

# “JAPANESE WA=ENGLISH COPULA”

## The Theory Revisited

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### ABSTRACT

This paper will attempt to show that the current hypothesis, which states Japanese learners of English employ a topic marking strategy wherein the Japanese topic marker ‘wa’ is translated into English using copula forms, is incomplete as it now stands. After first showing apparent validity for the above hypothesis, through the examination of actual data gathered from the writing journals of Japanese university female students, this paper will then go on to show why much more research is necessary before a replete theory can be developed. In short, to the present time, too many important factors with relevance to the tenets of the theory have not be adequately dealt with. In fact, in some vital cases, they have been completely ignored. Among these are such things as the characteristics of English copula forms themselves—especially their markedness; the role of ‘wa’ within the Japanese language itself; the relationship between ‘wa’ and Japanese copula; characteristics of the Japanese copula itself; and perhaps most importantly, the theory that Japanese copula may be implied within virtually all Japanese sentences even without actual physical presence. Support for these ideas has been taken from English and Japanese grammatical texts as well as from actual data obtained from a questionnaire administered in Japanese to university students in the Kobe-Osaka-Kyoto area. The questionnaire asked the students to discuss the characteristics of ‘wa’ and ‘desu’ as well as their relationship with each other. It also queried them as to the idea of implication of copula in Japanese sentences. The results do support, at least tentatively, the hypothesis that copula may be implied in the Japanese language and this has great implications for the theory in question. At the very least, this paper does

lend support to the idea that much more extensive research is required with respect to the original 'over-simplistic' hypothesis.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper will endeavor to scrutinize the hypothesis that native-speaking Japanese learners of English, whose native language utilizes a 'topic-comment' style of construction in both its spoken and written forms, may at often times employ the English copula (am, is, are, was, were) to mark the topic of written discourse and then make comments concerning that topic immediately following. Thus, in its immediately preceding form the hypothesis would seem to reflect both, a connection between cognition and language, as well as a first language transfer strategy. (See Ellis, 1986 for a discussion of language transfer strategy theory).

The amount of research in this area is extremely limited, and consequently, it is impossible to speak in terms of absolute validity. Preliminary results, however, would seem to constitute corroboration with the fundamental tenet of the original hypothesis. To the mind of this writer however, the hypothesis has, to this point in time, only been examined in the light of observations concerning the relationship that apparently exists with respect to English copula forms and the Japanese topic marker 'wa'. It is the contention of this paper that there is undoubtedly much more involved in this topic marking strategy hypothesis than simply a relationship between these two grammatical items. In order to truly examine this hypothesis it absolutely essential that we excogitate a number of seemingly interrelated issues with respect to, not only the function of the actual Japanese copula 'da' and its polite form 'desu', but also certain realities concerning English copula forms, markedness, other functions of 'wa', as well as other complicated, grammatical relationships that seem to exist within the Japanese language itself. Such discussions will ultimately not completely solve the conundrums that exist within the realm of this hypothesis but they will, hopefully, serve as support for the need for more research to be carried out, thus resulting in the creation of a sounder base upon which a more replete theory may be constructed.

This paper will be divided into three parts. In the first segment, support

for the original hypothesis shall be presented in the form of actual language data collected from the writing journals of female, Japanese, university students. This would seem to constitute a prerequisite before proceeding on to more intricate questions with regard to our discussion. However, it should be noted at the outset that numerous problems exist with respect to accepting the theory as it now stands.

In the second section, discussion concerning English copula forms, specifically their markedness, as well as the Japanese topic marker 'wa' and copula 'da/desu', will be presented utilizing both English and Japanese language grammar texts in order to look at more complicated relationship possibilities between these function words/particles in relation to the hypothesis.

The third portion of this paper shall examine the results of a questionnaire, administered in Japanese to 400 Japanese, male and female university students. The questionnaire asks the students to discuss both 'wa' and 'da/desu' as well as to comment upon any relationship they may see between these two particles. Discussion then follows in hopes of discerning what native speaker intuitions can tell us about this hypothesis.

One major point that will be introduced in this paper has to do with the idea that copula may be found to exist 'psychologically' in virtually all sentences in Japanese. This coupled with some inherent realities with respect to topic marker 'wa + da/desu' relationships leads us to the conclusion that the original hypothesis is obviously incomplete as an explanation for what is taking place.

## THE ORIGINAL HYPOTHESIS SUPPORTED

In order to investigate the validity of the original hypothesis, which contends that a direct relationship exists between English copula and the Japanese topic marker 'wa', a corpus of sentences has been selected from over 3,000 pages of journal writing carried out by female students at a four-year, Japanese, female, prefectural university. The data chosen would seem to reflect a direct correspondence between the use of the English copula 'is' and the Japanese language topic marker 'wa', with the former, apparently, taking on the very same 'topic-marking' property of the latter in Japanese student written English.

It must be noted however, that this relationship is not always clearly

indicated because, at certain times, the sentences could simply be reflections of other types of mistakes by the learners in their use of English grammatical forms. Also, the sentences chosen here sometimes reflect the way that more proficient acquirers of the English language (e. g. ‘native’ speakers and ‘successful’ ESL / EFL learners etc.) might express the very same ideas in English themselves. In addition, no mention is made with respect to the existence of the Japanese copula ‘da / desu’ in this data. These points notwithstanding, the results obtained here would seem, at first glance, to indicate a striking relationship between Japanese ‘wa’ and the English copula forms—most notably ‘is’, in the written English of Japanese university students.

