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CASE-MARKING OF CORE ARGUMENTS AND SYNTACTIC ALIGNMENT IN OLD JAPANESE

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Abstract

In recent years, a theory has gained currency according to which Old Japanese, the oldest attested ancestor of the modern Japanese language, exhibited a split system of syntactic alignment: active-stative in nominalized clauses (most of them subordinate), and nominative-accusative (the default) elsewhere. I attempt to show that the evidence and arguments offered in support of this theory are entirely insufficient to establish its authenticity.¹

1. INTRODUCTION. It is a matter of orthodoxy in Japanese linguistics that the particles *ga* and *wo* are considered case markers—nominative and accusative respectively. Additionally, *no* can be considered a nominative case marker in relative clauses. The syntactic alignment of the modern language is typically understood to be nominative-accusative, because subjects of transitive and intransitive verbs are treated alike in morphosyntax, and differently from transitive objects. Even a fairly careful examination of extant literature in the language of the Nara Period (ca 800 CE), known as Old Japanese (OJ), strongly suggests that these aspects of the grammar of the language have changed little in over a millenium. “The spirit of its grammatical system is the same now as it was twelve hundred years ago, although the material elements of the conjugation are much changed” (Chamberlain 1889:225). However, in recent years, claims have been made that the syntactic alignment of OJ is more complicated than it may appear to the casual reader. In this contribution, I will examine these claims and the evidence on which they are based. I will briefly summarize the usage of these three particles in modern Japanese, then discuss their usage in OJ, and some aspects of their diachronic development. Finally, I will present critiques of two very different papers claiming the presence of active-stative alignment in OJ: Vovin 1997 and Yanagida and Whitman 2009.

1.1 MODERN JAPANESE CORE ARGUMENT MARKING. First, a very brief run-down of the function of the three aforementioned particles in Modern Standard Japanese (hereafter NJ). Markers directly follow the phrasal head, with no fusion. *Ga* can be used to mark the subjects² of both transitive and intransitive predicates in any kind of clause, but its use is often not mandatory:

- (1) a. *ichirō-ga bōru-wo ut-ta.*
Ichiro-SUBJ ball-OBJ hit-PERF
‘Ichiro hit the ball.’
- b. *ichirō-ga yat-te ki-ta.*
Ichiro-SUBJ do-SUB come-PERF
‘Ichiro came.’
- c. *ichirō yat-te ki-ta.*
Ichiro do-SUB come-PERF
‘Ichiro came.’

¹I thank Yuko Otsuka, Alexander Vovin, William O’Grady, and Kamil Deen for extremely helpful comments on the content of this paper. Any errors are, of course, strictly my own.

²Whether the phrases in question, in both OJ and NJ, truly are subjects, topics, or some mysterious hybrid of the two is, to me, still very much an open question, albeit outside the scope of this paper (for a useful perspective on NJ, cf. Ono *et al.* 2000). But as it would be tiresome for me to adopt some kind of terminological hedge and continually qualify my statements, I will use the comfortable but tentative term ‘subject’.

Especially in casual speech and other less formal styles, subjects are often bare (1c). In any style, subjects are often followed by any of a wide variety of forms other than *ga* (e.g., *mo* ‘further’, *sae* ‘even’), the use of which normally prevents the appearance of *ga*, and which serve to delineate the boundary of the subject phrase from the rest of the clause:

- (2) a. *ichirō mo bōru ut-ta.*
 Ichiro PART ball hit-PERF
 ‘Ichiro, too, hit the ball.’
- b. *ichirō-ga ko-nai yo.*
 Ichiro-SUBJ come-NONPST.NEG EMPH
 ‘Ichiro won’t come.’
- c. *ichirō nanka ko-nai yo.*
 Ichiro something come-NONPST.NEG EMPH
 ‘Ichiro certainly won’t come.’ (Here *nanka* loses its lexical meaning, and functions to inject a mild sense of contempt toward the very idea that Ichiro might come.)
- d. **ichirō-ga nanka ko-nai yo.*
 Ichiro-SUBJ something come-NONPST.NEG EMPH
- e. **ichirō nanka-ga ko-nai yo.*
 Ichiro something-SUBJ come-NONPST.NEG EMPH

It should be noted that phrases marked with *ga* and *wo* cannot be combined with topic marker *wa*, though phrases marked in other kinds of case-like morphology may be so combined:³

- (3) a. **ichirō-ga wa bōru-wo ut-ta.*
 Ichiro-SUBJ TOP ball-OBJ hit-PERF
 ‘Ichiro hit the ball.’(?)
- b. **sono bōru-wo wa ichirō-ga ut-ta no da.*
 that ball-OBJ TOP Ichiro-SUBJ hit-PERF NML COP.
 ‘As for that ball, it’s the one Ichiro hit.’

Main clauses containing two *ga*-marked phrases are possible and not especially rare:

- (4) a. *tarō-ga unagi-ga suki da.*
 Tarō-SUBJ eel-SUBJ liked.thing COP
 ‘Taro is the one who likes eel.’

Kuno (1973:71) even gives an example sentence containing three NPs marked with *ga*. Another subject marker is *no*, although its use in this function is restricted to relative clauses. Subject marking is mandatory in relative clauses, and typically either *ga* or *no* may be used, with no change in meaning:

³*No* may be topicalized, but not in its subject-marking function.

