Genitive/active to nominative case in Japanese: the role of complex experiencer constructions

Yuko Yanagida (University of Tsukuba) & John Whitman (Cornell University)

Japanese is perhaps the best known example of a language where an exceptionless accusative alignment pattern has emerged through development of a genitive case marker to a nominative. In Modern Tokyo Japanese the subjects of both transitive intransitive verbs are marked by nominative =*ga* and the objects of transitive verbs are marked by accusative =*o*, while in Old Japanese (OJ; 8th century) =*ga* was a genitive particle also marking the subjects of "nominalized" subordinate clauses and =*(w)o* marked objects in a differential object marking pattern (Yanagida 2006). Previous research has claimed that the reanalysis of a major subclass of nominalized clauses as a matrix pattern led straightforwardly to reanalysis of genitive as nominative. Our purpose in this paper is to show that matters are more complex.

First, Yanagida and Whitman (2009) show that the alternation between =*ga* and zero in OJ shows properties of active alignment, including the familiar syncretism between active/ergative and genitive. Similar properties can still be observed in some Ryūkyūan languages. The OJ to ModJ shift is thus not just a change in case marking, then, but a change in alignment. Second, more recent and detailed research shows that genitive subject =*ga* in earlier Japanese is not the direct source of nominative =*ga* in ModJ. Instead, a pattern that we call **impersonal psych transitive constructions** played the central role in the shift in Japanese case marking and alignment. The impersonal psych transitive construction in OJ involves an implicit first person experiencer object, as in (1):

Old Japanese (8th century)

  (1) [papa wo panarete yuku]=**ga** kanasi-sa   (Man'yōshū 4338)

       mother OBJ part go.ADN=GEN sad-NMLZ

       '(I am) sad about parting from Mother.'

Examples like (1) increased in frequency after OJ. The examples in (2-3) are cited from Ohno (1977:142). Ohno (1977, 1987) observes that in EMJ (9th-12th c.), adnominal clauses marked by =*ga* are used predominantly with psych predicates with a first person experiencer (2), as in OJ (1), but that they also begin to appear with non-psych intransitive verbs as in (3).

Early Middle Japanese (11th century)

(2) [kokorobape wo mi-ru]=**ga**   wokasiu mo   (*Genji monogatari*, 11th c.)

  kindness ACC see-ADN=GEN   thankful EXCL

  'Seeing (someone's) kindness makes (me) thankful.'

(3) [kumo no usuku watare-ru]=**ga** nibi iro naru wo   (*Genji monogatari*, 11th c.)

  cloud GEN shallow pass.away-ADN AGT red color become EXCL

  'the clouds passing thinly away become red'

In (3) the adnominal clause marked by =*ga* is the subject of a non-psych intransitive verb, and it involves no implicit first person experiencer. A further change in EMJ is that while this psych predicate construction was used only in nominalized clauses in OJ, it came to appear in non-nominalized main clauses. Based on Middle Japanese (MJ, 800-1600) data, we show that ModJ nominative =*ga* is descended from =*ga* marking the clausal complements of psychological adjectives (or experiencer adjectives). Based on Ohno's observations and data collected from the NINJAL Diachronic Corpus of Japanese (http://historicalcorpus.jp/), we show that nominative =*ga* developed from a reanalysis of impersonal psych-transitives as true intransitives, where the =*ga* marked argument acquires the status of the subject argument of the predicate. As a consequence of this reanalysis, =*ga* reappears in Late Middle Japanese as a nominative postposition, first marking the theme subject of intransitives. It was extended to mark the subjects of transitive verbs in Early Modern Japanese. The Japanese example demonstrates the need to look behind apparently simple shifts in case marking or alignment, such as genitive/active > nominative. The path to realignment turns out to be not reanalysis in the classical sense, but rather extension of a fairly restricted pattern (impersonal psych intransitive to intransitive) followed by a syntactic readjustment (clausal/theme complement to subject).