To check the validity of the original hypothesis, the sentences selected from the student writing have been translated into Japanese—taking care to insure that these renditions closely reflect the meanings intended. These translations were then double-checked by a native speaker of Japanese to further guarantee accuracy. This back-translation method was undertaken in order to attempt to establish a clear relationship between the subjects marked by ‘is’ in English and the topics marked by ‘wa’ in Japanese. The vast majority of the sentences chosen are of the subject-marker type and employ the English copula forms ‘is’ and ‘was’.

Through an examination of the English sentences and their Japanese translations, it seems quite apparent that the English copula form coincides directly with the Japanese topic marker ‘wa’, thus lending initial, yet superficial, support to the original hypothesis.

## THE DATA SOURCE

The data utilized in this first section comes from English language journals written by the students for approximately a one-year period as a requirement for a Japanese-to-English translation and English composition course. The majority of the students were English language majors (52 out of 60), and, with the exception of three, were between the ages of 18 and 22. Each of the students had been exposed to 6 years of formal English instruction (three years in junior high school and three years in high school). Their goals could best be described as being practical. That is to say, they all seemingly desired to graduate with good grades and obtain employment afterward.

In addition to various translation exercises from Japanese to English, the students were taught English composition through the application of a 'principled eclectic' approach which employed a combination of the process approach, the controlled-to-free approach, the free writing approach and the communicative approach. In conjunction with numerous inside and outside class writing assignments, the students were required to maintain a journal (in English) consisting of at least four pages of written work per week throughout the school year. They were free to write about whatever they desired but were encouraged to comment about, not only their personal lives, but also their reactions to assigned readings and/or events in their country and the world.

Within the student journal writing, the English copula forms 'was' and 'is', as possible topic-markers, were the most prominent. For the purposes of this paper, only those sentences employing 'is' were selected for study. The reason for this was determined by the consideration that the use of 'was' could partly be explained as being a result of the actual task itself. That is, the students were required to keep journals and consequently, it was thought that they would normally find themselves writing in the past tense-as such an exercise would normally elicit such a response. The use of 'is', on the other hand, was thought to more clearly represent a reflection of a direct correlation between English copula forms and Japanese 'wa', as a topic-marking strategy, while at the same time avoiding the above mentioned possible bias.

A total of 32 sentences were selected for our purposes here-15 utilizing 'was' and 17 using 'is'. Both sets are found in Appendix A along with their Japanese translations. Much more data could have been given but the sentences chosen were largely representative of the theory in question.

Only those sentences utilizing the English copula form 'is' and not translatable into Japanese with the use of the Japanese copula 'da/desu' have been presented in the next section. The reasons for this are because the exact relationship between English copula and Japanese copula plus 'wa' are very complex; and 'da/desu' is often an optional element in many of the Japanese sentences, while, for our purposes here, 'wa' is always required. More will be said concerning 'wa' and 'desu' later.

## THE DATA

A total of 7 sentences have been selected for analysis here. An apparently clear relationship between the Japanese topic-marked by ‘wa’, and the English subject-marked by ‘is’, can be discerned. Where the meaning is not readily apparent due to a lack of context, a paraphrase, based upon the preceding and following sentences of the journal writing has been inserted immediately following the English version.

1. Concert is finished at last.  
Konsato wa yatto owatta.
2. He is a man to think. (He is a deep thinker).  
Kare wa shiroyabukai.
3. Driving car without instructor is very fond of.  
Kyokan nashi de unten suru no wa daisuki.
4. This is too difficult for me very much.  
Kore wa watsahi niwa muzukashi sugiru.
5. Today is I could meet Naoko.  
Kyo wa Naoko to au koto ga dekimashita.
6. National Sports Meet postage stamp is put on sale.  
Taiiku no hi no kitte wa uridasareta.
7. The second period is I watched a movie.  
Nijikan me niwa eiga o mimashita.

In all of the above sentences the word(s) immediately preceding both ‘is’ and ‘wa’ exactly correspond. This would seem to give some support to the original hypothesis that English copula forms can be utilized by Japanese learners of English as topic markers. In both the English and Japanese versions cases of topic-comment structures seem to exist. That is, both ‘wa’ and ‘is’ are used in apparently the same manner for the same purpose of first introducing a topic and then giving comment about it in both the Japanese and English renditions.

An examination of the sentences found in Appendix A (those employing both ‘was’ and ‘is’) reflects that the same situation holds true in all cases as well. Therefore, based upon this data, it would seem evident that there is

strong reason to believe that English copula forms may be utilized as topic markers in written English by Japanese university students. However, is it really this simple?

It must be noted that the sentences selected above do not contain the Japanese copula forms in their translations. However, in numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4 copula could have been optionally inserted at the very end. This fact has great implications as it leads to the obvious question of the relationship between English copula forms and 'wa' plus 'da/desu' constructions in Japanese. In fact, it represents initial support for the idea that copula may somehow be implied within Japanese sentences.

The data presented here seem to support the notion that English copula forms could be employed as topic markers by Japanese university students when writing in English. However, it has also given evidence that seems to indicate that the issue is not only restricted to English copula and 'wa' but also must include considerations of the Japanese copula forms 'da/desu' as well. In the next section, facts concerning the English copula-especially its markedness, will be discussed. In addition, a deeper investigation will be undertaken concerning the Japanese topic marker 'wa' and the Japanese copula 'da/desu', in order to demonstrate that the original hypothesis is incomplete as it now stands.

## ENGLISH COPULA

In order to fully investigate the hypothesis that English copula forms are utilized by Japanese speakers of English as topic markers it is first necessary to have an understanding as to what correct copula use really entails from an English grammatical view as well as some of the problems their use presents for non-native speakers.

