

# Variation in Syntax: Case in Japanese

SYCCL 2023

## Instructions

In this activity you'll examine several sets of Japanese sentences with word-by-word glosses and full sentence translations. Your job is to figure out the rules of case marking: where are the particles *ga* (nominative), *o* (accusative), *ni* (dative), and *no* (genitive) used?

Other particles (short grammar words) are mostly postpositions, and are translated accordingly. Note that *ni* is both a case marker and a postposition meaning in/at/on. Unlike in some languages, Japanese nouns never have a case marker if a postposition follows.

If you finish early, think about how you could write a CFG for this data (with or without case rules).

## Data Set 1

These are mostly simple sentences with intransitive, transitive, and ditransitive verbs. Can we predict the cases of their arguments? Some verbs have derivational morphology (passive/causative), but you don't need to know how this works.

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|---|---|
| (1) <i>Taroo ga hasitta.</i><br>Taroo NOM ran<br>'Taroo ran.'   | (6) <i>Piano ga hikareta.</i><br>Piano NOM was.played<br>'The piano was played.'  |
| (2) <i>Ame ga futta.</i><br>Rain NOM fell<br>'It rained.'   | (7) <i>Yumi ga hon o agerareta.</i><br>'Yumi NOM book ACC was.given<br>Yumi was given a book.'                                |
| (3) <i>Taroo ga piano o hiita.</i><br>Taroo NOM piano ACC played<br>'Taroo played the piano.'                 | (8) <i>Yumi ga Taroo o hashiraseta.</i><br>Yumi NOM Taroo ACC made.run<br>'Yumi made Taroo run.'                              |
| (4) <i>Jin ga Yumi ni hon o ageta.</i><br>Jin NOM Yumi DAT book ACC gave<br>'Jin gave Yumi a book.'           | (9) <i>Yumi ga Taroo ni piano o hikasetta.</i><br>Yumi NOM Taroo DAT piano ACC made.play<br>'Yumi made Taroo play the piano.' |
| (5) <i>Yumi ga Jin ni hon o moratta.</i><br>Yumi NOM Jin DAT book ACC received<br>'Yumi got a book from Jin.' | (10) <i>Taroo ga piano o hikaserareta.</i><br>Taroo NOM piano ACC was.made.play<br>'Taroo was made to play the piano.'        |

## Data Set 2

This data set focuses on nouns and their arguments (possessor, subject, object). Where is genitive case used? Also, some nouns do not have a case marker — which ones?

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|--|---|
| (11) <i>Yama no e</i><br>mountain GEN picture<br>'a picture of a mountain'                                 | (15) <i>Jin no ojiisan ga waratta.</i><br>Jin GEN grandpa NOM laughed<br>'Jin's grandpa laughed.'                 |
| (12) <i>Taroo no hon</i><br>Taroo GEN hon<br>'Taroo's book'  | (16) <i>Ami ga Jin no ojiisan o shitteiru.</i><br>Ami NOM Jin GEN grandpa ACC know<br>'Ami knows Jin's grandpa.'  |
| (13) <i>Taroo no yama no shashin</i><br>Taroo GEN mountain GEN picture<br>'Taro's picture of the mountain' | (17) <i>Eri ga totemo yasashii hito da.</i><br>Eri NOM very kind person is<br>'Eri is a very kind person.'        |
| (14) <i>Jin no imooto no tomodachi</i><br>Jin GEN sister's GEN friend<br>'Jin's sister's friend'           | (18) <i>Kyoo no jugyoo ga koko made da.</i><br>Today GEN lesson NOM here until is.<br>'Today's lesson ends here.' |

## Data Set 3

Adjectives have arguments too. What cases can they have? Also, some verbs defy the pattern from Data Set 1, and behave more like adjectives. Can you figure out why?

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|---|--|
| (19) <i>Hana ga akai</i><br>flower NOM red<br>'The flowers are red.'  | (23) <i>Boku ni/ga imooto ga iru.</i><br>I DAT/NOM sister NOM exist<br>'I have a sister.'                    |
| (20) <i>Eri ni/ga hebi ga kowai.</i><br>Eri DAT/NOM snake NOM afraid<br>'Eri is afraid of snakes.'                          | (24) <i>Saya ni/ga Eigo ga wakaru.</i><br>Saya DAT/NOM English NOM understand<br>'Saya understands English.' |
| (21) <i>Kono koohii ga amai.</i><br>this coffee NOM sweet<br>'This coffee is sweet.'  | (25) <i>Yumi ni/ga tennis ga dekiru.</i><br>Yumi DAT/NOM tennis NOM can.do<br>'Yumi can play tennis.'        |
| (22) <i>Eri ga itsumo koohii o amaku suru.</i><br>Eri NOM always coffee ACC sweet make<br>'Eri always sweetens her coffee.' | (26) <i>Taroo ni/ga piano ga hikeru.</i><br>Taroo DAT/NOM piano NOM can.play<br>'Taroo can play the piano.'  |

## Data Set 4

Next up, embedded clauses. Some of these allow more than one case pattern. How can we make sense of the exceptional patterns? You might have to be extra creative on this one.

- (27) *Saya ga [Eri ga kuru to] itta.*  
Saya NOM Eri NOM come that said  
'Saya said that Eri will come.'
- (28) *[Ami ga utatteiru] aida ni denki ga kieta.*  
Ami NOM be.singing period in light NOM turned.off  
'While Ami was singing, the lights went out.'
- (29) *Ken ga [Eri ga/kawaii to] omotteiru.*  
Ken NOM Eri NOM/ACC be.cute that think  
'Ken thinks that Eri is cute.'
- (30) *Eri ga [Ken ga/no kita] riyuu o sitteiru.*  
Eri NOM Ken NOM/GEN came reason ACC know  
'Eri knows the reason that Ken came.'

## Bonus Puzzle

Remember *hikeru* 'can play' from example (26)? It actually allows multiple case patterns: in addition to the DAT-NOM and NOM-NOM patterns shown earlier, it also allows NOM-ACC. Can you come up with an explanation? Hint at the bottom.<sup>1</sup>

## In Case You Were Wondering

There are some simplifications in the data above which will be obvious to anyone who knows Japanese.

- Japanese allows arguments of verbs to be moved around to a large extent—this is called scrambling. The sentences above keep all arguments in their default positions.
- Most of these sentences are rather unnatural out of context. This is because most Japanese sentences have a “topic”, marked by the particle *wa*. But *wa* replaces cases other than dative, which obscures the case patterns.
- Some transitive verbs have a single dative object rather than accusative. They are somewhat predictable, but not completely, so I've left them out.
- Passive and causative verbs are a bit more complicated than implied. I've left out the corner cases to keep things simple.

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<sup>1</sup>*Hikeru* can be decomposed as *hik-e-ru* 'play-be.able-present'.