, the second mention of the former employee in line 7 could have indicated a topic shift from Yoshinoya's franchise restaurants in the U.S., to the former employee. However, Hiro marks the given referent with *ga* in line 7 to explicitly indicate its non-topical status so as to maintain Yoshinoya as the ongoing topic of conversation. As seen in this example, the non-topic marking function of *ga* is observed in conversational data involving more than one referent potentially competing for topical status. The conversational data in the present study will explicate how conversational participants use *ga* as a local non-topic marking device so as to orient and maintain the co-participants' attention to the ongoing topic of the conversation.

### Previous studies on *ga*

Kuno (1972, p. 273) distinguishes two kinds of *ga* functioning as a subject marker: neutral description and exhaustive listing. Exhaustive listing refers to a sentence that singles out the subject X, as in 'X (and only X)...' or 'it is X that...,' while neutral description refers to an objective observation of an event, an action, or a state of affairs. Although there are some instances of the exhaustive listing *ga* in my data,<sup>5</sup> most instances of *ga* found in the

<sup>5</sup> The following is an example of the exhaustive listing from my data (*Nihongo*). Prior to the following segment, Nao tells Yuko about some restaurants in the neighborhood she does not know. After Yuko displays her admiration of Nao's knowledge (line 1), Nao humbly says that everyone knows the restaurants (line 2).

- 1 Yuko: *ho:, yoku shitteru yone?:, ... ironna [resutoran].*  
'Wow, you know various restaurants (in the area) so well.'
- 2 Nao: *[tabun minna shi]tte @masu @yo?*  
'Probably everyone knows (them).'

present data are of the neutral description type. Observe the following example of neutral descriptive *ga* (Kuno, 1972, p. 272, with minor changes in the styles and glosses):

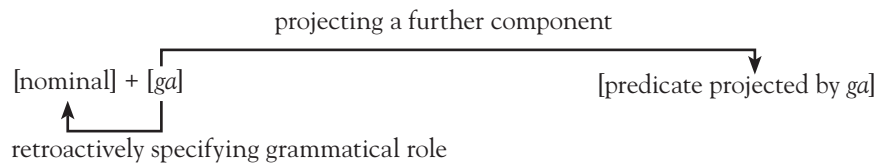
(4) Neutral description

*oya, John ga kita.*

‘Oh, look. John has come.’

In (4), the speaker has just seen John coming. The utterance in (4) represents the event as a whole. Iwasaki (forthcoming) further notes that “when the speaker utters these [neutral descriptive] sentences, ...no part of these sentences has been activated in the mind of the speaker, both [the entity and its temporary situation] are simultaneously activated on the spot” (p. 18). We can imagine a situation in which a speaker observes a state or event and immediately expresses his or her observation using *ga*. Although such use of *ga* is not common in dialogic interaction, the function of *ga* to mark a non-topical subject is closely related to the neutral descriptive *ga*. That is, *ga* presents the referent as being part of a state or event expressed by the predicate as if the scene is being observed in its entirety with no focus on individual components (see also Sunakawa, 2005, p. 178–182). The strategic use of *ga* functions to indicate the non-topic status of the referent, thereby preventing a false topic-shift.

In the study of turn-taking organization in conversation, Tanaka (1999) demonstrates how *ga* can be employed by conversational participants as an important grammatical resource for projecting further components of an unfolding utterance by creating a grammatical link between the preceding element and the following component yet to be produced. That is, when *ga* is uttered, it marks the preceding NP as a syntactic subject and at the same time projects that a predicate will follow at some point in the ongoing utterance. Figure 1, adapted and modified from Hayashi (2004, p. 350), is a schematic representation of this process:



**Figure 1.** Grammatical link created by *ga*

While Tanaka (1999) and Hayashi (2004) emphasize the grammatical function of *ga* in conversation, Ono et al. (2000) focus on the pragmatic aspect of the particle. According to their research, the use of *ga* as a subject marker is highly infrequent in unplanned spontaneous conversation, and the particle only appears in pragmatically salient environments where the relationship between the *ga*-marked NP and the predicate is difficult to grasp. For example, *ga*-marking is observed under situations where an NP (1) is singled out, (2) introduces a concept, (3) is phonologically ‘unusual,’ i.e., a complex NP, a one-mora NP (see also Tsutsui, 1984) or a foreign NP (see also Yamaji, 1998), or (4) names a

3 Yuko: *ei?! shi- sonna koto nain ja nai?*

‘What? kno- (I) don’t think that’s the case.’

4 → *Nao chan ga, yoku shitten ja nai?*

‘It is Nao (you) who knows (the restaurants in the area) well, don’t you think?’

In response to Nao’s remark, Yuko says (line 4), *Nao chan ga yoku shitten ja nai?*, singling out Nao as the only person who knows these restaurants.

concept which is under negotiation.<sup>6</sup> Based on these findings, the authors conclude that *ga* is a pragmatic marker indicating that the *ga*-marked NP is a participant of the state or event represented by the predicate in pragmatically salient situations.

