Japanese Contrastive *wa* and Ignorance Inferences
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I. Introduction. In this paper, I will investigate the Japanese contrastive marker *wa* with respect to ignorance inferences it can give rise to. In particular, I would like to point out that this particle shows similarities to superlatives like *at least*, and propose that *wa* denotes other possible assertions, and makes the hearer pay attention to them in the same way as *might* does so for possibilities (Ciardelli et al. 2009).

II. Background. It has been pointed out that the contrastive *wa* induces non-exhaustivity, while the nominative marker *ga* usually does not (Kuroda 2005). When (1) is uttered, the speaker leaves the possibility that somebody else is a student besides Taro. Because of this non-exhaustivity, (2) suggests that the speaker is uncertain about the number of states in the U.S. Therefore, (2) is infelicitous as an utterance by a speaker that has a basic knowledge of geography.

(1) [F Taro-**wa**] gakusee da. ‘Taro is a student.’

(2) #Amerika *ni-wa* syuu-**ga** [F yonzyuu-**wa**] aru. ‘The U.S. has at least 40 states.’

Compare (2) with (3), which involves a superlative. (3) is also infelicitous as an utterance from a speaker who knows the number of states in the U.S. This shows that Japanese superlatives behave in the same way as their English counterparts (Geurts and Nouwen 2007).

(3) # Amerika *ni-wa* syuu-**ga** saitei yonzyuu aru.

‘The U.S. has at least 40 states.’

III. The account. I propose *wa* is like a superlative involving a possibility operator as Nouwen (2010) proposed. However, the possibility operator included in *wa* cannot be a classical one in the proposed analysis. I assume this possibility operator should be analyzed as having the same semantics as for *might*, as proposed by Ciardelli et al. (2009), because we need to capture what is intended to be informative in the utterance and what is meant to be just attentive.

For example, the informative content of (1) is that Taro is a student. However, this is not the only thing that this sentence means. The particle *wa* associated with focus denotes alternatives and makes them attentive. In other words, the sentences with this kind of contrastive *wa* draw attention to the possibility that there are alternative assertions that a speaker could have made besides (1). This explains why (2) sounds infelicitous. In this case, the speaker is expected to be knowledgable, and hence, it is difficult to guess why they need to draw attention to these alternative possibilities in that context.

This analysis can predict that in the appropriate context, contrastive *wa* can be used even when the speaker is fully knowledgable as well. For example, in a certain context, (1) can be uttered by the speaker who does know that Hanako is also a student. In this case, the speaker is in a situation in which he or she cannot give full information to the hearer for some reason; yet, the speaker tries to be as sincere as possible by making the hearer aware of other possibilities.

References