



# PRAGREV

## Pragmatics.Reviews

Online Publication of the  
European University VIADRINA

Volume 1, Number 1

March 2013

**A gestalt-based solution to problematic sentence-  
final particles in Japanese**

by Martina Ebi

[dx.doi.org/10.11584/pragrev.2013.1.1.6](http://dx.doi.org/10.11584/pragrev.2013.1.1.6)

[www.pragmatics-reviews.org](http://www.pragmatics-reviews.org)

## A gestalt-based solution to problematic sentence-final particles in Japanese

Hideki Saigo. 2011. *The Japanese Sentence-Final Particles in Talk-in-Interaction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

In recent years, Japanese sentence-final particles have attracted increasing attention of researchers from various theoretical backgrounds. However, these previous studies failed to account for the use of particles in interaction. Due to their functional complexity on the one hand and the insufficient description on the other, sentence-final particles are difficult to acquire and pose problems in cross-cultural communication. Saigo tries to overcome these shortcomings by proposing an original hypothesis based on the concepts of gestalt psychology. The study focuses on the most frequent particles *ne*, *yo* and the combination of both *yone* in contrast to sentences without any particle.

After a brief description of the research question in Chapter 1, Saigo reviews previous approaches to Japanese sentence-final particles in Chapter 2. The studies are divided into two groups:

- studies based on the notion of the speaker's proprietary interest in the information contained in the utterance and
- studies focusing on the communicative function of the particles.

According to the approaches based on the notion of information propriety, *ne* is used when the information is in the territory of the addressee (and the speaker), whereas *yo* is added when the speaker believes that the information is solely in his territory (Kamio 1994). These theories, however, cannot explain why both particles can be used in utterances like (p. 1) that describe a situation obvious to both speaker and addressee.

1. *Ame ga futteimasu yo/ne*  
Rain SUBJ is raining yo/ne  
'It is raining yo/ne'

Communicative approaches to Japanese sentence-final particles claim that they invite the addressee's involvement or show the speaker's epistemic stance towards the conveyed information (Cook 1992; Lee 2007). These studies, however, "do not provide clear explanations as to why the speaker uses the particles in interaction" (p. 16). Saigo therefore proposes what he calls the *particle function hypothesis* (PFH) that he develops within the

general framework of gestalt psychology. According to the PFH, the particles indicate to the addressee how to interpret the preceding information in terms of figure and ground:

each distinct utterance in a turn constructional unit and the turn constructional unit itself is a figure when it is presented by the speaker to the addressee in the sense that it is foregrounded in the relation to the conversational background. Subsequently, the figure is grounded, by either the speaker or the addressee in one of a limited number of ways. that is to say, each figure becomes the ground for the next utterance, which replaces it as figure (p. 18).

A speaker uses *ne* when he wants the figure emerging in the talk to be treated as ground in the next proposition, and thus directs the addressee's acceptance. By contrast no particle is used, when he does not want to indicate how the figure emerging is to be grounded which leads the listener to the assumption that the topic is closed. Saigo illustrates the PFH with various made-up examples and explains the situations in which the utterances could be made in great detail. After a methodological discussion in chapter 3, chapters 4 to 6 are dedicated to an extensive qualitative analysis of a larger body of natural talk-in-interaction data. As the data comprise an extract from an everyday talk between two Japanese female friends and a goal-directed talk between two male native speakers (each with a duration of 6 minutes), Saigo is able to prove his hypothesis across gender and interaction types. Chapter 6 is of special interest for learners of Japanese as it analyses an extract from an everyday talk between a native speaker and a non-native speaker and illustrates the awkwardness the wrong use of a particle or a wrong reaction may evoke. The final Chapter 7 summarizes the findings and relates them to broader issues of pragmatics including teaching Japanese as a foreign language.

In sum, this book makes an important contribution to advancing our understanding of Japanese sentence-final particles. It is of special interest to all scholars concerned with pragmatic issues and discourse organization in Japanese. It is to hope that the results are taken into account in teaching Japanese as a foreign language.

### References

- Cook, Haruko M. 1992. Meanings of non-referential indexes: A case study of Japanese sentence-final particles *ne*. *Text* 12(4): 507–539.
- Kamio, Akio. 1994. The theory of territory of information: The case of Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics* 21(1): 67–100.

Lee, Duck-Y. 2007. Involvement and the Japanese interactive particles *ne* and *yo*. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39(2): 363–388.

**Martina EBI**

Research interests: semantics, text- and discourse linguistics, lexicography

Martina Ebi: Review on *The Japanese Sentence-Final Particles in Talk-in-Interaction*. 2011.  
In PRAGMATICS.REVIEWS 2013.1.1