Iwasaki (1985) investigates the possible correlation between *ga*-marking and new information in spoken “pear story” narratives<sup>7</sup> with a particular focus on initial mentions of referents in terms of their grammatical roles, i.e., the subject of a transitive predicate (A), the subject of an intransitive predicate (S), or the direct object of a transitive predicate (O) (following the style of Comrie, 1978 and Dixon, 1979), and postpositional particle markings. He found that human participants were introduced most frequently in the S role (55.3%) and then by the A role (17.6%). The result of his study suggests that Du Bois’ (1985) “given A constraint,” i.e., avoiding introducing a new referent in the A role, is not fully operative in Japanese narrative discourse. In order to account for the disconformities, Iwasaki discusses, among other factors,<sup>8</sup> the use of *ga* to introduce a new referent into discourse. Out of 62 human referents who were introduced in either the S role or the A role, more than 90 percent (56 referents) were introduced with *ga*-marking.

The use of *ga* is often compared with that of *wa* in terms of given/new and topic/non-topic distinctions (e.g., Kuno, 1972; Hinds and Hinds, 1979; Maynard, 1981; Shibatani, 1990; Noda, 1996). Noda (1996), for example, states that when an NP has previously been introduced into the discourse, the NP can be topicalized by means of *wa*-marking. Thus, if the given NP is marked by *ga*, it means that *ga*-marking is chosen by the speaker over *wa*-marking to indicate the NP’s non-topical status (Noda, 1996). Maynard (1981, 1987) also argues that the functions of *wa* and *ga* are in complementary distribution, with *wa* marking topical and *ga* non-topical information. However, this *ga-wa* dichotomy does not provide an account that reflects the use of these particles in actual spoken discourse. As Clancy and Downing (1987) show, many instances of *wa*-marking in spoken discourse do not mark the topical status of the NPs but instead mark a local contrast between *wa*-marked NPs and some other explicit or implicit elements. In addition, *wa*-marking is not the only means to indicate the topical status of an NP; zero-marking, *tte*-marking, the conditional *to ieba*, and zero anaphor are all possible means of encoding topic in Japanese (Suzuki, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> The following are some examples presented in Ono et al. (2000):

(1) NP is singled out: (p. 70)

*uchi tte hora onna ga minna dekai ja nai?*

‘My family, see women are all big, aren’t they?’

(2) NP introduces a concept: (p. 71)

*Harajuku ni Janiizu Shoppu ga dekita no.*

‘Johnny’s Shop has opened in Harajuku.’

(3) NP is phonologically ‘unusual’ (complex NP): (p. 68)

*nanka nikkori to suggoi kawaiku waratten no ga atta n da yo ne.*

‘There was uh (this) very cute smiling one (i.e., photo).’

(4) NP names a concept which is under negotiation: (p. 72)

A: *dono ko?* ‘Which child?’

B: *a, ue, oniichan ga.* ‘Uh, older, the older brother.’

<sup>7</sup> Native speakers were asked to watch a silent film and describe what happened in the film. For a full description of “the pear stories” film, see Chafe (1980).

<sup>8</sup> Two other factors he presents are the constraint against animate objects and the lack of grammatical devices to place the agent in a non-subject position (Iwasaki, 1985).

This suggests that, in order to uncover its function, we must examine the use of *ga* in actual discourse, going beyond a mere comparison of *ga* and *wa*.

The present study investigates the use of *ga* in conversational discourse and illustrates its role in the discourse topic organization in ongoing interaction. It will demonstrate that conversational participants more often refer to topical NPs using zero anaphora to maintain discourse continuity unless there are some discourse boundaries, in which case *wa*- or zero-markings are employed (see footnote 21 for more details). In contrast, *ga*-marking is employed whenever the conversational participants see the need to explicitly indicate the non-topical status of an NP in order to maintain the topical status of another referent.

### Triadic interactional framework

The triadic interactional framework represents the most fundamental structure of human interaction. In their earliest years, infants begin to learn how to establish joint-attentional focus with their caregivers on an object by constantly monitoring the caregivers' attention on both the object and themselves. These behaviors are "triadic in the sense that they involve infants coordinating their interactions with both objects and people, resulting in a referential triangle of child, adult, and the object or event to which they share attention" (Tomasello, 2003, p. 21).

This joint-attention frame (Carpenter, Nagell, & Tomasello, 1998; Tomasello, 2003), or what Du Bois (2007) terms a "stance triangle," is at work in adult-adult communication as well. For instance, when we share our opinion about something with someone, we must first make sure that our partner's attention is focused on the object of evaluation. In infant-adult interactions where interactional participants are face-to-face and the object of attention is physically present, non-linguistic resources such as gaze-following can be used to secure joint attention. On the other hand, in adult-adult conversational interactions, the object of attention is more likely not to be physically present and there may be more than one referent which could be a potential focus of attention. Conversational participants therefore need additional resources to gain and maintain their partners' attention to the object of focus (i.e., a discourse topic). The present study investigates discourse environments where more than one referent is involved in an attempt to demonstrate how the use of *ga*-marking contributes to locally securing and maintaining co-participants' attention to a discourse topic.

