

More 'inscrutable' particles

By Shigekatsu Yamaguchi

Special to The Daily Yomiuri

In a previous article, I discussed when and for what function Japanese needs particles, ending with a discussion of the particle *ga*. Today I'd like to expand my discussion further to cover some other particles.

First off, let me remind you that particles are employed only when needed. Their function must be called for: The speaker wants to add a certain nuance to a word or phrase (in relation to the predicate). In other words, particles are used when they are needed to convey a difference in meaning. In cases where the addition of nuance is unnecessary, particles are not used.

This last is particularly true in oral communication, because conversations necessarily occur between two or more people who have some relationship, at a particular place, occasion and point in time. Though they might not share the same interpretation of their mutual context, there will be things in common that all parties understand without discussion, such as the time, location and participants' relative ages.

Because of the absence of any specific context when writing, written Japanese has good reason to use particles frequently. This probably contributes to Japanese often feeling that dropping particles, common in speech, is somehow, "not correct." Thus, in spite of its naturalness, if you say *Watashi kinō sushi tabemashita*, most Japanese would "correct" you, saying that you should say *Watashi wa kinō sushi o tabemashita*.

With "corrections" like this, it is easy to be misled into believing that *X-wa* means X is the subject, and that *Y-o* means Y is the object. You are probably unconsciously thinking that all languages always have a subject and object. Until you unlearn this Eurocentric habit, the European-language mind-set holds you spellbound, and your Japanese will feel strained.

Generally, if you start using the terminology used for analyzing English, you will fall into this trap and start making many exceptions to the rules. When you do this, the pleasing regularity of Japanese disappears and the language becomes more difficult to analyze (and learn).

Before discussing why *X-wa* does not denote X as "the subject," let me return to the question, discussed in a previous article, of whether *X-ga* means X is the subject.

X-ga shows that X is the doer of the action if the predicate is an action verb. Hence, *Suzuki-san ga tabemashita* literally means "Suzuki as doer, eating occurred," which means "Suzuki is the one who ate it" or "Suzuki ate it." If the predicate refers to a

state, *X-ga* shows that X is subject matter of the state. Hence, *Suzuki-san ga suki desu* literally translates as "Suzuki as subject-matter, liking occurs," which therefore may mean, "Suzuki likes it" or "I like Suzuki."

Now, let us focus on *X-wa* and *Y-o*. When you are trying to state something, you are likely to choose some item or matter as your topic, at least for the time being. Since there are countless possible topics in the world, when you say *X-wa*, like *sushi-wa*, then sushi shows up momentarily, as if highlighted on a TV screen. Thus:

■ *Sushi tabemasu.* (I eat sushi.)

■ *Sushi wa tabemasu.*

Sushi as a topic for the moment, eating occurs. I eat sushi at least (and I'm not taking responsibility for other food that I may or may not eat).

Many of you might argue that you should use the particle *o* here, as in *Sushi o tabemasu*, because sushi is "the object" here. Your English-based thinking has now created a problem.

If you define *o* as an object indicator, then you must make an important exception and say that it can also be used with some intransitive verbs, like *Kono michi o kimashita*, which literally translates as, "I came this road." The problem here is that intransitive verbs, like "come," are defined as verbs that do NOT take objects.

Kono michi o kimashita means "I came (by choosing) this road" or "I came via this road." In other words, coming was acted upon "this road" among other choices of routes. For whatever reason, the speaker wanted to add this nuance.

When you say *Sushi o tabemasu* as opposed to *Sushi tabemasu*, you are implying that you have selected sushi for eating among other choices of food.

In summary, *sushi tabemasu*, *sushi wa tabemasu*, and *sushi o tabemasu* are all correct and valid Japanese but they differ in nuance. All three statements can correctly be translated to "I eat sushi"; differences in nuance in English come from the manner of speaking—such as accenting, raising the voice, gesturing and facial expressions. This makes English speakers more visibly expressive.

The availability of these instrumental particles in Japanese is one of the reasons why Japanese people can speak without much obvious expression, perhaps appearing "inscrutable" to foreigners who do not understand the nuances created by the precise use of particles.

LET US HEAR FROM YOU!

For comments on The Language Connection, queries for "A Question of Usage" and free insertions for "Bulletin Board," fax (03) 3217-8369

or

e-mail us at dy-edu@yomiuri.com.

Yamauchi is the president of International Communication Institute. After working for Sumitomo Corp. for 18 years, he completed Japanese language teacher training at Cornell University.