- (5) a. *tarō-ga tabe-ru mono wa unagi da.*
 Tarō-SUBJ eat-NONPST.INDIC thing TOP eel COP
 ‘The thing Taro eats is eel.’
- b. *tarō-no tabe-ru mono wa unagi da.*
 Tarō-SUBJ eat-NONPST.INDIC thing TOP eel COP
 ‘The thing Taro eats is eel.’
- c. **tarō tabe-ru mono wa unagi da.*
 Tarō eat-NONPST.INDIC thing TOP eel COP

The primary function of *no* is to serve as an attributive case marker, though it is used in several other ways as well:

- (6) a. *watashi-no namae wa tanaka desu.*
 1P-ADN name TOP tanaka COP
 ‘My name is Tanaka.’ (possessive reading)
- b. *tantōsha-no tanaka-san wa ashita ki-mas-u.*
 person.in.charge-ADN tanaka-POL TOP tomorrow come-POL-NONPST.INDIC
 ‘Ms. Tanaka, the person in charge, will come tomorrow.’ (non-possessive reading)

The so-called accusative case marker is *wo*, and like *ga*, its use is not mandatory, and what controls its appearance (and whether this is deterministic) is still not fully known.

It is my observation that Japanese is a language with a very dominant basic topic-comment structure; the category of subject is far less prominent than that of topic, certainly in the modern language. The evidence of OJ shows, as we will see, that explicit subject-marking was much more restricted in that language than in NJ, making it difficult to prove conclusively that subject plays a significant role in OJ syntax. Li and Thompson (1976:460) categorize Japanese (NJ) as being both topic-prominent and subject-prominent, although I believe they overestimate the significance of subject, probably under the influence of persistent reference to NJ *ga* in the linguistics literature as ‘nominative case marker’ (in contrast to topic marker *wa*). The fact that theories of syntactic alignment (in particular the active-stative alignment discussed in this paper) always refer to subjects, and not to topics, should serve to sow a seed, however small, of the reader’s skepticism regarding the claims that I will discuss below.

1.2 OLD JAPANESE CORE ARGUMENT MARKING. Now let us consider the (largely very similar to NJ) usage of these three particles in OJ. The primary function of both *ga* and *no* in OJ is adnominal or attributive modification. I prefer these terms to “possessive” or “genitive” (as is commonly found in the literature) to describe this function, because in actual usage their meaning, while inclusive of possession, is much broader (Sansom 1928; Shibatani 1990). To give just one example of each, showing a very much attributive but not possessive usage:⁴

⁴In examples, I use a phonetic representation in which medial voiced obstruents that would conventionally be written <b, d, g, z> are instead <Np, Nt, Nk, Ns> respectively, after Vovin 2005, among other works. This notation recognizes the diachronic origin (if not indeed the contemporary pronunciation) of these segments as prenasalized voiceless, and makes it possible to give a more accurate grammatical gloss, as morpheme boundaries often occur between the nasal and obstruent parts. Thus, *ga* will appear as <Nka>.

Further, when representing OJ text, it is normally necessary to make a distinction between so-called *kō* and *otsu* syllables, which I avoid for the sake of simplicity in the main text, because the phonology is irrelevant to my purpose here, and there is no possible confusion. Nevertheless for the sake of accuracy, I use a modified Yale romanization in examples quoted from OJ texts, which

- (7) a. *munsasinwo-nō woN-kukiy-Nka kyinKyisi tat-i-wakare*
Musashino-ADN DIM-stalk-ADN pheasant rise-INF-depart.INF
‘... like pheasants rising from the small stalks of Musashino’ MYS XIV.3375
- b. *itu-nō ma ka simwo-nō pur-i-kyem-u*
when-ADN interval Q frost-ADN fall-INF-PST.TENT-ATTR
‘At some point, frost seems to have fallen ...’ MYS V.804

Unlike in NJ, in which its attributive function has become fossilized in a few archaic idioms, place names, and the like, *ga* in this role in OJ is entirely productive (Frellesvig 2010:126). While it bears a pragmatic difference from *no*, *ga* tending to be used mostly with higher organisms, especially humans, and especially 1st and 2nd persons, and 3rd person nominals representing people who are of significance to the speaker, nevertheless the basic semantics are the same as those of *no*, and as we shall see, both have undergone an extension and reanalysis to use as *a kind of* subject marker (Frellesvig 2010:127–28). Therefore, we are justified in seeing them as the same kind of thing, but they are not allomorphs. Outside of the loss of productivity for *ga*, however, the function of these two as attributive markers has remained mostly unchanged to the present day. The primary function of *wo* in OJ, as throughout the known history of the language up to the present day, is *some kind of* object or patient marking.

1.2.1 THE EVOLUTION OF *ga* AND *no*. It is clear enough that both *ga* and *no* have, at some point early in the history of Japanese as we know it, and seemingly in parallel, undergone a functional split. The new function has been referred to in the literature, almost universally, as “subject marker” and/or “nominative case marker” (Shibatani 1990; Frellesvig 2010, among countless other works). The result of this change is analogous to a conditioned phonemic split, except that it is morphological rather than phonological, and interestingly, the split does not seem to have reached a stage of completion. That is to say, there remains an overlap in grammatical environment for the two functions that prevents their distribution from being perfectly complementary, and as a result, to the present day certain utterances remain, in principle, ambiguous between two possible analyses, as I will explain below.