### Local discourse topic

The notion of topic adopted in this study is a cognitive-pragmatic notion and is defined in terms of "aboutness," that is, what is being talked about (van Dijk, 1977a, 1977b; van Oosten, 1986). There are three dimensions of topic discussed in previous literature: sentential topic, local discourse topic, and global discourse topic. In what follows, the three types of topic are examined in light of the present conversational data (see the section on data for a description of the data). As will be seen later, the analysis of the conversational data suggests that it is the notion of a local discourse topic that is most relevant to the topic organization in Japanese conversational discourse. A local discourse topic is not only the entity about which the information is given at a local level of discourse, but also the focal referential point for various socio-interactional activities by the conversational participants.

### Sentential topic

The concept of sentential topic has been effectively utilized in analyzing sentence structures (e.g., Kuno, 1972; Lambrecht, 1994). However, in the analysis of spontaneous conversation, the concept of sentential topic, together with the very concept of a sentence, may not be adequately applied. From the perspective of topicality, it is extremely difficult to identify

a sentential topic in conversational data. For example, in excerpt (5) below, the sentences in lines 6, 11, and 12 each have two sentential topic candidates, but neither of them is expressed because of their given information status.

- (5) Sentential topic (ja\_0862)
1. Mom: *a, moshimoshi?*  
'Uh, hello?'
  2. Aya: *un.*  
'Yeah.'
  3. Mom: *nanka ne,*  
'Well,'
  4. Aya: *un.*  
'Mhm.'
  5. Mom: *ima sono: [rokuon no],*  
'Just now, uh:m, the recording's,'
  - 6.→ Aya: (zeroNP) (zeroNP) [*kiita desho?*]  
'(You) heard (it), right?'
  7. Mom: [[*un*]].  
'Uh huh.'
  8. Aya: [[*un*]].  
'Yeah.'
  9. Mom: (zeroNP) *yu[ttā kara]?*,  
'Because (on the recording, it) said,'
  10. Aya: [*soo soo*].  
'Right right.'
  11. → (zeroNP) (zeroNP) *ii?*  
'(Are you) fine (with it)?'
  - 12.→ Mom: (zeroNP) (zeroNP) *ii yo.*  
'(I'm) fine (with it).'
  13. Aya: *hai hai.*  
'Okay.'

We could say that these sentences are about 'the speaker' (line 12) or 'the listener' (lines 6 and 11). At the same time, we could also say that the sentences are about 'the recording' (line 6) or 'being recorded' (lines 11 and 12). The fact that the interlocutors have no trouble understanding each other's utterances indicates that the identification of "sentential" topic is irrelevant or unnecessary in successfully carrying out conversation.

### Global discourse topic vs. local discourse topic

In the previous section, we saw that the sentential topic was not a relevant notion to be employed in analyzing conversational discourse. In this section, the concepts of global and



local discourse topics are compared in an attempt to understand how “aboutness” (van Dijk, 1977a, 1977b; van Oosten, 1986) is understood by conversational participants.

When we examine the subsequent development of the conversation between Aya and her mother in excerpt (6), we notice that none of the zero NPs in (5) are made into a topic of any larger segment. Instead, the speakers initiate new discourse topics, explicitly marking them with *wa* in lines 17 and 25.

(6) Self-initiated discourse topic (ja\_0862)

14. Mom: [hai].  
‘Yes.’
15. Aya: [sor]ede ne?  
‘And,’
16. Mom: un.  
‘Yeah.’
- 17.→Aya: *untmenkenkyo wa*,  
‘The driver’s license,’
18. *saisho ni jitchi shike- a: gakka shiken to:, me no shiken de ne?*  
‘First, (there is a) driving te- u:m a paper test and, an eye exam, and,’
19. Mom: un.  
‘Uh huh.’
- 20.→Aya: *tsugini are ga aru no, ano:, ano: ji- jitchi unten?*  
‘Next, there’s that, uh:m, uh: a driving test?’
21. Mom: un.  
‘Yeah.’
22. Aya: *sorede mada ukete nakute:*,  
‘And, (I) haven’t taken (it),’
23. Mom: un.  
‘Mhm.’
24. Aya: un.  
‘Yeah.’
- 25.→Mom: *jitchi wa sono:*,  
‘The driving test uh:m,’
26. *anta, (H) ano: doraibingu suku:ru, iku tte itteta desho:.*  
‘You, uh, a driving school, (you) said (you) were going to.’

