

# **Contrastive topic =gyaa in Ikema-Nishihara Miyakoan of Southern Ryukyus**

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## **1 Introduction**

The primary purpose of this study is to describe the usage of =gyaa, one of the background (topic) particles in Ikema-Nishihara Miyakoan (hereafter, Nishihara). Nishihara has a rigid system to mark the information structure (i.e., focus vs. background) morphosyntactically using both background and focus particles. The particle =gyaa is typologically uncommon because it is

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an accusative-dedicated background (topic) form for objects (Hayashi, 2010; 2017) or a contrastive topic for other elements (Tao, 2018). Regarding the information structure (IS) marking system, what distinguishes Nishihara and other Miyako dialects from the rest of Ryukyuan languages and Japanese is that they have an obligatory focus particle (=du) that indicates an information (non-contrastive) focus (Shimoji, 2018). In describing the usage of =gyaa compared with the focus =du, this paper also discusses the relationship between contrastiveness and focushood, which is often blurred in languages like Japanese, where a focus is mainly expressed by intonation.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 The information-structure particles in Nishihara

Nishihara has three types of IS marking particles: =du (focus particle), =a (background/topic particle<sup>1</sup>), and =gyaa (object background/topic particle), all of which can be used as contrastive (Hayashi, 2013; 2016; 2017). Within a sentence, all the elements preceding the element to which the focus particle =du is attached are coded by the background marker =a or, in the case of an object, =gyaa in the form of =u=gyaa<sup>2</sup> (see 2.3 for details). As Tao (2018) reports on Ikema Miyakoan, a language closely related to Nishihara, =gyaa can follow nouns of other grammatical relations, such as subjects and datives, when the nouns are contrasted.

### 2.2 The origin of =gyaa

The marker =gyaa is considered to stem from =gami=a ‘=LIM=TOP’ (Tao 2018). In the Irabu dialect, =gami is a limited case marker, and =gami=a ‘=LIM=TOP’ can be used as a contrastive topic marker (Shimoji, 2017: p.165). Based on this observation, Tao (2018) argues that =gyaa in Ikema Miyakoan is from =gamyaa, which is a natural morphophonological change in this language. There is a slight difference in usage between Ikema and Nishihara, but, as Tao says, =gyaa in Nishihara has the same origin and is thought to have acquired the usage of non-contrastive topics in the object.

It is important to note that all other Miyako dialects also have an object background form that appears as =u=ba ‘=ACC=TOP/BG’. Only a few dialects,

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<sup>1</sup> This particle is what is widely referred to as a "topic" marker. For the clarity of the indicated object, the second author also sometimes calls it "topic" marker, but functionally it is more accurate to call it "background" rather than "topic". Indicating "topic" is included in its function (see section 2.3 or Hayashi 2017 in detail). For this reason, the "background" is used here instead of "topic" as the label of =a and =gyaa.

<sup>2</sup> =a can also be used to indicate the object background.

including Nishihara, have  $=u=gyaa$ <sup>3</sup>. It is still unclear why or how Miyako has such an accusative-dedicated object background marker, which has not been found in other Ryukyuan languages. As Miyakoan extensively marks cases to distinguish subject and object, there could be a motivation to distinguish subject and object topics.

### 2.3 The IS marking of Nishihara

Nishihara’s IS coding is mainly realized morphologically (Hayashi, 2017). It has both a focus particle  $=du$  and background particles  $=a$  or  $=gyaa$ , which are all enclitics, attached to various parts of a sentence in a paradigmatic manner. Both IS particles, along with word order and predicate form, are used together to indicate the IS of the sentence. Under certain conditions, namely, when the sentence is present (non-past), positive, or declarative, the focus particle is obligatory. The focus particle appears only once in a clause, indicating the left edge of the focus domain. The right end of the focus domain was not marked. The words/phrases of a sentence before the  $=du$ -attached phrase should be coded with background particles, whereas the phrases/words after the focus particle can be optionally coded with background particles if they are not in focus. The system is schematized in Figure 1, where PRED is a predicate and X is a phrase preceding the predicate.

