Japanese discourse particles as markers of relative authority

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Japanese features a closed set of sentence-final particles, including yo and ne, exemplified in (1).

(1) Ame-ga futteiru (yo/ne).
   rain-NOM falling YO/NE
   ‘It’s raining, (man/huh).’

As suggested by the glosses, these particles are non-truth conditional, and even though they are extremely prominent in discourse, it is difficult to pin down exactly what they mean. Native speakers tend to characterize yo and ne as markers of hearer-new and hearer-old information, respectively, and while existing analyses of these particles capture these intuitions quite elegantly as either informativity (McCready 2008) or relevance (Davis 2009) presuppositions, in the first portion of this paper I present new data that these existing treatments cannot account for. In particular, I show that a true hearer-newness requirement for yo is too strong, given its felicity in (2) below. Also, the fact that yo and ne can appear stacked onto one utterance, as in (3), suggests that yo and ne must be defined in mutually compatible ways, if we are to achieve an enlightening, compositional account.

(2) Context: Souta and Ayaka both know that Hanako arrived in town today. Souta knows because he saw her a few minutes ago. Ayaka knows because someone told her so.
   A: Hanako-ga tuita tte.
      Hanako-NOM came QUOTE
      ‘I hear Hanako has arrived.’
   S: (N.) Hontou da yo.
      (Yeah.) true COP YO
      ‘Yeah, that’s right.’

(3) Context: Souta and Ayaka are baking in the hot sun.
   S: Kyoo, atui ?(yo) ne.
      today hot ?(YO) NE
      ‘It is (seriously) hot today, huh.’ (S sound more certain than if he’d used ne alone.)

Based on these facts, I propose a novel analysis where yo and ne place demands on the context about the speaker’s epistemic authority to sponsor particular additions to discourse. The main theoretical contribution of this account is to suggest that a speaker’s authority should be judged by two different metrics: The first, termed absolute authority, compares a speaker’s authority over a given proposition to an objective informativity threshold for the purposes of the discourse. The second, relative authority, compares a speaker’s authority to the authority of other discourse participants. This bifurcation articulates the mechanisms underlying the concepts of source and dependent, as discussed by Gunlogson 2008 and Farkas 2010.

Under my final analysis, a yo-marked utterance with propositional content $\varphi$ presupposes that no one in the discourse is more authoritative than the speaker about $\varphi$, while an otherwise identical ne-marked utterance presupposes that the addressee is at least as authoritative about $\varphi$ as the speaker. My discussion, couched in the tabletop discourse model of Farkas and Bruce 2010,

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1 The ‘man’ gloss is due to McCready 2008. All others are my own, and attempt to mirror to the greatest extent possible the pragmatics of each utterance. When choosing between a translation more faithful to the literal Japanese and one appropriate for an identical context in English, I prefer the latter.

2 The full paper also accounts for uses of yo and ne with imperatives, in which case yo and ne relate to deontic authority.

3 I also incorporate a version of Davis’s 2009 relevance presupposition for yo, with the important difference that it is sensitive to authority structure.
shows how these definitions derive a variety of effects, including the violable tendency for yo to mark hearer-new information discussed above, as well as the fact that some responses are elicited after (licit use of) yo- or ne-marked utterances, as shown in (4-5).\(^4\)

(4) S: Hanako-ga tuita yo.  
Hanako-NOM arrived YO  
‘Hanako has arrived.’  
A: #N. / Soo ka.  
yes / oh  
‘#Yep. / Oh.’

(5) S: Hanako-ga tuita ne.  
Hanako-NOM arrived NE  
‘Hanako arrived, didn’t she.’  
A: N. / #Soo ka.  
yes / oh  
‘Yep. / #Oh.’

Finally, my definitions for yo and ne also correctly derive the behavior of the combined yo ne case in (3); the two presuppositions collapse in such a way that yo ne-marked utterances will be licit only when the speaker and addressee have equivalent authority over the truth of that utterance’s content.

The paper concludes with two directions for future work. First, I suggest that it may be possible to account for more of the Japanese sentence-final particles within this framework, especially those closely related to yo and ne, such as the ‘macho’ zo or commiseration marker nee. Second, there is evidence that the authority structures I describe are referenced cross-linguistically; German particle ne, Canadian English eh, and Southern California English yeah all seem to behave in a way that is analogous to Japanese ne. It would be worthwhile to consider whether evidence for the authority structure can also be found outside the domain of sentence-final particles.

References


\(^4\)Farkas and Bruce’s 2010 tabletop model is itself built on a long tradition in discourse level work, dating back to Stalnaker 1978. Most immediately, it relates to Gunlogson 2003.