In line 15, Aya marks the discourse boundary between the previous talk and what is to follow with the coordination marker *sorede*, which can be used to signal a return from a digression to a previously discussed idea (Ito, 1995; Sadler, 2006). In line 17, Aya reintroduces the idea of *untmenkenkyo* ‘the driver’s license (application)’ as the topic of discourse with *wa*-marking. Although this idea is not mentioned prior to line 17 in the ongoing telephone

conversation, it is evident from her mom's remark in lines 25–26 that the concept is shared and has previously been discussed between the two speakers. The 'driver's license' continues to be treated as the topic until line 25 when Mom narrows the topic down to *jitchi* 'the driving test' with *wa*-marking. The notion of a driving test was initially introduced by Aya as a non-topic with *ga*-marking in line 20. The question is whether to categorize the two discourse topics as local or global. The second topic, 'driving test,' represents a narrower concept than the first topic, 'driver's license,' since the driving test constitutes part of driver's license application process. However, the broader-narrower distinction is not equivalent to the global-local topic distinction.

According to Moya Guijarro (2003), the global discourse topic "represents what a whole text or discourse is about," and "unifies all the local topics of the discourse under the same topical frame" (p. 136). This concept is most compatible with a planned, static, monologic discourse such as a newspaper article or written narrative. These written discourses are explicit with respect to the main topics conveyed in the form of headlines and titles.

Unlike planned written discourse, conversational discourse is generally spontaneous, dynamic, context-dependent, and interactive (Linell, 1982; Ong, 1982; Clancy, 1982). Because there is no top-down topic organizational framework in unplanned conversation, the concept of a global discourse topic is of little relevance. Since conversation does not have a self-contained beginning and end, although it is situated in a larger socio-interactive context, it is unfeasible for a researcher to judge the global-ness of a discourse topic. For these reasons, I regard explicitly marked discourse topics such as 'the driver's license' and 'the driving test' in the previous excerpt as "local" rather than "global" discourse topics.

In written narratives, having explicit global discourse topics in the form of titles affords more flexibility in shifting local topics in the course of the story itself. In my informal analysis of the folk tale *Momotaroo* 'Peach Boy' (Nishiyama, 1966), for instance, the protagonist *Momotaroo* is marked by *ga* in main clauses three times after its initial introduction while the supporting character *inu* 'dog' is marked by *wa* four times after its initial mention. Because the writers can assume that the readers understand *Momotaroo* as the main character and global topic of the story, they can freely shift local topics by means of *wa* and *ga* markings in a sentence-by-sentence fashion.

In contrast to written narratives, topic-maintenance or topic-shifting in everyday conversation must be accomplished dialogically since there is no top-down global discourse topic governing the entire conversation, as shown in (5)–(6). Collaborative establishment and maintenance of a local topic is important in conversational interaction as the local topic serves as the common target of expressing and sharing of perspectives and attitudes by the conversational participants within a triadic interactional framework. Securing joint attention to a common local topic becomes especially challenging when there is more than one potentially topical referent involved. The section on function of *ga* will illustrate the role of *ga* in marking a non-topical participant, thereby contributing to establishing and maintaining a joint attention to a local discourse topic.

## Data

Data for this study comes from 10 face-to-face conversations<sup>9</sup> and 11 telephone conversations,<sup>10</sup> totaling over three hours of talk in length. All the conversational

<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank Tsuyoshi Ono for allowing me to use his data for this project.

<sup>10</sup> The data comes from Canavan and Zipperlen (1996) and Wheatley, Kaneko, and Kobayashi (1996).

participants are adult native speakers of Tokyo Japanese, and each conversation consists of either family members, close friends, or couples.

In the present study, I will limit the discussion to *ga*-attached human referents. This decision is based on the findings from past studies and my preliminary observation that *ga*-marked non-human referents appear in environments that are different from those in which *ga*-marked human referents appear.<sup>11</sup>

## Function of *ga* as non-topical subject marker

### New and given information status

Contrary to the claim that *ga* marks new information (e.g., Kuno, 1972), in the conversational data examined for this study, more than half of the *ga*-marked human referents (hereafter HR) represent given information,<sup>12</sup> as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Information status of *ga*-marked HRs (in 21 conversational data)

	new	given	total
<i>ga</i> -marked HR	70 (45.8%)	83 (54.2%)	153 (100%)

One notable difference in the distribution of new and given *ga*-marked HRs is the type of predicates that follow them. As we can see in Table 2, the majority of the HR occurrences with existential predicates, i.e., *iru* 'exist' are new (79.3%).<sup>13</sup> This tendency is in accordance with the universal trend of introducing a new referent in conversation by referring to its existence (Givón, 2001). It also parallels the previous finding that *ga*-marking and existential verbs are strongly connected with the practice of new referent introductions in Japanese conversation (Kuno, 1972; Ono et al., 2000).

**Table 2.** *Ga*-marked new/given HRs and types of predicates

	new HR	given HR	total
existential predicate ( <i>iru</i> )	23 (79.3%)	6 (20.7%)	29 (100%)
non-existential predicate	47 (37.9%)	77 (62.1%)	124 (100%)

A new referent introduced with *ga*-marking and the existential predicate *iru* may be subsequently topicalized as in (7), but the majority are only mentioned once in the ongoing discourse, as in (8).