The very first thing that one should be cognizant of with respect to the above issues is the fact that the copula is very disparate in comparison to all of the other English verbs. Consequently, it is necessary to examine the copula in a distinct manner. Celce-Murcia/Larsen-Freeman (1983:33-35) give a very complete explanation of why the copula is such a distinct verb. They discuss four main reasons for this situation: "First of all, the copula has more distinct forms with respect to person, number and tense than any other verb in English."

(Celce-Murcia/Larsen-Freeman, 1983:33). In order to illustrate these differences, English copula forms have been summarized utilizing the following tables which compare the copula 'be' with the verb 'walk':

### COPULA BE

PRESENT TENSE			PAST TENSE		
	Sg.	P l.		Sg.	P l.
1st. Person	I am	We are		I was	We were
2nd. Person	You are	You are		You were	You were
3rd. Person	He/she/it is	They are		He/she/it was	They were

### VERB WALK

PRESENT TENSE			PAST TENSE		
	Sg.	P l.		Sg.	P l.
1st. Person	I walk	We walk		I walked	We walked
2nd. Person	You walk	You walk		You walked	You walked
3rd. Person	He/she it walks	They walk		He/she/it walked	They walked

(Celcie-Murcia-Larsen-Freeman, 1983:33)

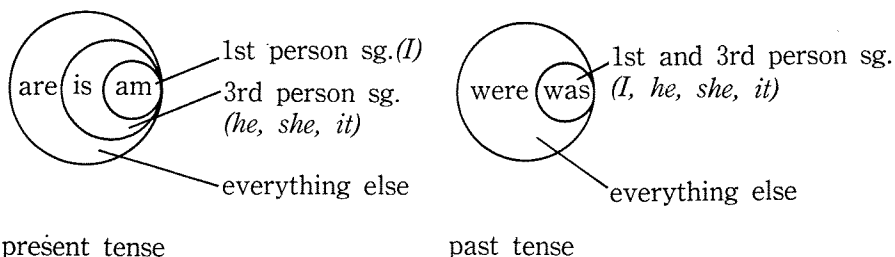
Verbs such as walk, talk and etc., have two present tense forms and one past tense form. Using 'walk' as an example, we have the following:

PRESENT: Walks- third person singular.

Walk- all other persons and numbers.

PAST: Walked- All persons and numbers.

However, English copula usage, on the other hand, is distinct in the sense that there are three different present tense as well as two different past tense forms. This is represented in the following diagram:



(Taken from Celce-Murcia/Larsen-Freeman, 1983:34)



Given the above it is little wonder that learners of English are often perplexed with respect to correct utilization of the various tense and number/person distinctions that exist in the realm of copula usage. "In fact, *is* and *was*, the most frequent present and past tense forms of the copula, tend to be overused by ESL/EFL learners and also by speakers of non-standard English dialects." (Celce-Murcia/Larsen-Freeman, 1983:35).

A second distinction between the copula and other English verbs is related to the fact that the former is distinct from the latter with respect to negation, question formation and various other constructions. That is, a verb like 'walk' will require a Do Auxiliary for many constructions while the copula does not.

The third difference between copula and a verb like 'walk' is concerned with the reality that copula freely precede adjectives or adjective phrases, while 'walk' (and similar verbs) are followed by prepositional phrases and noun phrases but not by adjective phrases.

Finally, as Celce-Murcia/Larsen-Freeman (1983:35) note, "...the copula doesn't occur in all languages but all languages have verbs. Especially in the present tense, many languages have nothing equivalent to the copula; speakers of such languages simply express the literal equivalent of sentences like the three below, and this pattern readily transfers to English."

\*Bill doctor

\*Mary in restaurant

\*Dave bald

In short, it can be said that the copula represents an interesting, and yet difficult, problem for non-native speakers of English. "This lack of universality of the copula is understandable if we consider that semantically it is not a necessary form; it is a syntactic marker in English, a linking element that carries tense and subject-verb agreement. In fact, children learning English as their mother tongue often omit the copula in their early speech as do many second language learners of all ages when they are learning English. Second language learners have been observed to omit copula regardless of whether or not their native language has an equivalent form. All these phenomena are related to the fact that the copula is a marked form (i. e. it not universal; it is somehow both ideosyncratic and redundant)." (Celce-Murcia/Larsen-Freeman, 1983:35).

The above sheds some new light upon the original hypothesis in the sense that it places a degree of doubt on its validity. Indeed, given the marked character of the English copula, it is plausible that mistakes in copula use by Japanese learners of English could represent a reflection of the difficulties in copula use rather than simply a 'wa' equals copula strategy.

In the next section we shall look at some typological features of the Japanese language in general. This would seem to be necessary before going on to more intricate discussions of 'wa' and Japanese copula in relation to the phenomenon in question.

## THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

The first thing to note in relation to Japanese is the fact that it is a SOV language. That is, the basic word order of a transitive sentence is that of Subject-Object-Verb. Other languages which have this characteristic include-Navaho, Hindi, Tamil, Burmese, Turkish, Mongolian, Korean and Ainu. Japanese is a language which possesses a very free word order except for the requirement that verbs must always be used in the sentence-final position. This is exemplified by the following sentences:

1.  
a. John            ga            Mary            o            but - ta.  
                  nomitive                    accusative            hit past  
                  particle                    particle  
b. Mary            o            John            ga            but - ta.  
c. \*John            ga            but-ta            Mary            o.  
d. \*But - ta    John ga    Mary o.