It seems reasonable to guess that the genesis of what I will call “subject-marking *ga/no*” lies in a *reanalysis*, followed by *extension* (Harris and Campbell 1995). The reanalysis begins with subordinate clauses whose predicates are inflected in nominalizing morphology. The most common of these is the attributive (called *rentaikei* in the Japanese grammatical tradition):

- (8) a. *kyimyi-Nka yuk-u myiti*
lord-ADN go-ATTR road
‘the road my lord travels’ MYS XV.3724
- b. *pana-nō sak-u tukiy*
flower-ADN bloom-ATTR month
‘the month when flowers bloom’ MYS XVIII.4066
- c. *saywo-pimye-nō kwo-Nka pyire pur-i-si yama*
Sayo-lady-ADN girl-ADN scarf wave-INF-PST.ATTR mountain
‘the mountain where the girl, Lady Sayo, waved her scarf’ MYS V.868

reflects the necessary distinction.

Finally, I gloss <Nka> (*ga*) and <nō>, which are nominal morphology, as -ADN (**adnominal**), even when used as subject markers, to make it easier to distinguish them visually from the verbal **attributive** inflection (-ATTR), although I use these two terms interchangeably.

According to Harris and Campbell (1995:51), an essential property of a construction undergoing reanalysis is an ambiguity that permits the assignment of more than one grammatical structure to the same surface form. In each of the examples above we see a structural ambiguity between a parse in which the *ga/no*-marked “possessor” modifies the rest of the phrase [kyimyi-Nka [yuku myiti]], versus a parse in which the possessor is read instead as a subject to the intervening predicate [[kyimyi-Nka yuku] myiti]. Frellesvig (2010:128) notes that the question of a diachronic relationship between these alternate analyses is still an open one. This phrase is valid in NJ, and not ambiguous, because of the loss of productivity of the attributive function of *ga* (i.e., only the latter of the two parses shown exists). Replacing *ga* with *no*, however, yields a phrase reflecting the same ambiguity found in OJ, although with a slight (and inconsequential) difference, in the meaning of *kyimyi*. Phrases of this basic form are common in NJ. Note that in spite of the syntactic ambiguity, the meaning of the two parses is essentially the same, hence my previous claim that this represents an overlap in functions of *no* that prevents full complementarity following the reanalysis. We can know that this ambiguity must have existed in OJ, because there are examples of similar relative clauses in which the subject of the relative clause predicate is the *modified* head NP rather than the ostensibly subject-marked NP that precedes. They therefore necessarily parse like the former of the two bracketed schemata above:

- (9) *a-Nka tat-i-naNkeyk-u ikyi tö sir-i-mas-e*
 IP-ADN rise-INF-lament-ATTR breath DV know-INF-HON-IMP
 ‘Know that it is my breath rising, lamenting (for you).’ MYS XV.3580

My claim with respect to examples like 8a and 8b is that the marked noun (‘lord’ and ‘flower’, respectively) can overtly modify the following branching NP and simultaneously serve as covert (understood) subject to its embedded predicate, while in 9, it is the antecedent head noun (‘breath’) that is the understood subject. The two are thus different. Nevertheless, this example shows clearly that *ga*- or *no*-marked elements in this pattern can sometimes modify a branching NP that includes a relative clause without acting as subject to its predicate at all.

In 8c, we find multiple possible ambiguities associated with the initial adnominal phrase (up to -Nka): lady as possessor of scarf, lady as subject of wave, and lady as attributively “possessing” mountain loosely in the sense of it being the one where she waved (*ala* example 9).

What the above examples have in common is an explicit nominal that can be interpreted as the modified head. The next class of examples I will introduce have no such explicit (lexical) nominal, but have a predicate that is nominalized. The OJ suffix *-aku* creates a kind of gerund which nominalizes the entire clause (Vovin 2009a:764), although unlike the attributive, these cannot modify a following noun. Yanagida and Whitman (2009:132) refer to a theory due to Konoshima (1962), proposing that attributive clauses themselves are treated as nominalized in OJ, which seems to be universally accepted by now. Assuming this is true, examples in the literature are numerous. In such constructions containing a *ga/no*-marked element, we still find the possibility of multiple interpretations, and thus the breeding ground of reanalysis: Is the phrase (which I mark as ADNominal) a modifier/possessor of the nominalization, or is it the subject of what is still, superficially, a clause with a verb?

- (10) a. *wa-Nk-imwo-kwo-Nka swoNte mö sipopo n-i nak-i-si sö*
 IP-ADN-beloved-girl-ADN sleeve FOC soaking DV-INF cry-INF-PST.ATTR FOC
 [o]möp-ay-u
 long.for-PASS-ATTR
 ‘I long for my dear girl, who cried so that even her sleeves were soaking wet’ MYS XX.4357

- b. *wotōmye-ra-Nka imey-ni tuNk-ur-aku*
 maiden-PL-ADN dream-LOC tell-ATTR-NML

‘The maidens having told me in a dream’

MYS XVII.4011

Examples will include not only embedded clauses, but also attributive main clauses, usually licensed by the rule of *kakari-musubi*:

- (11) a. *pyitō-N-tuma-kwo-rō-wo ik-yi n-i wa-Nka s-uru*
 person-ADN-wife-girl-DIM-ACC live-NML DV-INF 1P-ADN do-ATTR

‘I live for the wife of another.’