(7) Subsequently topicalized new referent (*Ryuugaku*)

1. Chie: ... *nanka, uchi no kurasu ni* [sa:, .. *sono*,]  
'well, in my class, ... uh,'

<sup>11</sup> *Ga*-marked non-human NPs appear in the grammatical object position (e.g., Sugamoto, 1982; Ono et al., 2000) and some of the *ga*-marked non-human NPs appear to be lexicalized (Ono et al., 2000). *Ga*-marked human NPs may also appear in the syntactic object position, but the number of such NPs is extremely low compared to non-human NPs. In my data, I did not find any *ga*-marked human NPs in the object position.

<sup>12</sup> 'Given information' here refers to information that has been mentioned in the preceding discourse context, and thus likely to be active in the mind of the addressee (Chafe, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> The verb *iru* 'exist' is used with animate subjects. The inanimate counterpart of *iru* is *aru*. Since the present study only deals with *ga*-marked human referents, only *iru* is relevant here.

2. Fumi: [kanbase]eshon, ... paato[[naa]].  
'conversation partner.'
3. Chie: [[un]].  
'Yeah.'
- 4.→ ... nihonjin no, ... otoko no, ... nijuu-san gurai no hito ga, hitori iru-n [da kedo],  
'there is one Japanese, male, a person about 23 years old,'
5. Fumi: [un un].  
'Mhm.'
- 6.→Chie: ... sono hito wa nanka, .. isha ni narita- ... naritakute:, Amerika ni kitan da tte.  
'that person said (he) came to America to become a doctor.'
- (8) Single-mentioned new referent (*Bukatsu*)
1. Ken: ... yakuyu wa mada, dekiru kedo,  
2. ... regyuraa wa, .. kore mo, dame jan.  
'(I) can play baseball fairly well, but (as far as) becoming a regular member, this is also impossible.'
3. Emi: ... [un].  
'Yeah.'
- 4.→Ken: [chuu]gakkoo kara yatteru yatsu ga, iru kara.  
'because there are those who have played it since middle school.'

In (7), a new referent is introduced with *ga*-marking in line 4, and in line 6, the same referent, now referred to as *sono hito* 'that person,' is explicitly marked by *wa*. The referent remains the topic for the next 70 IUs. (8) represents an instance of single-mentioned *ga*-marked new HRs introduced with the predicate *iru* 'exist.' These HRs are either non-referential (i.e., there is no specific referent for the NP) or unimportant referential nouns which are mentioned only once in the ongoing discourse. In (8), Ken explains why he would not become a regular member if he joined the baseball club at his high school. The *ga*-marked HR in line 4, *chuu-gakoo kara yatteru yatsu* 'those who have played (baseball) since middle school,' is non-referential and is mentioned only once in the entire conversation.

However, not all newly introduced HRs are subsequently topicalized or disappear after initial mention. Some *ga*-marked new HRs continue to be marked by *ga* in the subsequent mentions. These are *ga*-marked given HRs,<sup>14</sup> which is the focus of the next section.

### *Ga*-marked given referents

In this section, I will present actual instances of *ga*-marked given HRs from the conversational data to demonstrate the function of *ga* in marking a non-topical subject. The first example comes from a story-telling sequence in which one of the speakers, Ken, recalls his after-school sports club experience in high school. The story features himself and a martial arts teacher (*kakugi no sensee*), who also turns out to be the judo club coach

<sup>14</sup> Not all *ga*-marked given HRs are initially introduced into the discourse with *ga*-marking. For example, if they are introduced in an object position, they may be marked by *o*, and if they are introduced in a dative position, they may be marked by *ni*.

(*juudoobu no komon*). Both participants have been introduced into the discourse prior to the following segment.

(9) *Ga*-marked given referent (*Bukatsu*)

1.→Ken: *tsugi no hi, ore, kaettetan da* [yo].

‘The next day, I was going home.’

2. Emi: [u]n.

‘Yeah.’

(several IUs omitted)

3. Ken: *kaetteta ra, ... tochiuu de sa, ...*

4.→ *sono komon ga sa, ..*

‘And as (I) was going home, that coach,’

5. Emi: *un. ..*

‘Uh huh.’

6. Ken: *mukoo kara, aruite kite sa. ...*

‘came walking towards (me),’

7. Emi: *n. ...*

‘Mm.’

8. Ken: *mada, .. gakkoo, deru mae ni* [ne].

‘Before (I) left school.’

9. Emi: [un].

‘Yeah.’

10. Ken: *de sa, kyoo, renshuu wa dooshita, toka @itte.*

‘And then, (he) said something like “what happened to the practice today?” ’

(several IUs omitted)

11.→Emi: @demo, @soshitara, ... nani;

12.→ *shizen ni haitchatta, @mitai @na kanji na no?*

‘Then, is it like (you) joined (the judo club) unintentionally?’