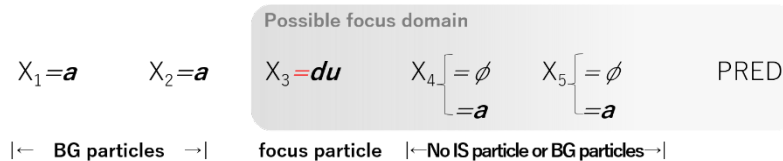


Figure 1. IS particles in a sentence: The word order and focus domain

The usage of  $=du$  ‘FOC’, as we said, is to indicate the informationally “new” part of a sentence (with or without contrastive meaning). It includes the most common usage of focus, namely coding the answering part of *the wh*-question (Lambrecht, 1994).

- (1) (Replying to “What can you see?”)

*mayu=nu=du. mii-rai ui*  
 cat=NOM=FOC see-POT PROG.NPST  
 “I can see a cat.”

<sup>3</sup>Ikema Miyakoan also have  $=u=ba$  in addition to  $=u=gyaa$  (Tao 2018).  $=u=ba$  is not usually observed in Nishihara.

As =*du* is obligatory in all present/positive/declarative sentences to indicate new information, it also appears in sentence-focus constructions, the so-called thetic sentences.

- (2) (Finding a cat walking outside)  
*mayu=nu=du mii-rai ui*  
 cat=NOM=FOC see-POT PROG.PRES  
 “Ah, I can see a cat.”

As in (2), when the whole sentence carries new information, =*du* is attached to the initial part of the sentence. It can also be used in the so-called “contrastive focus” without changing any form, including intonation.

- (3) (Replying to “You see a dog?”)  
*aran, mayu=nu=du mii-rai ui*  
 no cat=NOM=FOC see-POT PROG.PRES  
 “No, I can see a cat.”

Background particles can also be used in contrastive meanings without changing the form/intonation. This is exemplified by (4).

- (4) *taroo=ya t-tai-suga ziroo=ya kuu-n*  
 Taro=BG1 come-PST-but Jiro=BG1 come-NEG  
 “Taro came, but Jiro didn’t come.”

As shown above, IS particles in Nishihara indicate what is informationally new or background, and all IS particles can express contrastiveness. This study investigated the use of the second background marker, =*gyaa*.

## 2.4 The purpose of this study

In the following sections, we discuss the usage of the background particle =*gyaa* when it is attached to the subject and object, especially with an interest in the question, “what is the difference between contrastive focus and contrastive topic?” The basis of this questioning is the fact that, as Repp (2016) points out, “focus” and “contrast” are often confused concepts. Particularly in languages such as English, where the focus is marked by intonation in the same way as in contrast, these can lose their formal distinction<sup>4</sup>. On the other

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<sup>4</sup> This of course has a lot to do with how focus is defined. Especially in relation to contrast, as Repp points out, the definition of focus in Rooth (1992) 's alternative semantics can be synonymous with some definitions of contrast. In the present study we mainly use the characterization of IS and focus based on Lambrecht (1994) which is independent of contrast, because it is more

hand, in Nishihara, the information structure is primarily presented in a morphosyntactic manner, and contrastiveness is independent of it. Therefore, if =gyaa is a background marker, it can be predicted that even when it appears contrastive, there should be a difference from the contrastive focus.

To confirm this, we investigated the usage of =gyaa, especially in the answering part for *wh*-questions, which is the typical usage of the focus. As mentioned above, =gyaa in Nishihara occurs most frequently as an object background marker, with or without a contrastive meaning. In contrast, as reported by Tao (2018) regarding the property of =gyaa in Ikema, =gyaa attached to elements other than the object is expected to always have a contrastive meaning in Nishihara. In the following, we will show how =gyaa is used in each of these two different cases and describe the relationship between IS properties and the contrastiveness of IS markers in Nishihara.

### 3 Data

We created a questionnaire to control the context: contrastive vs. non-contrastive, and background vs. focus (answer to the question). The second author, who mainly conducted fieldwork in Miyako, interviewed a consultant via telephone. The main consultant was a female speaker who was born in 1951. The interviews were conducted several times, in March and April 2021.

### 4 Subject =gyaa

We found that *gyaa* coding subjects can only be used as a contrastive. It can code the answer to a question, but the sentence implies that the speaker does not answer the question entirely, which is a characteristic of a contrastive topic.

