This talk presents new evidence that ‘aboutness’ in the sense of Reinhart (1981) is the only notion relevant for the syntactic distribution of topics in Japanese. In particular, I argue that the notions ‘discourse givenness’ and ‘contrastiveness’ are sufficient to mark an item with the putative topic marker *wa*, but the items so marked are not in fact topics. The evidence comes from the observation that aboutness *wa*-phrases display a syntactic distribution that is predicted by independent considerations at the syntax-discourse interface, while the other types of *wa*-phrases do not.

It is well-known that at the level of information structure, a focus-background structure can be part of a comment, but a topic-comment structure cannot be embedded inside a background (e.g., Lambrecht 1994, Hajicová, et al 1998). Moreover, in relation to how such constraints may be represented in the syntax, Rizzi (1997) and Neeleman & van de Koot (to appear) have argued that the sister constituent of a fronted topic is interpreted as the comment, while that of a fronted focus is interpreted as the background. These two considerations together make the predictions in (1): a focus can follow a fronted topic, but a topic cannot follow a fronted focus. Neeleman & van de Koot show that the predictions are borne out for Dutch. The cross-linguistic observation that topics generally precede foci also partially confirm these predictions (Hajícová, et al 1998).

(1) a. \[ \text{topic} \alpha \text{comment} \text{FOCUS} \beta \text{background} \gamma \text{ti} \] (SMALL CAPS = stress)
   b. \[ \text{*FOCUS} \beta \text{background topic} \text{comment} \alpha \text{ti} \]

Data such as (2), however, which shows that a fronted focus can precede a *wa*-phrase, suggests that the prediction in (1b) may be incorrect for Japanese, seemingly giving support to an approach which projects multiple Topic-Phrases in pre- and post-focal position (e.g., Rizzi 1997, 2004, Watanabe 2003).

(2) A: \[ \text{sono inu-ga dare-o kande-simatta no?} \]
   that dog-nom who-acc bite-closed Q ‘Who did the dog bite?’
   B: i. \[ \text{sono inu-wa JOHN-0 kande-simatta} \]
      that dog-wa John-acc bite-closed ‘The dog bit John.’
   ii. \[ \text{JOHN-0 sono inu-wa ti kande-simatta} \]
      John-acc that dog-wa bite-closed ‘It’s John that the dog bit.’

Nevertheless, I argue that the considerations in (1) are reflected in the syntax by aboutness *wa*-phrases and that the post-focal *wa*-phrase in (2B-ii) is a discourse given item and should not be treated as a topic. I first provide two arguments for this position and then show that by similar reasoning *wa*-phrases that are simply contrastive should also not be treated as topics.

First, in responding to a request such as *Tell me about that dog*, which forces *sono inu* ‘that dog’ to be an aboutness topic in the following utterance (Reinhart 1981), only the order in (2B-i) is permitted. (2B-ii) is infelicitous even if *John-o* is unstressed. If *wa*-phrases are uniformly topics, there should be no such distributional difference. Second, there is evidence that aboutness *wa*-phrases and discourse given *wa*-phrases are licensed in distinct syntactic configurations. Unstressed *wa*-phrases are generally analysed as base-generated in a left-peripheral position, binding a *pro* internally to the clause (Saito 1985, Hoji 1985). Consequently, they can be associated with a position inside an island, such as a relative clause:

(3) \[ \text{sono kodomo-wa kyoo} \text{NP} \text{[TP pro, e] kinoo katta} \text{inu]-ga John-o kande-simatta.} \]
   that child-wa today yesterday bought dog-nom John-acc bite-closed ‘As for that child, the dog that (he) bought yesterday bit John today.’

(3) can felicitously follow a request like *Tell me about that child*, but not one in (4), which, like

(4) ...
merely mentions the item marked with *wa* in the response, namely *sono kodomo* ‘that child’. The standard approach in terms of *pro* therefore applies only to aboutness *wa*-phrases.

(4) \[ \text{NP [TP} \text{sono kodomo}-g\text{a }e_j \text{kinoo katta]} \text{inu}_j\text{-ga dare-o kanda no?} \]

that child-nom yesterday bought dog-nom who-acc bit Q

‘Who did the dog that the child bought bite?’

The above syntactic difference predicts that if a post-focal *wa*-phrase is a discourse given *wa*-phrase, then it cannot be associated with a position inside a relative clause, which is true:

(5) \[ \#\text{JOHN}_k\text{-o sono kodomo}_l\text{-wa kooen-de[}\text[[pro}_i\text{e}_j \text{kinoo katta]} \text{inu}_j\text{-ga }t_k \text{kande simatta} \]

John-acc that child-wa park-at yesterday bought dog-nom bite-closed

‘It is John who the dog that that boy bought yesterday bit in the park.’

Thus, a discourse given *wa*-phrase apparently violates the independently motivated prediction in (1b), while an aboutness *wa*-phrase does not. It seems reasonable to conclude then that only aboutness *wa*-phrases are topics.

Similar considerations extend to contrastive *wa*-phrases. It is possible for a contrastive *wa*-phrase to follow a fronted focus, in apparent contradiction to (1b).

(6) \[ \text{cigarette-acc }\text{MARY-wa }t_i \text{suimasu.} \]

cigarette-acc Mary-wa smoke

‘It is cigarettes that Mary smokes.’ (Implicature: Mary is contrasted with someone else)

However, in contexts where the *wa*-phrase is interpreted as what is often referred to as a contrastive *topic*, such as (7), where the *wa*-phrase introduces a new discourse topic (Büring 1997), it cannot follow a fronted focus, as in (7B-ii), as predicted by (1b).

(7) A: Fred-wa nani-o tabeta no?
    Fred-wa what-acc ate Q ‘What did Fred eat?’

B: Fred-wa dou-da-ka siranaikedo,
    Fred-wa how-cop-whether know-not-but, ‘I don’t know about Fred, but...’
    (i) \[ \text{BILL-wa MAME-DAKE}_i\text{-O tabeta} \]
    Bill-wa beans-only-acc ate ‘Bill ate only the beans.’
    (ii) \[ \#\text{MAME-DAKE}_i\text{-O BILL-wa }t_i \text{tabeta.} \]
    beans-only-acc Bill-wa ate ‘Bill ate only the beans.’

A difference between (6) and (7B-ii) is that in the former, the *wa*-phrase only indicates a contrast, while in the latter, the statement must be about the *wa*-phrase. That this last point is so can be seen from the gloss of the preceding clause *I don’t know about Fred,...* In other words, as a consequence of the contrastive *wa*-phrase being also an aboutness *wa*-phrase, the constraint in (1b) comes into play for (7B).

Thus, the notions ‘discourse givenness’ and ‘contrastiveness’ are sufficient to mark an item with *wa* in Japanese. However, in contrast to some other languages (Meinunger 2000, Rizzi 1997, 2004, Belletti 2004), they are not relevant for determining the syntactic distribution of topics.