At the beginning of the segment, Ken explicitly establishes himself as the primary participant of the subsequent discourse through zero-marked *ore* ‘I’. First person pronouns are employed recurrently in conversational discourse to mark their discourse topic status (cf. Ono & Thompson, 2004). After providing short supplementary information in the first omitted IUs (that he went to the practice that day but did not stay), Ken makes an explicit reference to the judo club coach in line 4 with *ga*-marking. The given information status of the coach is evident from the use of the demonstrative pronoun *sono* ‘that’ as a discourse deictic. Then, in the immediately following context, Ken reports what the coach told him. Emi’s utterance in lines 11–12 is a question about how Ken ended up joining the judo club (rather than, say, how the coach persuaded Ken to join the club). Despite the fact that the coach is crucially involved in the action sequence, Emi’s utterance, which includes

the predicate *haitchatta* ‘entered,’ clearly demonstrates that she understands the narrative segment as being about Ken instead of the coach. The use of the first pronoun *ore* ‘I’ in line 1 and the *ga*-marking in line 4 both contribute to jointly establish and maintain the local discourse topic, i.e., Ken. That is, *ga*-marking explicitly tells the addressee (Emi) that the coach is a non-topical referent and thus not the main target of comment.

The next example also involves the speaker and third person HRs as participants in a sequence of actions.

- (10) *Ga*-marked given referent (*Nihongo*)
1. Yuko: *de watashi wa tomodachi to shabettete,*  
‘and I was talking with a friend,’
  2. *de sono hito ni tsuite, komento o shiteta no yo.*  
‘and commenting on that person.’
- (several IUs omitted)
- 3.→ *shitara sono futari ga,*  
‘then those two,’
  4. *totsuzen, eego de shabetteta noni,*  
‘though they were talking in English, suddenly,’
  5. *[@koro @tto @nihongo @de] @hanashi @dashite,*  
‘(they) began speaking in Japanese,’
  6. Nao: *[nihongo ni suicchi shita no]?,*  
‘(they) switched to Japanese?’
  7. Yuko: *@watashitachi no hoo o mita @no.*  
‘(they) looked at us.’
  8. *... <VOX> u </VOX> @to @omotte,*  
‘(I) thought “ugh,”’
  9. *cho- chotto atozusari shitari shite,*  
‘and (I) stepped back a bit,’

In (10), Yuko shares her embarrassing experience which resulted from her assuming that two strangers standing in front of her and her Japanese friend did not understand Japanese.<sup>15</sup> In line 3, the two strangers, who represent given information as evident from the use of *sono* ‘those,’ are marked by *ga*. The explicit encoding of the two strangers as non-topical entities helps maintain *watashi* (Yuko) as the local discourse topic. Notice that the second occurrence of the topic *watashi* (Yuko) in line 8 is zero anaphor. In the immediately subsequent discourse, Yuko clarifies what she said about one of the strangers upon Nao’s request and gives the moral of the story by saying *ki o tsukenai to* ‘(I/we) have to be careful (not to assume a person does not understand Japanese just by his/her looks)’. Her remark confirms that her talk was about her and not the two strangers.

<sup>15</sup> Yuko’s story is a response, or a “second” story, to Nao’s preceding story about an American musician at a concert and how he unexpectedly and surprisingly spoke fluent Japanese. In general, a “second” story is related to the first one and displays how the teller of the second story understands the first story (e.g., Ryave, 1978; Sacks, 1992).

The previous two examples involved the speakers as the topical referents. The next excerpts, (11) and (12), each involve two third person participants, with one of them marked by *ga*. In (11), a married couple Mika (wife) and Ryo (husband) are talking about Mika's friend's plan to travel to Australia.

(11) *Ga*-marked given referent (*Ryokoo*)

1. Mika: ... *soshitara, kekkyoku nanka*,  
'and then, in the end,'
- 2.→        *kareshi ga:*,  
'her boyfriend,'
3. Ryo:    *un*.  
'Yeah.'
4. Mika: .. *shigoto ga ne, ... nanka, taihen de:, ... isogashikute:*,  
'(his) work was, like, troublesome, and busy,'
5.            *... de, yasumi ga, torenai toka i- tsutte*,  
'and, (he) said (he) can't take time off work,'
6. Ryo:    .. *arara*.  
'Oh no.'
7. Mika:    *... nde:, ... iku?*<sup>16</sup>  
'and, the day of leaving?'
8. Ryo:    ... *un*.  
'Yeah.'
9. Mika:    .. *isshuukan mae, toka itta ka na?*  
'a week before that, or something like that?'
10. Ryo:    .. *kyanseru?*  
'Cancel?'
11. Mika:    ... *un*.  
'Right.'

The boyfriend (i.e., Mika's friend's boyfriend) has been introduced into the discourse prior to the segment. Nevertheless, the boyfriend is marked by *ga* in line 2. This segment consists entirely of the boyfriend's actions with no mention of Mika's friend, yet both Ryo and Mika understand that the discourse is about Mika's friend, not her boyfriend. This is clearly shown in the subsequent discourse when Ryo asks Mika *okotteta?* 'was (X) mad?' with subject ellipsis. Because the boyfriend was excluded from the possibility of being the local discourse topic through *ga*-marking, Ryo sees no need to explicitly state the topic of his question. Mika immediately understands the question with an unexpressed topic to be about her friend as she answers *moo atama ni kichau toka tte, ... atashi yori shigoto o totta tte koto da yo ne toka* '(My friend said) '(I'm) so upset,' (she said) 'it means that (he) chose his work over me, right?'" The conversation continues as Mika tells Ryo that the boyfriend actually did not tell his boss about the vacation plan at all because the company was too busy at that time.

