It is well known that in early Old Japanese (OJ), both subjects and objects tend to be morphologically unmarked, as illustrated in (1).

(1) wago ookimi Ø_{subj} kuni Ø_{obj} sirasu-rasi (M. 933)
   ‘The emperor country govern-AUX
   ‘The emperor might govern the country.’

Miyagawa (1989) observes that in OJ, unmarked objects must be strictly adjacent to the verb, and argues that they are given abstract case from the verb under the adjacency condition. Given that objects in modern Japanese are assigned morphological case from the particle o, Miyagawa proposes that Japanese underwent historical shift from abstract case marking to overt case marking.

Although it has been widely recognized that subjects in OJ tend to be morphologically unmarked, no research has ever been conducted on the distribution of unmarked subjects. From a complete survey of morphologically unmarked subjects in Manyoshu, I discovered that examples like (1) in which a bare subject appears in a transitive clause are restricted to main/root clauses. In embedded clauses, unmarked subjects appear exclusively with non-active intransitive verbs, and appear immediately adjacent to the verb, as is the case with bare objects, observed in Miyagawa (1989). This is exemplified in (2).

(2) maki Ø_{subj} latu…yutsari Ø_{subj} kure-ba…miyuki Ø_{subj} furu…(M. 45)
   ‘A tree stands…, when evening comes, snow falls…’

Since Japanese is a topic prominent language, I suggest that unmarked subjects in transitive clauses are topicalized subjects that appear not in the canonical “subject” position but in the topic position within the domain of CP. Given that the object of a transitive verb and the subject of an intransitive verb behave exactly alike with respect to case marking, I suggest that early OJ possesses absolutive case marking typology. Vovin (1997) claims that wo in early OJ is an absolutive case marker on the basis of the well-known fact that wo marks the subject of stative predicates that end with mi, as in (3).

(3) yo-wo naga-mi ino nera-e-nu (M. 3680)
   night-ABS long-MI sleep-can-not
   ‘As the night is long, I can hardly fall to sleep.’

Note that predicates with mi can take a morphologically unmarked subject, as in (4).

(4) furuki miyako-fa yama Ø_{subj} taka-mi kafa tofosiroshi (M. 324)
   ancient Palace-TOP mountain high-MI river wide
   ‘In the ancient Palace, mountains are high and rivers are wide.’

I suggest that the subjects in (2) and in (4) are assigned morphologically unrealized absolutive case. Yanagida (to appear) made a complete investigation of transitive clauses in Manyoshu whose subjects and objects are overly expressed, and found that there is a striking difference in word order between Modern Japanese and early OJ. In early OJ, when the subject is marked by the genitive gaino, the object that follows must be morphologically unmarked. When the object is marked by wo, it is necessarily raised over the subject. The representative examples are given below.

(5) idukuni-ka kimi-ga Tune Ø_{obj} fate kutsa Ø_{obj} mutsubi-kemu (M. 1169)
   where-Q you-GEN ship stop grass tie-PAST
   ‘Which port in the world did your ship cast anchor at?’

(6) aki yama-wo ikani-ka kimi-ga fitori koyu-ramu (M. 106)
   autumn mountain-OBJ how-Q you-GEN alone cross-AUX
   ‘How do you cross the autumn mountain alone?’
Given that objects are assigned abstract case under the strict adjacency requirement, wo in early OJ does not function as a case marker. This particle is used to assign some semantic/pragmatic interpretations, and shows up only when internal arguments move outside a VP. I found a total of 54 examples of the OSV pattern, as given in (6), and there are 14 cases in which the subject is morphologically left unmarked, as in (7). (Others are marked by the genitive particle ga/no.)

(7) koromo-no fimo-wo are Ø-topic tokame-ya-mo (M. 3585)
    dress-GEN lace-OBJ I untie-Q
  ‘The lace of dress, I will not untie, will I?

Assuming that the topic position in the articulated CP structure is recursive (cf. Rizzi 1997), I suggest that the wo-marked object and the unmarked subject in (7) are both topics, and thus, we find a minimal pair as in (8), in which the subject is marked by the topic particle fa.

(8) musubishi fimo-wo …ware-fa tokimi-zi (M. 2919)
    knot lace-OBJ I-TOP untie-not
  ‘The lace we knot (together), I do not untie myself.’

Vovin (1997) argues that the case marker i, which is treated as a nominative case among traditional Japanese grammarians, is in fact an active case used with subjects of transitive verbs and of active intransitive verbs. His example is cited below:

(9) papa-i mor-edomo… (M. 3393)
    mother-ACT guard-GER
  ‘Though [my] mother guards [me]…’

I discovered that in Manyoshu, there are only five instances of the particle i attached to the subject (see also Vovin 1997:282), but that there are a number of cases of i prefixed to an active verb, as exemplified in (10).

(10) atsanagi-ni i-kaki-watari yusiwo-ni i-kogi-watari…(M. 1520)
    morning-calm-LOC i-paddle-go evening tide-LOC i-row-go
  ‘When the morning sea is calm, (he would) toil hard to paddle, and on evening tide, (he would) go rowing…’

The prefix i is attached only to active predicates. In other words, i is in complementary distribution with unmarked (non-topicalized) subjects, which appear only with non-active predicates. I propose that the case particle i and the prefix i in OJ are morphologically related: the prefix i is a clitic pronoun attached to an active verb, and is reanalyzed as a case particle. I made a complete survey of Konkomyou Saishou Okyou ‘The Sutra of Golden Light’, originally written in India and translated into Chinese in 703. (This Chinese text was read in Japanese through a system called haku-ten ‘white markings’ used as a way of translating Chinese into Japanese.) In this text, I found a number of the case particle i used to mark the subject of a transitive verb and of an active intransitive verb. Based on the above observations, I suggest that OJ in the Nara period (710-784) has an ergative-absolutive case marking system.

References:


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