Particle-stranding Ellipsis in Japanese as the Privilege of the Root Phenomenon

This paper analyzes a new type of nominal ellipsis in Japanese, which I dub Particle-Stranding Ellipsis/PSE. This pattern, first noted by Hattori (1949, 1960), has been occasionally discussed in subsequent work (Arita 2009; Vance 1993; Yoshida 2004) but its implications for linguistic theory has not received due attention. PSE has emerged in Japanese as a robust reply pattern used in colloquial dialogues, as shown in (1a).

(1) Speaker A: John-wa kyoo nani-o si-teiru no?  
John-TOP today what-ACC do-TEIRU Q  
‘What is John doing today?’

Speaker B: a. Ø-wa, Mary-ni daigaku-de a-tteiru ne.  
TOP Mary-DAT university-LOC meet-TEIRU TAG  
‘Intended: Ø (=John) is meeting Mary at a university.’

b. * Mary-ni Ø-wa, daigaku-de a-tteiru ne.  
Mary-DAT TOP university-LOC meet-TEIRU TAG  
‘Intended: Ø (=John) is meeting Mary at a university.’

c. * Mary-ni daigaku-de Ø-wa, a-tteiru ne.  
Mary-DAT university-LOC TOP meet-TEIRU TAG  
‘Intended: Ø (=John) is meeting Mary at a university.’

In this dialogue, as a response to Speaker A’s question, which includes John as a topic of discourse, Speaker B starts his reply with the (non-contrastive) topic-marker –wa without the accompanying NP as in (1a). The topic marker is typically followed by an intonational break, realized as comma intonation. I argue that PSE instantiates what Rizzi (2005) calls the Privilege of the Root (PoR). I propose that a non-contrastive topic NP moves into the specifier of ToP, leaving –wa behind. PSE obtains when the phase head ToP triggers the Spell-Out of its TP complement.

PSE is a root phenomenon targeting the sentence-initial topic which can apply once. These properties are illustrated by the ungrammaticality of the examples in (1b, c), (2) and (3).

(2) Speaker A: John-wa sono-toki Taro-o doo omotta no?  
John-TOP that-time Taro-ACC how thought Q  
‘What did John think at that time about Taro?’

John-TOP that-time TOP genius-COMP thought TAG  
‘Intended: John thought at that time that Ø (=Taro) is a genius.’

(adopted from Yoshida (2004), with modifications)

(3) Speaker A: Kono-hito-wa John-o dare-ni syookai-suru-tumori-na-no?  
this-person-TOP John-ACC who-DAT introduce-do-intend-COP-Q  
‘To whom does this person intend to introduce John?’

Speaker B: * Ø-wa, Ø-wa, Mary-ni syookai-suru-tumori-nan-desu yo.  
TOP TOP Mary-DAT introduce-do-intend-COP-POL EXCL  
‘Ø (=this person) intends to introduce Ø (=John) to Mary!’  
(Yoshida 2004)

PSE is from argument ellipsis (Oku 1998; Saito 2007) because the latter exhibits none of the properties noted here for PSE. First, it is not a root phenomenon. Second, it can occur to a non-sentence initial element. Finally, it can occur more than once in a clause.

Rizzi (2005) proposes that Phase Theory allows for an intriguing account of the optional pronunciation of linguistic material at the edge of the root category; the PoR arises when material in the specifier of the topmost phase escapes Spell-Out to PF (Nissenbaum 2000). Rizzi applies this PoR approach to German pro drop, as illustrated in (4b).

(4)a. Ich hab’ ihn schon gesehen.  b. Hab’ ihn schon gesehen.  
I have him already seen have him already seen  
‘I saw him already.’  ‘Ø (=I) saw him already.’  
(Huang 1984)

Here, a topic moves into the specifier of the phase head ToP, escaping Spell-Out. Importantly, German topic drop patterns with PSE, as shown in (5-7).

(5) * Ihn hab’ Ø schon gesehen.  
him have already seen  
‘Ø (=I) saw him already.’  
(Huang 1984)
Based on these parallels between topic drop and PSE, I propose that the latter obtains as the result of the movement of a non-contrastive topic phrase into the specifier of the phase head \textit{Top} in the left periphery, which triggers Spell-Out of its complement \textit{TP}, as shown in (8).

Our analysis provides a simple account for the three properties in PSE observed above. First, PSE can only occur in the sentence-initial position because there is a dedicated functional projection (\textit{TopP}) for the non-contrastive topic element to move into, as in (8). Second, it is a root phenomenon because \textit{TopP} occurs at the leftmost periphery of the syntactic derivation. Finally, it applies only once because there is only one \textit{Top} projection for the non-contrastive topic element. The crucial ingredient of this analysis is that –\textit{wa} heads an independent projection (Kayne 1994). Whitman (1997) presents two arguments for this analysis. First, the contrast in (9, 10) shows that –\textit{wa} cannot co-occur with –\textit{ga} or association-with-focus particles, unlike –\textit{ni}.

This contrast follows from the clausal head analysis because \textit{John-wa}, unlike \textit{John-ni}, does not form a phrase. Second, –\textit{wa} must take matrix interpretation under scrambling as in (11). This pattern also follows if –\textit{wa} is base-generated as the head of \textit{FP} in the matrix clause.

The present analysis has three important contributions to Japanese linguistics and beyond. First, the analysis provides strong evidence based on particle stranding that Japanese has an articulated discourse structure in the left periphery of a clause as suggested by Rizzi (1997) for languages like Italian (see also Saito 2010). Second, our analysis suggests that the so-called \textit{phrasal particles} such as –\textit{wa} are independent words rather than affixes (Vance 1993). This result has important implications for the micro-parametric difference between Japanese and Korean; Korean particles do not exhibit PSE and hence are arguably affixes. Third, the results of our analysis provide further empirical support from a typologically different language for the general applicability of Rizzi’s phase-theoretic implementation of the PoR phenomenon, which has heretofore been motivated solely on the basis of Germanic and Romance languages.