<sup>16</sup> According to my transcription conventions, [?] simply indicates rising intonation, not a question.

Here too, when the boyfriend is overtly referred to in the subject position, he is marked by *ga* (*jibun ga* ‘he himself’).<sup>17</sup> In this way, *ga* explicitly marks the persistent HR as non-topical, which contributes to maintaining the conversational participants’ attention to the local discourse topic, in this case, Mika’s friend.

In the next excerpt (12), Tae is telling her sister Iyo about Tae’s friend and how the friend had an arranged marriage with a politician. The politician was introduced into the discourse prior to the segment.

- (12) Ga-marked given referent (*Ojoosama*)
- 1.→Tae: ... *de soko ni, seijika no hito ga ittete*,  
‘and the politician was there,’
  2.       .. *motte .. n mo nai hanashi*,<sup>18</sup> *mitai na toko atte*,  
‘it was sort of like a windfall (for her parents),’
  3.       .. *demo, ... kan- .. genjitsu ni*,  
‘but, in reality,’
  - 4.→     *kare ga, .. ofisu ni dehairi shite*,  
‘he was in and out of the office,’
  5.       *kanojo no koto o, ki ni itchatta kara*.<sup>19</sup>  
‘and because he took a fancy to her.’
  6. Iyo:   .. *un*.  
‘Yeah.’

Despite its given information status, the politician is marked by *ga* twice in lines 1 (*seijika no hito ga*) and 4 (*kare ga*). Unlike the previous excerpt, in (12), both the politician and Tae’s friend (*kanojo*) are mentioned. However, as we can see in lines 4–5, the politician appears as the subject/agent while Tae’s friend is the object/patient. As the subject/agent is much more likely to be treated as the discourse topic than the object/patient (Givón, 1983; Noda, 1996),

<sup>17</sup> The following is Mika’s subsequent utterance following the excerpt (11):

1. *kaisha ga, dame da, tte itteru wake ja, nai rashii no yo*.  
‘(It) seems that it is not the company that is saying that he cannot go on a vacation (lit. it is not okay).’
2. *jibun ga*, (several IUs omitted), *fudoosangyoo nan da kedo, ima chotto sugoi, isogashikute*,  
‘He himself, (several IUs omitted), (the company) is a real-estate business, and (it) is very busy right now,’
3. (several IUs omitted) *soo iu toki ni, jibun dake nanka, yasumi toru no mo, ya da shi*,  
‘In such a (busy) time, just he himself, um, did not want to take time off work.’

<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to tell whether the speaker is saying *omottemo nai hanashi* ‘windfall’ or *mottainai hanashi* ‘more than one deserves.’ The former interpretation is chosen here because it seems more appropriate in this particular context. In either case, the interpretation of this phrase does not affect the analysis of *ga*.

<sup>19</sup> *Kara* ‘because’ is a conjunctive particle. It generally marks an adverbial subordinate clause indicating the cause of an effect, but utterance final *kara* is also commonly observed in conversation (Iguchi, 1998; Haugh, 2008). *Kara* in line 5 is of the latter kind.



explicit marking of the politician as a non-topical entity is crucial to achieve or maintain the joint attention to the intended discourse topic, i.e., Tae's friend. In the subsequent discourse, Tae's friend remains as the focal point of their conversation as they talk about how Tae's friend ended up marrying the politician instead of her boyfriend.

In this section, it has been argued that the function of *ga* is to explicitly indicate non-topicality of the NP through the analysis of four conversational excerpts involving two persistent human referents (HR). Table 3 summarizes the topical referents and the *ga*-marked non-topical referents in the four conversations. In the next section, these topical NPs and *ga*-marked NPs will be further scrutinized using two quantitative measurements of topicality.

Table 3. Topical and *ga*-marked referents

excerpt	topic	<i>ga</i> -marked
Bukatsu	1st (speaker)	3rd (club coach)
Nihongo	1st (speaker)	3rd (two strangers)
Ryokoo	3rd (speaker's friend)	3rd (friend's boyfriend)
Ojosama	3rd (speaker's friend)	3rd (politician)

### Referent persistence vs. topicality

According to the hierarchy of topicality (Givón, 1976, p. 152), a definite human referent who is more involved in the event or state under discussion is more likely to be a topic or what is being talked about. Givón (1983, p. 22) further notes that grammatical subjects and semantic agents are higher in the topicality hierarchy and thus more likely to be topics than other grammatical or semantic roles. From this perspective, two or more of the human referents that appeared in the previous four conversational segments all rank high in the topicality hierarchy.

