

# ‘Joshi,’ Japanese particles—Part 1

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In any language, ideas expressed using nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are relatively easy to grasp, as each of them represents an independent definable thing or state. But most languages also have “instrumental words,” such as the articles and prepositions of English, which are more difficult to grasp.

In Japanese, these instrumental words are called *joshi*, or particles. Learners of Japanese often complain about the difficulties of using particles properly. This difficulty is comparable to the problem of proper use of articles in English, i.e. the use of *a* or *the*, or not using either.

To start with, let us see why modern Japanese “needs” particles. First, I must surprise you by saying that, in principle, Japanese does not require the use of particles. In other words, particles are employed only when they are called for. Please do not think that there must always be particles in Japanese sentences.

Japanese has the following two golden rules about word order:

- The predicate comes at the end of the sentence.
- The modifier comes before the modified.

Other than these, Japanese word order is basically free. You’ll see why this is important in a moment.

So, what do I mean by “predicate?” A predicate is the shortest form of a sentence, and there are three types. In Japanese these are: the verbal predicate, adjectival predicate and nominal predicate. These are equivalent to verbs, adjectives and nouns in English, respectively. The reason to use these slightly modified terms is not to be pedantic, but because in Japanese each predicate constitutes a valid and complete sentence on its own, while in English, verbs, adjectives and nouns are only words. I will discuss predicates more in future articles.

For now, let’s use the verbal predicate *tabemasu*, for our discussion. The past form (more precisely, “perfective form”) is *tabemashita*, of course.

Using this verbal, the following discourse is possible:

A: *Tabemashita?* (Did you eat?)

B: *Ee, tabemashita.* (Yes, I did.)

As you see above, *tabemashita* itself constitutes a perfect sentence. It is not sloppy, rude or incomplete. This is the core of the Japanese language. If you want to define who ate what, when, how, how much, etc., then just add the modifying nouns before the predicate *tabemashita*; thus:

*Suzuki-san kinō sushi takusan tabemashita.* (Mr.

Suzuki ate a lot of *sushi* yesterday.)

Each of these words modifies the predicate (*tabemashita*) according to its own meaning, and the order is basically free. Therefore, this sentence can be restated:

- *Kinō Suzuki-san sushi takusan tabemashita.*
- *Sushi Suzuki-san takusan kinō tabemashita.*
- *Suzuki-san takusan sushi kinō tabemashita.*

Although there are certain preferences regarding order, these sentences and other different combinations are all valid and correct. No matter what the order may be, the sentence is understood correctly because we know that *Suzuki-san* is a person, *sushi* is food, *kinō* refers to the time, and *takusan* to the amount.

What happens, though, if *sushi* is replaced by *wani* (alligator), for instance?

- *Kinō Suzuki-san wani tabemashita.*

This sentence is confusing: Unless *Suzuki-san* is here with us alive, it is not clear whether he ate alligator or an alligator ate him! Here is where particles play their important, fundamental role. Because word order is completely free in Japanese, we need a way of illustrating what role each noun plays in relation to the predicate, which is a verb here. By adding *ga* to *Suzuki-san*, i.e. *Suzuki-san ga*, we can tell that he is the eater. If we say *wani ga*, then we can immediately tell that the alligator was the one doing the eating. *X ga* indicates clearly that X is the doer of the action.

What happens if the predicate is not an action? Japanese has a good number of verbals which do not represent an action, several of which you probably know, including *wakarimasu*, *dekimasu*, *chigaimasu*, etc. Here *X ga* indicates that X is the subject matter of each of the conditions the words represent, whether X is a person or a thing. Thus, the following utterances are all valid:

■ *Suzuki-san ga wakarimasu.* (Mr. Suzuki is the subject matter of understanding) Mr. Suzuki understands.

■ *Tai-go ga wakarimasu.* (Thai is the subject matter of understanding) He understands Thai.

■ The same thing happens when *X ga* is used with the other two predicates, i.e. adjectival and nominal predicates.

■ *Suzuki-san ga isogashii desu.* (Mr. Suzuki is the subject matter of being busy) Mr. Suzuki is busy.

■ *Shigoto ga isogashii desu.* (The work is the subject matter of being busy) I’m busy with my work.

■ *Suzuki-san ga suki desu.* (Mr. Suzuki is the subject matter of liking) Mr. Suzuki likes (it). Or, I like Mr. Suzuki.

I have stuck with the particle *ga* today, but likewise each of the other particles has its own role to play in determining the role of words in relation to the predicate. If you have any particles you want me to discuss here in the future, I would be pleased to honor your requests.