"Although (1a) represents the basic word order, (1b) is also grammatical. On the other hand, (1c) and (1d) are ungrammatical because they violate the Verb-Final constraint." (Kuno, 1973:3-4).

Japanese is a postpositional language which accordingly has no prepositions. Therefore, all case and functional relations (which in English would be represented by prepositions, subordinating conjunctions and coordinating conjunctions) are expressed by particles that are postpositional. This characteristic is shared by many (but not all) SOV languages. (The interested reader is encouraged to consult Greenberg, 1963, for a more complete discussion on the topic of

universals in SOV languages).

Unfortunately, space considerations do not allow for a complete discussion of the seventy postpositional particles (cf. Kuno, 1973). In this paper we will be concerned with 'wa' and 'da/desu' which will be dealt with in the sections that follow. However, one fact about postpositional particles that should be noted is that they are often utilized after sentence-final verbs to show the speaker's attitude towards the content of the sentences uttered. Examples of such particle usage include 'yo' (which implies certainty); 'ne' (which asks for agreement); 'ka' (which indicates a question) and 'sa' ('It goes without saying').

Japanese is also one of the few languages of the world that possesses a built-in mechanism for specifying the theme or topic of the sentence. This is indicated through the use of the topic marker 'wa' More of which will be said later.

The following represent other important characteristics of the Japanese language and will only be briefly mentioned—although certainly the reader is invited to investigate them in such works as Kuno, 1973; Ono, 1973; and McClain, 1981):

- a. Japanese is a 'left-branching' language—as opposed to English which is 'right-branching'. In short, genitives, adjectives and relative clauses precede the head nouns in Japanese.
- b. Questions in Japanese are expressed by the addition of the interrogative particle 'ka' at the end of sentences.
- c. There is much ellipsis found in Japanese. Sentences can (and often do) have their subjects missing and transitive verbs may also have their objects missing. This may also have great implications for our discussion here.
- d. Japanese lacks 'real' third person pronouns. In colloquial speech one may find different levels of first and second pronouns but no third person pronouns are utilized. "Where English would use 'he', 'she', 'it', 'they', Japanese would either (i) have no over forms, (ii) have attribute nouns such as titles, (iii) have full-fledged noun phrases". (Kuno, 1973:17). One can find in the speech and writing of 'educated' Japanese so-called third person pronouns—for example, Kare (he), Kanojo (she), Kare-ra (they) and Kanojo-ra (they-female). However, in reality, these forms are derived from demonstrative pronouns.
- e. Japanese possesses an extremely rich grammatical and lexical means of

distinguishing between various levels of politeness and respectfulness. Mikami (1970) notes four levels:

1. Informal
  2. Polite
  3. Super polite
  4. Formal Writing
- f. Japanese lacks relative pronouns so relative clauses precede their head nouns directly without relative pronouns or conjunctions.
- g. Japanese possesses a very rich system of classifiers each related to a class of nouns. For example:
- |         |                     |          |               |           |                 |
|---------|---------------------|----------|---------------|-----------|-----------------|
| i-satsu | 'one book'          | ni-satsu | 'two books'   | san-satsu | 'three books'   |
| ip-pon  | 'one bottle'        | ni-hon   | 'two bottles' | san-bon   | 'three bottles' |
| ip-pai  | 'one cup(of water)' | ni-hai   | 'two cups'    | san-pai   | 'three cups'    |
| ip-piki | 'one dog'           | ni-hiki  | 'two dogs'    | san-biki  | 'three dogs'    |
- h. There is usually no marking of nouns with respect to number. For example, 'Boku wa imoto ga aru'. (lit. I have sister)-can mean either 'I have one younger sister, or 'I have younger sisters'. For human beings Japanese has a plural suffix '-tachi' but it signifies 'and others, and the likes'. (cf. Kuno, 1973:26).
- i. The Japanese reflexive pronoun 'jibun' (self) is used for all persons and genders and may refer to 'myself', 'yourself', 'himself', 'herself', 'themselves' and etc. . .
- j. Japanese has double and even triple subject constructions. For example, 'Bunmeikoku ga dansei ga heikin zyumoo' is a sentence which has three subjects: 'Civilized countries (have the characteristic that) males (have the characteristic that) their average life span is short'. (Kuno, 1973:34).

From the above it is clear that English and Japanese differ in fundamental, grammatical ways. While difference is not necessarily, in itself, a cause for difficulty in attempts to learn English with a Japanese L1 background, it would seem that the basic grammatical differences-especially with respect to ellipsis-could also be factors in the evaluation of the hypothesis in question.

## THE JAPANESE TOPIC MARKER-WA

It would not be an understatement to say that 'wa' marked, topic-comment sentence structures are predominant in the Japanese language. Indeed, such constructions form the very basis of communication in that language. What follows will be an attempt to impart to the reader some of the realities of 'wa' usage-although it should be noted at the very outset that this section (by no stretch of the imagination) does not fully explain the complexities involved in the use of 'wa' within Japanese.

The Japanese language utilizes a topic-comment form of expression in both speaking and writing. Put simply, the topic of the sentence is presented first, marked by 'wa' and comment about that topic then follows. For example, in the Japanese sentence, 'Watakushi wa daigakusei desu' (I am a university student), the topic 'watakushi' (I) is marked by 'wa' and the predicate 'daigakusei desu' (university student am) then follows.

In Japanese grammar books written for JSL/JFL learners we can find more in-depth definitions of 'wa' : "Wa is used when the speaker [or writer] is going to give an explanation regarding the subject, after presenting it first; that is, the particle wa is the theme or topic of the sentence. And the predicate...will be an explanation giving new information about the particular noun or pronoun presented as the theme or topic." (Ono, 1973:33).