MYS XIV.3539

- b. *yamiy-ni ya imwo-Nka kwopiy-tutu ar-uram-u*
 dark-LOC Q beloved-ADN long.for.INF-COOR be-TENT-ATTR

‘Will my beloved be longing in the dark for me?’

MYS XV.3669

I would like to call attention to a third kind of ambiguity, which can be seen in the two examples 8c and 10a, between a parse in which the human female is, overtly, merely the possessor of a garment (and *covertly* the subject of the clause), versus one in which she is the overt subject of the clause. These are sure to be somewhat rare in the literature, but they do illustrate another potential source of structural ambiguity, in which the nominal that could be parsed as the subject or modifier of the predicate (the one marked with *ga*) instead can be understood as modifying the nominal that follows it, which might be a direct object, as in 8c, or one not subcategorized for by the verb, as in 10a. Indeed, in the latter, this analysis potentially disconnects ‘my girl’s sleeves’ syntactically from the subordinate clause headed by ‘cry’, isolating it in a focused “topic-type” phrase. With regard to these examples, we must bear in mind that Japanese has always been a language in which a lack of overt indexing morphology puts the burden of matching participants to thematic roles on the hearer. We must allow that a parse in which the female possesses the garment is possible, and so these sentences were unfortunate choices by Yanagida and Whitman for use as central evidence in syntactic argumentation on the nature of *ga* (as we will see later).

Yanagida and Whitman further consider realis (*izenkei*) and irrealis (*mizenkei*) subordinate clauses like the following (respectively) to be nominalizations:

- (12) a. *mwomyit-i-wo kaNsas-i wa-Nka wor-e-Npa*
 leaves.turn.color-NML-ACC decorate-INF 1P-ADN be-EV-CON

‘When I was (there), decorating (my hair with) colored autumn leaves ...’

MYS XV.3707

- b. *ma-sakyi-ku-te imwo-Nka ipap-aNpa*
 INT-safe-INF-SUB beloved-ADN pray-COND

‘If my beloved prays (that I return) safely ...’

MYS XV.3583

As far as I know, their view is not shared by the scholarly community, and the authors do not provide references for justification. They do offer some argument for the synchronic nominalized status of realis and irrealis clauses, which I find unconvincing. Their argument is that (a) these clauses sometimes exhibit *galno* marked subjects, and (b) they appear in syntactic structure in positions typical of nominalized clauses (p. 115). Since they are subordinate clauses, point (b) is hardly worth discussing. As for (a), I believe it makes much more sense to regard these cases as examples of the ongoing spread (i.e., extension) of the reanalyzed subject-marking function to nonnominalized subordinate clauses before it finally penetrated all clauses of any type. There is no other evidence to support Yanagida and Whitman’s idea, and we can scarcely

imagine that all subordinate clauses in a language must be nominalized, regardless of the morphological manifestation of their predicates.

Perhaps the next question to ask is: why do we find (what I am calling) the attributive case, which includes genitive/possessive semantics, to be the one extended to the new function, rather than some other? In fact, there is a strongly attested cross-linguistic tendency for languages to have a convergence or syncretism between genitive/possessive and ergative/agentive cases, i.e., the connection seems to be related to agentivity, and not subjecthood *per se*. Examples include languages in the Mayan family (England 1983, Coon 2008, Lyle Campbell, p.c.), Formosan languages including Seediq (Austronesian; C.C. Kuo, p.c.), Burushaski (isolate; Baerman *et al.* 2002), among other works. Palancar (2002:229) notes 11 ergative cases in his language sample that “show syncretism with a Possessive,” and refers to such ergative agents as “possessors of the action” of the verb. Even in English we can find possessive NPs as the subjects of nominalized clauses (“His signing of the document”). Therefore it is not unexpected to find genitive/possessive morphology being applied to an active, agentive (and thus usually human) subject. This correlation may perhaps account for the *actuation* (i.e., initiation) of the change (Weinreich *et al.* 1968) in clauses featuring a human who can be interpreted both as agent, and as possessor of (perhaps at first) an explicit, modified head, and/or of a nominalized predicate, several examples of which we have seen. In the case of Japanese (at least in OJ and NJ—cf. example 8b—and very likely at all stages in between), we see marking of nonhuman, nonagentive apparent subjects with *no* (which we conclude has developed in parallel with *ga*), so we cannot draw too close a synchronic analogy with languages having ergative/genitive syncretism, except to note its potential as an explanation of the change’s actuation.