#### 4.1 Contrastive use of =gyaa in subjects

*Gyaa-coding* subjects is always contrastive. As shown in the comparison between (5) and (6), for example, the *gyaa*-coded noun in (5) referring to ten people, not contrasted with anybody else, is not acceptable, whereas the *gyaa*-coded noun in (6) referring to three people in contrast to the remaining seven people, is acceptable.

(5) Non-contrastive

(I had ten classmates in my elementary school.)

*unu tuu=nu hitu={u/#gyaa} nnama=mai myaaku=n=du*  
 that 10=GEN person={BG1/BG2} now=also Miyako=DAT=FOC

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sufficiently descriptive at least for the case of Nishihara. For reasons of space, we do not explain these further in this paper.

*ui=doo*  
 remain.NPST=SFP  
 “Those 10 people still remain in Miyako.”

(6) Contrastive

*˚unu micyaai=gyaa nnama=mai myaaku=n=du*  
 that 3.people=BG2 now=also Miyako=DAT=FOC  
*ui=doo*  
 remain.NPST=SFP

The contrast of these examples indicates that subject-coding =*gyaa* can only be used as contrastive, unlike object-coding =*gyaa* (§5).

#### 4.2 Incomplete answers to a question

Are the contrasted *gyaa*-coded subject foci; Can they be the answer to a question? The answer is yes and no; *gyaa*-coded subjects can answer a *wh*-question, but the sentence implies that it is only an incomplete answer. For example, in (7), a *gyaa*-coded subject implies that there could be other regions that received the prize. This is similar to what has been pointed out regarding the contrastive topic *wa* in Japanese (Tomioka, 2009). Also note that the concession marker =*suga* ‘though’ is necessary to leave an implication, which is another piece of evidence showing that the answer is incomplete.

(7) Q: Which (region) won the prize?

*nudatsi=tu kaimata=gyaa zzi=du u-tai=suga*  
 Nudatsi=and Kaimata=BG2 receive.CVB=FOC RES-PST=though  
 “(I don’t remember... Oh!) (At least) Nudatsi and Kaimata won the prize, but... (I do not know others).”

However, (8), where the focus marker =*du* is used instead of =*gyaa*, is the complete answer to the same question.

(8) *nudatsi=tu kaimata=nu=du zzi-tai*  
 Nudatsi=and Kaimata=NOM=FOC receive-PST

(9) is another example showing that the *gyaa*-coded subjects are incomplete; as the answer to a question “how many people came”, (5) implies that more than 10 people might have come.

(9) Q: How many people came?

*tuu=nu hitu=gyaa tti=du u-tai*  
 10=GEN person=BG2 come.CVB=FOC RES-PST  
 “At least 10 people came.”

### 4.3 Concession clause

In the case of contrasting clauses, =gyaa appears only in concession clauses. This is because the gyaa-attached nouns are only partially informative.

(10) Contrastive

*taroo={ya/gyaa} aici-tai-suga=du, ziroo={ya/#gyaa} haicci-tai*  
Taro={BG1/BG2} walk-PST-but=FOC Jiro={BG1/BG2} run-PST  
“Whereas Taro walked, Jiro ran.”

(11) *taroo={ya/gyaa} ucinaa=nkai iki=du,*

Taro={BG1/BG2} Okinawa=ALL go.CVB=FOC  
*ziroo={ya/#gyaa} yamatu=nkai ha-tai*  
Jiro={BG1/BG2} Japan=ALL leave-PST  
“Taro went to Okinawa, Jiro went to mainland Japan.”

## 5 Object =gyaa

So far, we have been discussing the gyaa-coded subjects. However, as mentioned in Section 2, =gyaa appears most frequently as an accusative topic, as in =u=gyaa, where =u is an accusative case particle. For this reason, =gyaa is called a topic marker and is dedicated to an accusative marker (Hayashi 2010, 2017).

In this section, we describe the usage of object =u=gyaa and compare it with that of subject =gyaa. We show that, unlike subject =gyaa, object =u=gyaa can appear as both contrastive and non-contrastive but still code background/topic, which implies that =gyaa is contrastive and background/topic but never as a (contrastive) focus.

Unlike subject =gyaa, object =u=gyaa can appear both contrastive and non-contrastive, as exemplified in (12). Note that a non-contrastive subject coded by =gyaa is not acceptable, as shown above.