McClain (1981:137) offers the following explanation with respect to the Japanese topic marker-'wa'.

- a. WA isolates the noun which preceds it from the other words.
- b. WA in this sense functions similarly to the English exprssion 'as for'.
  1. The word which preceds 'WA' CAN [emphasis mine] be treated as a subject.  
Watakushi wa gakusei desu. (I am a student).

Kore wa hon desu. (This is a book).

NOTE: In this sentence structure with copula at the end, the word preceding WA is neither emphasized nor contrasted with any other element..."

'Wa' may also act as a contrasting element; there may be occurrences of more than one particle 'wa' in a given sentence; 'wa' may be used to express the notion that 'as far as... is concerned, it is all right, but...'; and it may also be utilized to emphasize certain elements in a sentence. (See McClain, 1981:

137-138, for examples of each of these possible functions of 'WA').

In "GAIKOKUJIN NO TAME NO KIHONGO YOREI JITEN" (1975:808) 'wa' is explained as follows:

何かについて述べる場合にそれが何についての話であるかということを表す.

"1. When you want to talk about a certain thing 'WA' indicates the topic of discussion.

◦ わたしは学生です.

◦ さくらの花は大変美しいです.

◦ I am a student.

◦ Cherry blossoms are beautiful.

上の二列は文法的な主語を表すようにも見えるが、主語は「が」で表されるのであり、この「は」は主語を表すための助詞ではないことに注意.

/ It looks as if the subject of the above two sentences is being indicated by 'WA'. However, in Japanese the subject is indicated by 'GA'. Therefore, be careful to note that this 'WA' does not indicate the subject."

Along these same lines, from "KISO NIHONGO JISHO" (1989:620) we see the following:

"It is often thought that 'WA' and 'GA' are used in the same way but they are characteristically different...". This is further exemplified by the following example, where the subject of the sentence depends heavily on the context:

きょうは一日は何も食べないほうがいいです.

"Today, it would be better if [I/you/we/they/etc.] didn't eat."

(Taken from "GAIKOKUJIN NO TAME NO NIHONGO YOREI JITEN" (1975:920).

Another discussion of 'WA' from "KISO NIHONGO JISHO" (1989:621), explicates as follows:

"1 Wa is used when specifically mentioning the core, object, action, function, condition, etc.. It is used to compare or emphasize these elements."

"2 彼は学生です. He is a student.

In this example, both the speaker and listener know Kare (he/him), but the listener, based upon the speaker's assessment of the situation, is thought by the speaker to not know what Kare (he/him) is or does. In short, the speaker tells this information to the listener.

"3 Consequently, sentences with the WA+DA (DESU) pattern are referred to as judgemental constructions. In other words, the topic and the information about that topic are separate until combined with/denoted by, DA (DESU)."

Ono (1973:56) notes in this connection, "... (WA): The nominative case WA indicates an essential and inevitable relationship including continuous occurrences...WA in the nominative case suggests such shading as the adverb *itsumo*, (always); and thus, 'the subject is always 'predicate'."

Another consideration that must be taken into account in our discussion is related to the question of whether 'WA' can be thought of as a separate entity or if it is, indeed, a part of the topic or theme itself. This would seem to be pertinent with respect to the topic at hand because in virtually all romanized renditions of Japanese sentences 'WA' occurs separately from the noun it follows. For example, 'Kore WA hon desu' (This is a book).

With respect to this issue Sugawara (1985:183-184) gives the following insightful information:

"(3) 'Senseiwa honwo yomu' [The teacher is reading a book].

"In Japanese, particles are added to make the nouns structural elements of a sentence. In English, a noun needs no addition to place it in relationship to the other words in a sentence. Position alone suffices. The word 'sensei', for example, cannot function as the subject by itself, but when it is combined with WA it becomes a structural element functioning as a subject...In fact, with respect to sentence (3), it is important to note that it is written with a space between the minimum meaningful units. These word-units are called 'bunsetsu' in Japanese, and a Japanese sentence may be defined as a chain of bunsetsu."

## THE JAPANESE COPULA-DA/DESU

With respect to the original hypothesis, the role and function of the Japanese copula (da/desu) has been completely ignored. However, since the hypothesis attempts to discuss a relationship between English copula and Japanese 'WA', it seems completely logical that consideration must be given to the Japanese copula as well. This section will attempt to carry out the objective of imparting to the reader some information with respect to Japanese copula and will also look at some implications of possible relationships that apparently exist in Japanese between 'WA' and 'da/desu'.

First of all, Ono (1973:33) notes, "... desu acts as a copula, connecting the two parts of a sentence as a kind of equal sign."

McClain (1981:13-15) has this to say about the Japanese copula: “Copula da (informal form) and desu (polite form) may both be used as follows:

1. As a predicate verb, they show that the subject (A) equals the complement (B). A complement may be a noun or some other part of speech...

2. After a place noun, da and desu mean ‘is located at (in)’ and are used in the same way as ni arimasu or ni imasu.

e. g. Watakushi no uchi wa Tokyo desu.

Watakushi no uchi wa Tokyo ni arimasu.

(My house is in Tokyo).

3. After O-v2, [verb forms with ‘O’ in front] they form the honorific expression.

e. g. ‘Ano kata wa Okosan ga takusan Oari desu (ni narimasu)’. (He has lots of children).