1.3 ACTIVE-STATIC ALIGNMENT. Here, I give a brief overview of what is meant by syntactic alignment, and active-static alignment in particular (also known as stative-active, active, and split intransitive). Alignment refers to patterns in the morphosyntactic marking (or lack thereof) of different kinds of core argument nominals in a given language. The two most common alignment types found cross-linguistically are nominative-accusative (aka accusative) and ergative-absolutive (aka ergative). In accusative languages (e.g., English, and most European languages), subjects of transitive and intransitive predicates are marked the same (nominative case), while objects of transitives are marked differently from them (accusative case). In the notational convention of Dixon 1979, this fact is abbreviated as *A* (transitive subject, think “agent”) and *S* (intransitive subject) are alike, while *O* (transitive object) is different, or even more compactly, *AS/O*.

In an ergative language (e.g., Basque, and most Australian aboriginal languages), *S* and *O* are marked alike (absolutive case), while *A* is different (ergative case), or *A/SO*. In a language with active-static alignment, by contrast, intransitive subjects are split into two groups: some *S* are marked like transitive subjects *A*, and others are marked like transitive objects *O*. Dixon (1979:80) calls these *S_A* and *S_O*, respectively. The distinction is normally based on semantic properties such as volitionality or the exercise of conscious control. Subjects of intransitive verbs referring to volitional actions like “sing” will receive active (*S_A*) marking; those referring to involuntary actions like “die” will receive stative (*S_O*) marking. In some languages, the distinction is drawn based on whether the event being described has the semantic property in question, rather than it being permanently associated with the verb root in the lexicon. Dixon calls these “fluid” systems (p. 80).

2. PREVIOUS ANALYSES OF SUBJECT-MARKING AND ALIGNMENT. Next, I turn my attention to particular claims about Old Japanese syntax, made originally in Vovin 1997 and modified and expanded upon in Yanagida and Whitman 2009. This is the claim that OJ shows evidence of having a split alignment system, in which main clauses are nominative-accusative, and nominalized clauses (mostly subordinate) are active-static.

2.1 VOVIN 1997. Vovin’s argument is divided into two main parts, one focusing on subject-marked elements, and the other on (superficially) object-marked elements. Notably, Vovin explicitly excludes from

his argument any subjects marked with the usual *ga* and *no*, reasoning that these are to be understood as modifiers (or “possessors”) of the action that is denoted by the nominalized predicate (p. 275).

Rather, his argument for active-stative alignment in subordinate clauses with regard to transitive and active intransitive subjects is built on the rarely-appearing subject-marking suffix *-i*. However, in examining the few examples of *-i* attested in the Old Japanese corpus (exhaustively listed in the paper), the great majority of them are used to mark subjects in transitive clauses. All of these are either obviously semantically transitive (many of which have objects not explicitly mentioned even if they are clearly understood), or are accompanied by a patient argument marked with *wo*. I believe we can include the latter group among the transitives regardless of the specific semantics of the verb. Among the 18 attestations, there are only two clearly intransitive predicates: Vovin’s numbers 47 (my 13a), and 54 (not shown); numbers 39 (my 13b) and 48 (my 13c) are uncertain in terms of transitivity, but are potentially intransitive.⁵

- (13) a. *koku-wau-i wau-wi-ni imas-u tōkyi*
country-king-SUBJ king-position-LOC be-ATTR time
‘When a king is in power ...’ SENMYŌ 28
- b. *ipye-n-ar-u imwo-i obobosi-mise-m-u*
house-LOC-exist-ATTR beloved-SUBJ worry-show-TENT-FIN
‘My beloved, who is at home, will worry (about me).’ MYS XII.3161
- c. *nakamarö-i tadasi-kyi womyi tö s-ite paber-i-t-u*
nakamarö-SUBJ loyal-ATTR retainer DV do-SUB serve-INF-PERF-FIN
‘Nakamaro served as a loyal retainer.’ SENMYŌ 34

In number 54 (which I have not shown), the intransitive predicate is combined with two clearly transitive ones in a multi-clausal sentence, all sharing the same subject, and so it must be discarded as a bad data point. Example 13a has an intransitive predicate in a relative clause, but the verb is “to be,” which seems much more stative than active, semantically. A significant problem with this argument is that it fails to draw a clear line (or indeed any line) between active and stative semantics. This leaves us with examples 13b and 13c as the only two having a plausibly intransitive predicate with plausibly active semantics and no other obvious “difficulties.” Languages with active-stative alignment (by definition) mark the subjects of transitives and of active intransitives alike, and mark nonactive (or stative) intransitives differently, and so any claim for this alignment must turn crucially on the treatment of intransitives. Unfortunately, the evidence afforded by examples of subject-marking *-i* in the corpus is insufficient to allow us to draw any conclusions from it regarding such alignment. The attestation of subject-marking *-i* is extremely limited in the history of the Japonic family; there is no trace of it in the Ryūkyūan family and in mainland Japanese, Vovin claims a modern reflex only in one minor regional dialect of Kyūshū (p. 281). Although it may be merely circumstantial, I am suspicious of any conclusions drawn about a grammatical element of such central importance that is so suddenly and thoroughly lost by a language family as deeply conservative of its core grammar as Japonic, while the three morphemes that form the main topic of this paper have changed so little in over twelve-hundred years.