(12) Non-contrastive (continuous)

(Yesterday, I got soba soup.)  
*unu soba-tsuyu=u=gyaa kyuu tsukai yaa*  
That soba-soup=ACC=BG2 today. use.CVB RES2.NPST  
“That soba soup, I used (it) today.”

In addition, unlike subject =gyaa, object =gyaa can appear in both contrasting clauses, as shown in (13).

(13) Contrasted clauses

*mancyuu={yu=gyaa/ya}. nama=hii=mai fau=suga*  
papaya={ACC=BG2/BG1} raw=INST=also eat=though

$nn=\{nu=gyaa/na\}$        $nii=du$        $fau$   
 potato= $\{ACC=BG2/BG1\}$     boil.CVB=FOC eat.NPST  
 “Whereas (we) eat papaya raw, (we) eat potatoes cooked.”

Importantly,  $=u=gyaa$  is unnatural as the answer to a question, presumably because, unlike  $=gyaa$  coding subject,  $=u=gyaa$  acquired non-contrastive usage and may not be sufficiently contrastive compared to subject  $=gyaa$ , as exemplified in (14).

- (14) (What did you eat yesterday?). – I ate soba.  
 $?soba=u=gyaa$      $fau-dusi-tai=suga$   
 soba=ACC=BG2    eat-FOC-PST=though

## 6 Discussion

In summary, *gyaa*-coded subjects are always contrastive and background, that is, they cannot be the perfect answer to a question; the sentence implies that the speaker does not fully know the answer to a *wh*-question, and the sentences are often required to end with a concession marker. *Gyaa*-coded objects, on the other hand, can appear non-contrastive and background. Given that they cannot appear as the answer to a question, even with the implication that the answer is not perfect, *gyaa*-coded objects are not contrastive. The results are summarized in Table 1. The fact that the element coded by a contrastive and background marker can only be a partial answer to a question is reminiscent of the contrastive *wa* in Standard Japanese (Hara, 2006; Tomioka, 2009; Oshima, 2021).

	Background	Focus
Non-contrastive	$=a$ / $=u=gyaa$ (Object)	$=du$
Contrastive	$=a$ / $=gyaa$ (Subject) / $=u=gyaa$ (Object)	$=du$

Table 1. Summary of the usage of  $=gyaa$  and other IS markers in Nishihara

It is a major assumption that contrastive topic is a sub-type of focus especially in the formal analysis,<sup>5</sup> where “the focus semantic value of a sentence [is] a set of alternatives from which the ordinary semantic value is drawn, or a set of propositions which potentially contrast with the ordinary

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Narrog (2019) for the discussion on confusion between focushood and contrastiveness.



semantic value” (Rooth, 1992: p.76; See Oshima, 2021 in Japanese, among others). Other scholars argue that contrastiveness and focushood are different concepts (Lambrecht, 1994; Vallduví & Vilkuna, 1998, among others). In Nishihara, where background and focus are distinguished morphologically and contrastiveness can be realized by both background and focus markers, it is reasonable to assume that the three concepts, background, focus, and contrastive, are distinct concepts but not subtypes of any one of them.

## 7 Conclusion

This study investigated the use of =*gyaa* in Ikema-Nishihara Miyakoan and found that it is a contrastive background marker coding subject and a simple background marker coding object. We argue that backgroundness (topichood), focushood, and contrastiveness are distinct concepts. We also found that an element coded by contrastive and background markers (so-called contrastive topic markers) can only be a partial or imperfect answer to a question because they are in the background instead of focus. We will investigate the theoretical basis using more data in a future study.

Why *gyaa*-coded subjects and objects behave asymmetrically remains a mystery, although we speculate that the motivation could be to distinguish subjects and objects in the background exactly like when they are case-coded. In general, Miyakoan almost always codes subjects and objects overtly, and zero-coded nouns are rarely found. In this language, there might be some functional or structural pressure to distinguish between subjects and objects.

### Abbreviations

ACC Accusative; BG1 Background; CVB Converb; DAT Dative; GEN Genitive; LIM Limitative; NOM Nominative; NPST Non-past; POT Potential; PRES Present; PROG Progressive; PST Past; RES Resultative; SFP Sentence final particle; TOP Topic

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