BUT: After predicate adjectives, desu changes to the polite level. It should be remembered that desu does not have a verbal function, since Japanese adjectives are not only adjectives but also verbs. Because predicate adjectives are the informal verb ending form, da is redundant, as shown in the following example.

e. g. Kono uchi wa okii (informal level) (This house is big/large)

Kono uchi wa okii desu (formal level)

WRONG: Kono uchi wa okii da. (Da is redundant and cannot be used after adjectives.” This is especially interesting because we have already noted the relationship between English copula forms and adjectives.

With respect to the sentence ‘Kono uchi wa okii’ it must be pointed out that a copula form seemingly exists. This gives rise to the question of whether copula are universally implied in Japanese sentences. If so, then this must also be taken into consideration with reference to the hypothesis being discussed herein.

Since daroo and desho are also recognized as belonging to the copula class (although they both imply probability in addition to connecting functions) and because ‘masu’ verb endings are also utilized to connect the nominative and predicate parts of sentences in Japanese, we have a strong case for hypothesizing that copula forms are to be found in virtually all sentences. If this is true, then the hypothesis that WA=copula in the writing and speaking of Japanese ESL/EFL learners, must be examined in new light taking this consideration into account. That is, if copula can be hypothesized to exist in ‘ALL’ Japanese sentences, then an explanation of the WA=copula hypothesis would be simply that copula are used



in English by Japanese learners because the forms are always found in Japanese. Such a first language transfer strategy possibility cannot be ignored.

In support of the above hypothesis, Sugawara (1985:71-72) says this about 'masu' and 'desu'. "Grammatically speaking, both masu and desu are jo-doshi (auxiliary verbs) which simultaneously indicate the speaker's respect and humility towards a second person and HIS CERTAINTY ABOUT SOMETHING [Emphasis mine]. Although desu can be used independently from a main verb, masu is always a suffix affixed to the stem of a verb or another auxiliary. Nowadays, however, since the connotations of humility and respect have largely fallen out of conscious use, the jo-doshi are generally used as general expressions of verbal etiquette and politeness. Consequently, they are not used in conversations among friends when either the informal form of the verb or of a verbal auxiliary is the most acceptable form of address."

Sugawara informs us that desu and masu both perform the same basic functions and belong to the same class of verbs. Therefore, are they roughly equivalent and differ only with respect to politeness? If so, then, leaving the politeness issue alone at this point, could it be said that, all endings for Japanese sentences do indeed, tie the subject with the predicate? And if this is true, then all Japanese sentences contain within them, the 'psychological' presence of a copula formation.

## JAPANESE NATIVE SPEAKER INSIGHTS A QUESTIONNAIRE

In order to gain some insight into the way in which Japanese native speakers in EFL classes view 'wa' and 'da/desu' a questionnaire was administered to approximately 400 Japanese university students. The questions were put to both male and female students at five universities in the Kansai (Kobe-Osaka-Kyoto) area. Generally speaking, the students ranged in age from 18-24 years of age. They were all products of the Japanese compulsory education system in the sense that they all had experienced 6 years of exposure to formal (classroom) English instruction—three years in junior high school and three years in high school. While certainly their individual goals varied in some respects it can be stated that they desired to graduate from their universities with good grades and

find gainful employment afterwards. Surely a number of them do not expect to utilize English in their future careers but equally true would be the observation that some of them would indeed do so.

A copy of the original Japanese questionnaire is found in Appendix B along with an English translation of the questions. The directions for the questionnaire were given in Japanese and the students were asked to write their answers in their first language as well. This was done to avoid any possible translation problems in the expression of their thoughts with respect to the subject matter at hand. A total of seven questions were asked on the questionnaire but for our purposes here only four will be taken up for discussion. Both the Japanese original question and an English translation follow along with a chart showing the most common responses to each inquiry:

1). あなたは助詞「は」がどういう意味を持つと思いますか。

もし「は」について考えた時、日本語の中でどういう目的を持った言葉だと思いますか。

What meaning does 'wa' have?

If you think about 'wa' what purpose does this word have in the Japanese language?

ANSWER	NUMBER OF PERSONS	PERCENTAGE
Subject Marker	227	58%
Connector/equal sign	63	16%
Emphasis/Limitation	29	7%
Make the sentence smooth	17	4%
Don't know	10	3%
Various other answers	53	14%

2). あなたは「…です」がどういう意味を持つと思いますか。

What meaning does 'desu' have in your opinion?

ANSWER	NUMBER OF PERSONS	PERCENTAGE
Politeness	228	58%
'Dantei' (conclusion)	99	25%
'Jutsugo' (predicate)	23	6%
'Jotai Yosu' (situation)	8	2%
Don't know	12	3%
Various other answers	24	6%

- 3). 文章の中で「…です」という部分が言われていなくても、この「…です」は含まれていると思いますか.

Do you think that 'desu' is implied in Japanese sentences even if it isn't said?

ANSWER	NUMBER OF PERSONS	PERCENTAGE
Yes	205	51%
No	132	34%
Yes and No (case by case)	26	34%
Don't know	16	4%
Various other answers	13	4%

- 4). 「は」と「です」の間にどういう関係があると思いますか.

What kind of relationship do you think 'wa' and 'desu' have with each other?

ANSWER	NUMBER OF PERSONS	PERCENTAGE
Subject-predicate relationship	115	30%
Don't know	107	26%
Necessay to form complete sentence	41	10%
They are always together	44	12%
No special selationship	17	5%
Various other answers	68	17%

## DISCUSSION

This survey reflects the difficulty inherent in questioning persons about their native language. That is, the layman does not usually think about such questions-especially in his first language. However, some insights may be gleaned from the data. It is to a disucssion of these that we shall now turn.