The next part of Vovin’s case for active-stative alignment (although it is presented first in the paper) uses evidence from *wo*-marked nominals. Please recall that the primary function of *wo* is to mark patients or objects. The majority of the nominals adduced by Vovin are the (sole) arguments of adjectival predicates formed with what he calls the gerundive suffix *-myi*. Its precise history and nature are not known, although

⁵I have modified the glossing of examples for internal consistency with the others in this paper, but the differences have no bearing on the arguments.

Vovin (2009b:84) argues persuasively that it is a loan from the Korean peninsula with a localized and short-lived influence in Japan. This suffix appears only in the OJ corpus, having no reflex in later Japanese sources or in the Ryūkyūan languages.

- (14) a. *akyi-nō ywo-wo naNka-myi n-i ka ar-am-u*
 autumn-ADN night-?? long-GER DV-INF Q be-TENT-FIN
 ‘Could it be because the autumn night is long?’ MYS XV.3684
- b. *yama-wo taka-myi kamo kuni töpo-myi kamo*
 mountain-?? high-GER PART province far-GER PART
 ‘(Is it) because the mountains are high? Because the province is far?’ MYS I.44

It is claimed that because the nominals are the sole arguments of these (necessarily monovalent) predicates, they are therefore to be considered subjects, and because they are marked with *wo* (which he calls “absolute case”), and the predicates necessarily stative because their meaning is adjectival in nature, that we may then understand *wo*-marking to be a reflection of the case-syncretism between stative intransitive subjects and transitive objects that is expected in an active-stative language (in this case specifically in subordinate clauses).

This seems to be a rash conclusion to draw when the data are extremely limited. The uncertainty surrounding this trendy, ephemeral morph *-myi* is sufficient to maintain doubt with regard to any strong claims about its syntactic behavior, especially in the absence of other good supporting evidence. In any event, *-myi* is apparently not a nominalizer, and so its failure to make use of the usual adnominal subject markers is hardly surprising.

Vovin provides a small handful of further examples of apparent intransitive subject-marking *wo*, but it must be noted that none of them include stative subjects (S_O) in nominalized subordinate clauses, a rather large and significant gap in the evidence. All involve either final-inflected main clauses, or infinitivals of some kind: predicates in *ren’yōkei*, or in subordinative suffix *-te*. Mostly the examples offered may be tentatively explained without the need to posit syntactic subject-marking.

- (15) a. *kwosi-nō kuni-ni sakasi mye-wo ar-i to kyik-as-i-te*
 Kosi-ADN land-LOC wise woman-?? exist-FIN DV hear-HON-INF-SUB
 ‘(He) heard that in the land of Kosi is a wise woman’ KOJIKI KAYŌ 2
- b. *murasaki-nō nipop-yer-u imwo-wo niku-ku ar-aNpa*
 violet-COMP be.beautiful-PROG-ATTR beloved-?? unpleasant-INF be-COND
 ‘If my beloved, who is beautiful like a violet, were unpleasant to me ...’ MYS I.XXI

Some of the examples have a possible interpretation in which the *wo*-marked argument becomes a patient of the main verb (15a). For others, the poetic metrics require an extra syllable that is filled by *wo* (15a, 15b), and there are reasons (as I explain following) to suspect that *wo* may have been used as a substitute for *ga* or *no*. It is important to bear in mind an uncontroversial fact about Old Japanese: that while subject marking with *ga* and *no* was available for nominalized clause types, it was, with rare exceptions, never used with other types of clauses (final/conclusive, infinitival, etc), whose subjects were usually unmarked. Therefore, the poet wishing to focus the subject of his clause pragmatically, or merely to flesh out a line that was otherwise one syllable short, in a time before the extension of adnominal subject-marking to all clause types had taken hold, might well have used *wo*, it being (for pragmatic, prosodic, aesthetic, or even grammatical reasons) a more attractive choice than other particles ostensibly available for this purpose, such as *sō* or *mō*, which are never used as core argument markers. Of course, such usage violates the strong conventional use

of *wo* with patients or objects, which presumably explains why we see so few examples of it used to mark subjects.

Note that *wo* (or at least a superficially indistinguishable homophonous particle) could also be used for other, possibly divergent functions such as adding emphasis (Vovin 2009a:1273) or as a kind of utterance-final conjunction (Vovin 2005:170). The emphatic function could perhaps have been invoked in some of these apparent instances of subject-marking. We simply do not know how these other uses may (or may not) be related historically to the primary function of patient-marking. In line with what I have said before, Japanese is, from the start, a language which makes great use of the unsaid, and which relies on the hearer/reader to figure out many of the thematic relationships among participants; on top of this, we are dealing with poetry, where rules are often bent as a matter of course, and much more is left unsaid than in prosaic styles. Against this background, an approach which starts from the assumption that surface forms can always be explained according to strict grammatical categories and relations seems unrealistic. I do not wish to be understood, however, as suggesting that “anything goes”—that there is no formal grammar at work here. Obviously there is, and there are empirical arguments that can be made about it: Yanagida and Whitman (2009) are right to point out (p. 126) that the lack of examples of *wo*-marked subjects of normal, stative intransitive verbs in nominalized clauses is good enough reason to reject Vovin’s claim of *wo* as absolutive case marker (a huge proportion of subordinate clauses, and even some main ones, are of the nominalized type).