As a more concrete measurement of topicality, Givón (1983) proposes two cross-linguistic quantitative measurements: (a) referential distance and (b) decay. These measurements are based on the assumption that topical referents figure more frequently in the discourse. Such measurements have been employed for Japanese data in previous research (e.g., Hinds, 1983; Clancy & Downing, 1987). Here are short descriptions of the two measurements (Hinds, 1983).

- (a) Distance—the distance from the present mention of a noun phrase by a particular device [(e.g., ellipsis, independent NP or pronoun, NP or pronoun marked by a particle)] to the last clause where the same referent was a semantic argument of that clause, in numbers of clauses. In a values of 1 to 20, 1 represents maximum continuity while 20 represents minimum continuity.
- (b) Decay—the number of clauses to the right from [the mention of a noun phrase in which] ... the same referent remains a semantic argument of the clause. The minimal value is zero, signifying an argument that decays immediately and hence minimum continuity. There is no maximal value (the higher the number, the greater the persistence). (p. 58)

In short, the distance looks back at the preceding context and measures the number of clauses between the current mention of the NP and the previous mention of the same NP, with a smaller number representing a higher continuity. The decay looks forward at the

subsequent context and counts the number of clauses in which the NP continues to appear as a semantic argument (a higher number represents a higher persistence). I will refer to the two measurements as “persistence” for convenience. In order to compare the persistence of *ga*-marked and topical referents, I measured referential distance and decay. Table 4 presents the results of referential distance and decay measurements.

**Table 4.** Referential persistence measurements

excerpts	distance		decay	
	topic	<i>ga</i> -marked	topic	<i>ga</i> -marked
Bukatsu	1	1	11	8
Nihongo	1	1	4	3
Ryokoo	1	1	9	9
Ojoosama	1	1	4	3
average	1	1	7	5.75

The referential distance values in Table 4 indicate that both topical and *ga*-marked referents are maximally continuous. The difference in decay values between topical referents and *ga*-marked referents is found to be statistically non-significant,  $t(3)=1.99$ ,  $p=0.14$ .<sup>20</sup> As mentioned before, the basic rationale for Givón’s two referent persistence measurements is the assumption that the more important a referent is, the more frequently it appears in the current discourse. Based on this principle, both topical and *ga*-marked given referents are important as they both show high persistence values. In other words, the results show that both referents have high topicality. The quantitative findings substantiate the motivation for non-topical referent marking. The speakers exploit *ga*-marking to avoid the potential interference between the two persistent referents. Although *ga*-marked referents are crucial participants in the unfolding action sequence, they are explicitly marked as the non-focal reference point for socio-interactional exchanges between the conversational participants.

The question remains as to why the conversational participants explicitly mark the non-topical referent by *ga* instead of marking the topical referent by *wa* or other linguistic means. As we saw above, in informal conversation, zero anaphora is the unmarked form representing referent continuity (cf. Clancy, 1980; Hinds, 1983; Suzuki, 1995). Both *wa*-marked and zero-marked phrases indicate the topicality of referents, and as Suzuki (1995) and Iwasaki (1997) have found, they also express discourse boundaries.<sup>21</sup> When there is more than one persistent referent in the ongoing discourse, there are competing motivations between maintaining referent continuity and indicating the topicality or non-topicality of the referents. The findings in the present study suggest that the conversational participants prefer to refer to topical referents by zero anaphora to maintain discourse continuity unless there are some discourse boundaries to be marked, in which case *wa*- or zero-markings are employed.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, non-topical

<sup>20</sup> A paired t-test was used to compare decay values between topical referents and *ga*-marked referents.

<sup>21</sup> In the present conversational data, *wa*-marked *watashi* ‘I’ in (10) and zero-marked *ore* ‘I’ in (9) express discourse boundaries. According to Suzuki’s (1995) findings, *wa*-marked phrases express major discourse boundaries while zero-marked phrases express minor discourse boundaries. Iwasaki (1997) calls these discourse boundaries “(unit-)floor transition.”

<sup>22</sup> *Wa*-markings are also employed to mark contrastiveness (Clancy & Downing, 1987).

referents are marked by *ga* whenever the conversational participants see the need to explicitly indicate the non-topicality of the referent so as to keep the other referent's topical status.

## Conclusion

This study examined one discourse-pragmatic function of the so-called subject marker *ga* in conversational discourse in the light of the triadic interactional framework. Conversational participants constantly monitor each other's attention and alignment not only to themselves but also to the local discourse topic on which they share their comments and perspectives. Achieving and maintaining joint attention to a common topic is especially challenging when there is more than one potentially topical referent continuously involved in the ongoing discourse. We have seen that *ga*-marking is an important grammatical device that conversational participants draw on to explicitly indicate the non-topical status of the referent, thereby contributing to successful socio-interactional communication.

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**Appendix: Transcription conventions**

..	pause, short (<150 milliseconds)
...	pause, untimed (>150 milliseconds)
:	prosodic lengthening
[ ]	overlap (single)
[ [ ] ]	overlap (second instance)
(H)	inhalation
@word	laughter during the production of the word
wor-	word truncation
-	truncated intonation unit
<VOX> </VOX>	voice of another