## QUESTION NUMBER ONE

With respect to the first question-"what meaning does 'wa' have...". we notice that 58% of the persons responded that 'wa' is a subject marker.

This is not surprising—even though it is generally recognized that ‘ga’ is the ‘grammatical’ subject marker—because ‘wa’ may often serve as an indicator of the so-called ‘psychological’ subject. There is an extremely fine line between the definitions of ‘subject’ and ‘topic’. Indeed, they are, to the minds of many, synonymous.

16% of the people polled expressed the opinion that ‘wa’ acts as a connector between the ‘subject/topic’ and the predicate. This answer coincides with many of the ‘definitions’ given for ‘wa’ in grammar texts. The same observation holds true for those who contend that it ‘emphasizes/limits’ the topic of discussion (7%) and those who feel it ‘makes the sentence smooth’ (4%) as these opinions are also often expressed in discussions of Japanese grammar with respect to functions of ‘wa’.

3% could not give an answer and this too is not really surprising as it is safe to assume that virtually all of those queried had probably never seriously thought about the question asked before in their lives.

Among the ‘various other answers’ were some very interesting ideas. However, space considerations do not allow the luxury of dealing with them in this paper.

## QUESTION NUMBER TWO

The questionnaire regretfully expressed this inquiry in a confusing manner and unwittingly caused the subjects to consider the element of politeness. It should have been stated using the form ‘da’ and not ‘desu’. Consequently, 53% made reference to politeness. 33% listed answers concerned with ‘conclusion, predicate and/or situation’. This may be interpreted as a reference to ‘da/desu’ being related to ‘wa’ in the sense that it acts as a true copula and binds the ‘topic/subject’ to the predicate. Again, there were some interesting responses in the ‘other’ category.

## QUESTION NUMBER THREE

The same problem that was found in question number two exists here. Again, ‘da’ should have been used—not ‘desu’. However, it is extremely interesting

to note that 51% of the subjects said that 'desu' is implied in Japanese sentences—even when not explicitly mentioned. If we add the 7% who responded 'yes and no depending on the situation', then it would appear that approximately 60% felt that the Japanese copula is implied in Japanese—even without being mentioned. This is by far the strongest reason to consider the idea that implication of 'da/desu' may affect the writing style of Japanese students attempting to express themselves in English.

### QUESTION NUMBER FOUR

The question referring to the relationship between 'wa' and 'desu' was by far the most difficult of all to answer as is evidenced by the fact that 26% didn't respond to it. However, 30% stated that it was a 'subject-predicate' relationship and 22% responded that 'they are always together' (12%) and/or 'they are necessary to form a complete sentence' (10%). This would seem to indicate that over 50% of the native-speaking Japanese who were queried, felt that 'wa' and 'desu' must come together. This has implications for the theory being discussed here despite the problems related to politeness. In short, if 'wa' and 'desu' must come together, and if many Japanese think of 'wa' as referring to the 'subject' then it is no wonder that they overuse or misuse English copula forms especially if we consider that 60% felt that Japanese copula forms are implied even without being explicitly stated.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated the hypothesis that Japanese learners of English may employ a strategy of 'wa=copula' in their attempts to express themselves in English in both its spoken and written forms. It has presented data that would seem to give support to the hypothesis. However, it has then subsequently shown that problems exist in that a number of factors have not been taken into consideration with respect to the theory in question. It calls for more intensive research into various grammatical areas in both Japanese and English in order for the discovery of a more replete theory. Among those factors to be considered are the following:

First of all, no theory of the kind discussed in this paper can claim validity without the realization that the English copula itself is a very marked form. It is extremely difficult for non-native speakers of English to utilize it correctly. Consequently, it is very possible that because of the markedness of the English copula; because of its distinct character with respect to negation, and question formation; because it may freely precede adjectives or adjective phrases (which a regular verb such as 'walk' cannot do); in short, because it is such a difficult form-mistakes in the production of English (be it spoken or written) by Japanese acquirers may be related to inherent complexities related to that form in itself and not related at all to the particle 'wa' in Japanese. More research with error analysis is thus required as a prerequisite before accepting the theory in its present form.

Next, with respect to 'wa' in the Japanese language, the theory to the present time has been rather simplistic in its outlook. In Japanese, 'wa' performs a number of different functions in addition to its role as a topic marker. Research must be done to ascertain what relation these other functions of 'wa' may have with respect to the tenets of the theory. In addition, work should also be carried out in order to investigate the idea of 'topic' and 'subject' in a more succinct manner. Although this question is still unanswered among Japanese linguists as well, the concept of the 'psychological' subject as opposed to the 'grammatical' subject must be further developed before the theory can satisfactorily be dealt with. The issue of ellipsis, very common in Japanese and much less so in English, is also of cardinal importance. This coupled with the idea of 'bunsetsu' must be further investigated as it could be that Japanese students may feel that English subjects contain within themselves a topic marking quality and this could be related to a 'wa+copula first language principle' being extended to English.

To this time, the theory being discussed here has not taken into consideration the role of the Japanese copula 'da/desu' whatsoever. It seems to the mind of this writer that a theory dealing with the usage of English copula by Japanese learners of that language must also investigate the copula form found in the mother tongue as well. For example, is the English copula more marked than its Japanese brother or vice-versa? What characteristics do these two forms share in their respective languages? How do they differ in usage? Only after

answers have been found to these questions can we go on to the real implications of the theory being discussed.