2.2 YANAGIDA AND WHITMAN 2009. Yanagida and Whitman hope to show the reality of essentially the same alignment split using different theory and entirely different evidence. One difference from Vovin’s claim is that they posit active alignment specifically for nominalized clauses (most of which are subordinate). I am unable to address their whole paper in detail. They make broad grammatical claims based on *very* few examples, that cannot by themselves support the conclusions the authors draw. Some of the examples exhibit ambiguities and other problems that make them unsuitable as evidence. There are too many apparent counterexamples in the corpus that are not adequately dealt with. The authors add to their straightforward empirical argumentation a Chomskyan analysis that cannot prove or disprove any part of the thesis. At best, such theoretical approaches can provide a weak, secondary form of corroboration that is valuable only to the extent that, in providing a compelling, explanatory picture of some phenomenon, by that very fact they in turn strengthen the framework (and these analyses do not strike me as that sort).

I will nevertheless directly address their central empirical claims. First, that *ga* marks the subjects of active intransitives; stative intransitive subjects can be unmarked (p. 103) or marked with *no* (p. 113). As counterexamples to this claim, I offer the previously seen 12a (verb “to be”) and the following 16, which shows that even when the subject is very high on the animacy scale, and the verb is agentive,⁶ *ga* is not required:

- (16) *opo pune-ni imö nör-u mönö n-i*
big boat-LOC beloved get.aboard-ATTR thing DV-INF

‘That my beloved had boarded (my) big boat ...’

MYS XV.3579

There seems some confusion in their thesis, because they allow marking with both zero and *no* for stative intransitive subjects, and don’t address the difference between examples like 8b and the following 17 (both cited in their paper), which have identical structure and very close meanings, but different subject marking:

⁶Although an argument might be made for this verb to be an unaccusative, I see it as a volitional act: getting aboard as opposed to simply being aboard. Like Vovin (1997), Yanagida and Whitman make no attempt to clarify the nature of active vs. stative semantics in OJ (specifically), and so all interpretations are available.

- (17) *pisakiy op-uru kyiywo-kyi ka-para-ni*
 catalpa grow-ATTR pure-ATTR river-field-LOC

‘On the pristine riverbank where catalpas grow’

MYS VI.925

They claim that *ga* marks subjects (the clear implication being “exclusively”) that are higher animates capable of exercising control and/or volition (p. 114). Example 18a directly contradicts this claim. It is worth noting that animates of particularly high status—specifically royalty—often tend to take *no* as subject marker rather than *ga*, as in 18b:

- (18) a. *iNtuku-yu ka siwa-Nka k-yi-tar-i-si*
 where-ABL Q wrinkles-ADN come-INF-PERF.PROG-INF-PST.ATTR

‘Where did the wrinkles come from?’

MYS V.804

- b. *opö kyimyi-nö tukap-as-urasi-kyi*
 great lord-ADN use-HON-SUP-INF-ATTR

‘[That] it seems the great lord made use of’

NK 103

Continuing with closely-related claims, “*ga* marks the external argument of transitive/unergative verbs but not the internal argument of an unaccusative” (p. 135). This, too, fails to account for both examples in 18. Although I am unconvinced that ‘come’ need necessarily be considered an unaccusative verb (at least not if ‘go’ is considered unergative), the evidence that the authors believe ‘come’ to be unaccusative can be found in their footnote 9 on p. 113. As for 18b, the verb is transitive, and thus we should expect a subject marked by *ga*.

I will continue by examining their approach to the verbal prefixes *i-* and *sa-*. Their claim is that these forms are used with active and stative verbs respectively. To begin with *i-*, Yanagida and Whitman provide a table (p. 117) showing the breakdown in clause types for all attestations of this prefix in *Man’yōshū* (the eighth-century CE poetry anthology that makes up the great majority of the extant OJ corpus). Out of 74 occurrences, 52 appear in either realis, irrealis, or infinitival clause types. I have already mentioned that Yanagida and Whitman claim the former two to be nominalized clauses in apparent contradiction to the prevailing view in the field. They do not claim the same status for infinitive clauses (*ren’yōkei*); however they do recognize (p. 118) that subject-marking *ga* does not appear in these clauses. If verbal prefix *i-* participates in the syntax of active-stative alignment (limited, in their theory, to nominalized clauses), then why can it appear (with this function) in infinitive clauses, which are not nominalized? Conversely, if infinitive clauses can exhibit active-stative alignment, then why is alleged active subject-marking *ga* never seen in that context (even when *i-* is missing)? Such subtleties of careful analysis have, it seems, been overlooked. Regarding alleged stative prefix *sa-*, the data offered (p. 119-20) show a kind of inconsistency that the authors do not acknowledge: there are examples where the subject is human and the verbal semantics indicate a prototypical stative or nonactive event (e.g., ‘sleep’ (28b) and ‘shine’ (28c)), but there are at the same time many examples in which the subject is an animal, with a verb that *ought* to be classified as active. The best example of these is their 28d, in which pheasants dance. Considering that this verb is the same one used for human dancing, it is probably quite reasonable to see this as an example of anthropomorphization. Regardless, let us recall that in active-stative languages the core distinction is typically drawn based on the volitionality/agentivity involved in the *event* denoted by the verb (which is perhaps why we usually see marking on the verb (Nichols 1992:90)), not really in the *capability* of the subject for volitional action. Compare also their 28e, featuring “run,” a prototypical unergative, and yet marked here for stative/nonactive, presumably because the subject is an animal. These examples of *sa-* point more in the direction of the choice of prefix being based on subject animacy than on agentivity of the verb itself. Unsurprisingly,

this view aligns nicely with the known grammatical usage of *ga* and *no*. For one more example, let us return to the claim that *no* marks stative intransitive subjects in nominalized clauses:

- (19) *pyiNkurasi-nö nak-u sima kaNkey-ni*
 evening.cicada-ADN sing-ATTR island shadow-LOC
 ‘In the island shadows where evening cicadas are singing’ MYS XV.3620

Here we find a prototypical unergative (agentive, and therefore ostensibly active) predicate ‘cry/sing’ (Perlmutter 1978) in an attributive relative clause, with a subject marked by *no* rather than the predicted *ga*. Of course, the explanation of this discrepancy, too, is to be found in the preceding paragraph.

In order to emphasize the error of claiming subject-marking differences in OJ based on verbal semantics, compare 19 to the following examples (the first of which is a repeat of 10a) all sharing the same main verb root *nak-*:

- (20) a. *wa-Nk-imwo-kwo-Nka swoNte mö sipopo n-i nak-i-si sö*
 1P-ADN-beloved-girl-ADN sleeve FOC soaking DV-INF cry-INF-PST.ATTR FOC
[o]möp-ay-u
 long.for-PASS-ATTR
 ‘I long for my dear girl, who cried so that even her sleeves were soaking wet’ MYS XX.4357
- b. *imwo-wo sita nak-yi n-i*
 beloved-?? secretly cry-INF DV-INF
 ‘My beloved secretly wept.’ KOJIKI KAYÖ 78

The examples in 20 even share the same subject, the ‘beloved’. In the theory of Yanagida and Whitman, 20a marks its subject with *ga* in the expected way because it is unergative and active. In contrast, however, is 20b, which Vovin (1997:279) posits as a stative construction in which the subject of *nak-* is marked with absolutive *wo*. Regardless of the relative virtues of considering ‘cry’ to be active vs not, however this is defined, it cannot be both when used with the same subject and in the same sense.

3. CONCLUSIONS. Nichols (1992) has done a typological survey of 155 languages in order to discover patterns of grammatical stability and diversity in both genetic (diachronic) and areal dimensions. While such statistics are at best suggestive, she finds no cases in her sample of languages marking nouns and pronouns with active-stative morphology (p. 90); languages identified as having this alignment type mark only the verb (although in some cases the marking may be seen in pronominal affixes that are included in the verbal template, and thus reflect properties of the arguments). She further finds (p. 181) that dominant alignment type has a high degree of stability along the genetic dimension—although I would add a caveat that her specific treatment of the alignment types is complex and idiosyncratic, and focused entirely on morphological marking rather than syntax as such. Nevertheless, her findings do not reflect well on the active-stative proposals for Old Japanese, in which mainly nouns and pronouns are marked, and the two verbal affixes claimed to be relevant, rare to begin with, vanished from the language in a fairly sudden way.

The building up of a complicated case for a grammatical phenomenon the likelihood of whose existence should seem dubious even on first glance to someone intimate with the language, based on a small amount of relatively weak, ambiguous, and exception-ridden evidence, requiring a variety of special assumptions, and crucially depending on affixes that are probable borrowings and in any case rarely attested, strikes me as a violation of Occam’s Razor, if not of common sense.

The illusion of an active-stative alignment system depending heavily on the distribution of *ga* and *no* no doubt arises because of the aforementioned functional semantics of *ga* which strongly prefer its use at the

higher end of a person/animacy hierarchy, where subject nominals refer mostly to humans (and correspondingly, the lower end for *no*). Yanagida and Whitman essentially allow as much, in a way that is perceptible to the already skeptical reader. “Active” and “human” are not independent variables. Naturally enough, one will find a statistical predominance of human or anthropomorphized subjects correlated with verbs having active (unergative, volitional) semantics, and just as naturally one will find this pattern limited to nominalized clauses when the morphological markers in question are restricted by syntax to this environment.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Glossing for OJ is mostly consistent with Vovin 2005, 2009a,c.

1P	1st person	EV	evidential (izenkei)	OBJ	object/patient
ABL	ablative	FIN	final (shūshikei)	PART	particle (various)
ACC	accusative	FOC	focus particle	PERF	perfective
ADN	adnominal	GER	gerund (special)	PL	plural
ATTR	attributive (rentaikei)	HON	honorific	POL	polite
COMP	comparative	IMP	imperative	PROG	progressive
CON	conjunctive gerund	INDIC	indicative	PST	past tense
COND	conditional	INF	infinitive stem (ren'yōkei)	Q	question particle
COOR	coordinating gerund	INT	intensive	SUB	subordinative gerund
COP	copula	LOC	locative	SUBJ	subject
DIM	diminutive	NEG	negative	SUP	suppositional
DV	defective verb	NML	nominalizer	TENT	tentative
EMPH	emphatic	NONPST	nonpast tense	TOP	topic

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