

Making sense of sentence-particles

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I have discussed *joshi* (particles) several times during this series, for instance, the often-troublesome *wa*, *ga*, *o*, *ni*, and *de*. These suffixes, or postpositions, attach to, and determine, a noun's particular relationship with the subsequent verb (more precisely, predicate). Thus:

X-wa means: X being the topic for a moment

X-ga: X being the doer of the action or the subject matter of the state/condition

X-o: X being the thing upon which the action acts

X-ni: X being the location where something is located or the time at which something takes place.

X-de: X being the place where the action or event takes place

X-de: X being the instrument, i.e., by means of X

Phrase-particles are important because in Japanese *all* nouns are placed *before* the verb and word order is free. Phrase-particles clarify how nouns modify verbs.

But there is another set of particles, more precisely called "sentence-particles," as opposed to "phrase-particles." Not surprisingly, sentence-particles come immediately after sentences, adding a particular mode to a sentence.

If you are an English native, you may not be aware of this, but in English changing a sentence into a question is pretty complex, at least when viewed from a beginning English learner's point of view:

■ You are a lawyer. → Are you a lawyer?

■ John can play tennis. → Can John play tennis?

So far, the rule looks simple—just exchange the subject and the verb. But what about:

■ You play tennis. → Do you play tennis?

■ John plays tennis. → Does John play tennis?

■ Mary went to New York → Did Mary go to New York?

Suddenly, the rule changes. Rather than exchanging subject and verb, we employ another verb, *do*. Moreover, depending on subject and tense, we may need to change "do" into "does" or "did" and change the verb into its root form (plays → play; went → go). This is fairly complex—a lot for English learners to grasp.

Compared to this, Japanese is far simpler. Thanks to a sentence-particle, constructing a question can be accomplished by simply adding *ka* to the end of any sentence. Thus: "*Wakarimasu ka*?" (Understanding occurs. It is comprehensible. One understands, etc.) can be quickly changed into a question, i.e., "*Wakarimasu ka*?" (Does understanding occur? Is it comprehensible? Do you understand? etc.)

All sentence-particles add their specific mode to the sentence in a similar fashion. Let's look at several:

ka?: With rising intonation, acts as a question marker making the sentence into a question.

ka!: With falling intonation, the speaker grasps

a new fact, perhaps with slight amazement.

ne?: With rising intonation, the speaker seeks confirmation like the English tag questions (isn't it? aren't they? etc.) or the French *n'est-ce pas*?

nee!: The speaker seeks agreement or compassion, seeking mutuality of emotion.

yo: The speaker thinks s/he is giving new information like "I tell you" or "you see" ending an English sentence.

zo: The speaker is warning or threatening.

wa: With rising intonation, softens the utterance, used predominantly by women in the Kanto area. (In Kansai, *wa*, with falling intonation, is used by both genders with a similar function as *yo*.)

By virtue of these sentence-particles, a simple sentence can be modified as below:

Takai desu.: It is expensive.

Takai desu ka?: Is it expensive? (I'm asking.)

Takai desu ka!: (without raising intonation) Is it expensive! (I didn't realize.)

Takai desu ne?: It is expensive, isn't it? (I want to confirm.)

Takai desu nee!: It is expensive, isn't it! (I'm sure you'd agree.) How expensive it is!

Takai desu yo.: It is expensive, you see. (I'm telling you.)

Takai desu zo.: It is expensive. (I'm warning you.)

Takai desu wa.: It is expensive (softly, or in a womanly manner).

Those of you outside of Tokyo can probably think of other sentence-particles found in your area's local dialect. It would be impossible to list all of those, I think, even if I had space.

Recently, if you listen carefully, you may have noticed that people tend to use *ja-nai* (i.e., isn't it?) or its distal-style equivalents *ja-nai-desu-ka* or *ja-arimasen-ka* at the end of sentences with falling intonation, as in:

Takai janai!

Takai ja-nai-desu-ka!

Takai ja-arimasen-ka!

Young people may also say *Takai jan!*, though some consider this a regional variant.

Lengthy as these constructions are, they are best regarded as a single unit, and as sentence-particles. Simply put, all the above sentences are equivalent to "It is expensive, as you know." This "particle" appeals to the listener as sharing the same knowledge as the speaker.

Actually, English shares a similarly confusing construction. Over 40 years ago I lived with an American host family as a high-school exchange student. My American father would habitually add "I tell you" when he spoke. I also found many people put "you know" or "you see" into their sentences here and there. I knew what these words meant literally, but had never been taught such usage in English class in Japan. I could not figure out what nuance they carried or what role they played. It remained a riddle for a good while.

It was only when studying the teaching of Japanese, when I came to better understand sentence-particles, that I was able, at last, to solve my long-lasting riddle.

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