In addition, what is the relationship between 'wa' and Japanese copula forms? Prior to the assumption that Japanese 'wa' and English copula have a distinct relationship, it should first be determined what relationship exists in the mother tongue between a topic marker and a copula form. This relationship is far from clear as was shown by the questionnaire discussions in the previous section. Even linguists have yet to reach a final definitive answer. Perhaps, one cannot be found-and yet the fact remains that the present theory is making an assumption based upon an 'apparent' relationship between two distinct forms in two very different languages (Japanese topic marker 'wa' and English copula forms). Undoubtedly, more work is required here.

Perhaps the most important discovery that this paper has shown support for is the apparent implication of the copula in Japanese sentences-even without actual physical presence. This psychological presence of copula in Japanese, if true, will have a profound affect upon the further development of the hypothesis in question. In short, if the copula in Japanese can be optionally inserted into sentences, and/or if it can be thought of to exist in essence without actual presence, then the phenomenon of Japanese mistakes with copula use in English will take on new, dynamic proportions.

## APPENDIX A

### A. Sentences employing 'was'.

- 1) Today *was* due for a report of one of psychology seminars.  
Kyo *wa* shinrigaku seminaru no reporto teishutsu deshita.
- 2) Today *was* movies day. (Today I saw some movies)  
Kyo *wa* eiga mimashita.
- 3) Outside *was* very noisy, but inside of it *was* calm itself.  
Soto *wa* totemo urasakatta ga naka *wa* shizuka datta.
- 4) Inside *was* full of passengers.  
Naka *wa* taihen konde ita.
- 5) Textbook *was* not found at once.  
Tekisto *wa* sugu ni mitsukaranata.
- 6) My sister *was* often made her favorite clothes dirty by its jumping.  
(My younger sister's favorite clothes were often dirtied by the cat jumping up on her)  
Imoto *wa* itsumo okini iri no yofuku o neko to jarete yogoshita.

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- 7) Main band *was* Osaka prefectural band.  
Shuyo gakudan *wa* Osaka fu ko kyo gakudan datta.
  - 8) It *was* blue and it was my favorite color.  
Sono iro *wa* buru de watashi no daisuki na iro datta.
  - 9) Today *was* not busy very much.  
kyo *wa* sonna ni isogashiku nakatta.
  - 10) A lecture of French grammar *was* not given today.  
Furansngo no bunpo kogi *wa* kyo wa nakatta.
  - 11) Today *was* coming of age day.  
Kyo *wa* seijin no hi datta.
  - 12) After club it *was* six thirty.  
Kurabu ga owatta toki *wa* rokuji han datta.
  - 13) Today *was* the our regular concert day.  
Kyo *wa* watashitachi no itsumo no konsato no hi datta.
  - 14) Yesterday my boy friend *was* birthday party.  
kinoo *wa* boyfurendo no tanjobi pati ga atta.
  - 15) The class of law *was* absent. (Nor clear. Could be that the class was cancelled or that she skipped the class. Both translations are given).
    1. Horitsu gaku no jigyo *wa* nakatta.
    2. Horitsu gaku no jigyo o yasunda.
- B. Sentences employing ‘is’.
- 1) Flute *is* stand out. (The flute player or music was best).  
Furuto *wa* saiko da.
  - 2) Noh’s rythmn *is* very complicated rythmn.  
Non no rizumu *wa* fukuzatsu de aru.
  - 3) She *is* in spirits.  
Kanojo *wa* tottemo genki da.
  - 3) Today *is* very hot day.  
Kyo *wa* tottemo atsui desu.
  - 4) Today *is* memorial day of foundation. (Today is the founding day of the school).  
Kyo *wa* soritsu kinnenbi desu.
  - 5) Our stage *is* successful. (our performance).  
Watashitachi no sutagi wa seiko desu.
  - 6) Piano *is* one of my friend.  
Piano *wa* watahi no tomodachi desu.
  - 7) Today *is* work day.  
Kyo *wa* shigoto no hi desu.
  - 8) It *is* rain today.  
Kyo *wa* ame desu.
  - 9) Tomorrow it *is* a French test.  
Ashita *wa* Furansugo no tesuto desu.
  - 10) Today *is* garbage collecting day longed for. (She’d been waiting for the garbage men to come).



Kyo wa yatto gomi no hi desu.

In all of the above sentences the word(s) immediately preceeding 'is'/'was' and 'wa' are exact translations.

## APPENDIX B

- (1) あなたは助詞「は」がどういう意味を持つと思いますか。  
もし「は」について考えた時、日本語の中でどういう目的を持った言葉だと思いますか。  
What meaning does 'wa' have in your opinion?  
If you think about 'wa' what purpose does this word have in the Japanese language.
- (2) 子供に対して、この「は」の意味や目的をあなたはどう説明しますか。  
How would you explain the meaning and purpose of 'wa' to a (Japanese) child?
- (3) あなたは「…です」がどういう意味を持つと思いますか。  
What meaning does 'desu' have in your opinion?
- (4) 子供に対して、この「…です」の意味、目的をあなたはどう説明しますか。  
How would you explain the meaning or purpose of 'desu' to a (Japanese) child?
- (5) 文章の中で「…です」という部分が言われていなくても、この「…です」は含まれていると思いますか。 (例) 今日は暑い。(です。)  
Do you think that 'desu' is implied in Japanese sentences even if it isn't said?  
(Example) Today It hot (is).  
(日本語を学習している)
- (6) 外国人に対して、「は」と「です」をどう説明しますか。  
How would you explain 'wa' and 'desu' to a foreigner learning Japanese?
- (7) 「は」と「です」の間にどういう関係があると思いますか。  
What kind of relationship do you think 'wa' and 'desu' have with each other?

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