How High Can You Get?
On Japanese Nominative Object Construction

Zixi Liu

In Japanese Nominative object construction (NOC), instead of the canonical dative or accusative case, a set of stative-denoting predicates license nominative case (NOM) on the (in)direct objects.

(1) a. Masami-ga kabin-o wat-ta.
Masami-NOM[1] vase-ACC break-PAST
'Masami broke the flower vase.'
b. Mary-ga John-ni purezento-o age-ru.
Mary-NOM John-DAT gift-ACC give-PRES
'Mary gives John a gift.'

(2) Mary-ga kore-**ga** waka-ru.
Mary-NOM this-**NOM** know-PRES
'Mary knows this.'

(3) a. John-ga kono uta-**ga**/-**o** uta-e-ru.
John-NOM this song-**NOM**/-**ACC** sing-POT-PRES
'John can sing this song.
b. Jane-wa Mary-**ga** wain-o nom-ase-yasu-i.
Jane-TOP Mary-**NOM** wine-ACC drink-CAUS-easy-PRES
'Jane can make Mary drink wine easily.' (Takahashi 2010:343)

In this article, I argue that NOC exemplifies a henceforth unnoticed phenomenon, which is that the structural height of the object can affect the structural height of the subject.

The article is organized as follows: in section 1, I bring new evidence that NOM-objects in NOC occupy a higher structural position than their canonical ACC/DAT counterparts. Importantly, I argue that in NOC, the clause-mate NOM-subjects also occupy a higher subject position than NOM-subjects outside NOC. In section 2, I argue that it is not a coincidence that in NOC, both subjects and objects are in a higher position. In fact, the high object position results in a high subject position. I show that such an interaction effect can be derived from very basic assumptions about locality requirements on movement. Supporting arguments for my proposal is also provided.

1. Data: higher-than-canonical subjects and objects in NOC

1.1. Objects are higher

It has been frequently proposed (Ura 1999, Nomura 2005, Hiraiwa 2005, etc.,) that NOM-objects are structurally higher than their ACC counterparts. One argument is from Hiraiwa (2005): Indeterminates like *dare* 'who', *nani* 'what' must be in the c-command domain of the particle *mo*.

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[1] NOM = nominative; ACC = accusative; DAT = dative; POT = potential; CAUS = causative; TOP = topic; NEG = negation; COMP = complementizer;

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(4) a. Taro-wa [VP dare-o seme]-mo si-nakat-ta.
Taro-TOP Indet-ACC blame-mo do-NEG-PAST
'Taro didn't blame anyone.'

b. *Dare-ga [VP Hanako-o seme]-mo si-nakat-ta.
Indet-NOM Hanako-ACC blame-mo do-NEG-PAST
'No one blamed Hanako.'

Crucially, the NOM-object patterns not with the ACC-object but with the NOM-subject.

(5) a. Taro-wa [VP nani-o uta-e-]-mo si-na-i.
Taro-TOP Indet-ACC sing-POT-mo do-NEG-PRES
'Taro cannot sing anything.'
b. *Taro-wa nani-ga uta-e-mo si-na-i.
Taro-TOP Indet-NOM sing-POT-mo do-NEG-PRES
Int. 'Taro cannot sing anything.'

The above suggests that NOM-objects are higher than ACC-objects, and at least higher than VP[2]. Note that without *mo*, a nominative object in place of the indeterminate is otherwise acceptable. I follow Hiraiwa (2005) in arguing that the above suggests NOM-objects move out of VP (the exact position to be discussed in section 2).

1.2. Subjects are higher

I make the new empirical observation that subjects are also higher in NOC. Evidence comes from a contrast in binding.

First the baseline, non-NOC data: in (6) the subject contains a pronominal 'it', while the object contains a QP 'three or more'[3]. In (7), the QP object scrambles in front of the pronominal subject. Below is the context and the desired distributive reading for binding. (6)–(7) show that object scrambling establishes a binding relationship.

Context: *Many high schools have their own school songs and sometimes require their students to learn how to sing them. Suppose that there is an investigation regarding the number of high schools where the students actually learned their respective school songs.*
Desired reading: *In school A students learned school A's song, in school B students learned school B's song, etc.*

[2] Some authors, e.g., Takano (2003), note that the c-command account of *-mo* cannot explain the distribution of dative-marked *wh*-phrases in ECM constructions, as shown below. Here *-mo* is attached to the embedded CP, while the dative indirect object receives its theta role from the matrix verb 'say' and therefore should be in the matrix and outside of the c-command domain of *-mo*.

i. ?Mary-ga [VP dare-ni [ReportP Hanako-ga kasiko-i to]-mo iw]-anakat-ta.
Mary-NOM who-DAT Hanako-NOM smart-PRES COMP-MO say-NEG-PAST
'Mary did not tell anyone that Hanako was smart.' (from Takahashi 2021, ex.13)

Note however, that this observation alone does not void the claim for a high NOM-object. Whatever the exact definition for the licensing domain of *-mo* turns out to be (see Takahashi 2021 for a 'transfer domain' approach), the crucial point here is that nominative objects are outside of this domain and pattern with nominative subjects, in contrast to accusative objects (and the matrix dative object here).

[3] For justification using quantifier-binding test rather than reflexive *otagai* 'each other' binding test, see Hoji (2003).

(6) Soko$_{*i/j}$-no gakusei-ga mittu-izyoo-no koukou$_i$-no kouka-**o** nara-tta.
it-GEN student-NOM three-or.more-GEN high.school-GEN school song-**ACC** learn-PAST
'More than three high schools$_i$' students learned their$_{*i/j}$ school song.'

(7) Mittu-izyoo-no koukou$_i$-no kouka-**o** soko$_{i/j}$-no gakusei-ga nara-tta.
three-or.more-GEN high.school-GEN school song-**ACC** it-GEN student-NOM learn-PAST
'Lit. Their$_{i/j}$ students learned more than three high schools$_i$' school song.'

The ungrammaticality of (6) is expected, since the pronominal needs to be c-commanded by a QP to be bound. The example (7) shows that clause-internal movement of the quantifier object to the sentence initial position can create a new binding relationship, which is typical of A-movement (Saito 1985). Therefore, clause-internal object scrambling can be A-movement when object receives ACC.

Importantly, NOC does not pattern with non-NOC in terms of object scrambling, as shown below. Here the predicate *suki* 'like' only licenses NOM on the object.

Context: *...Now, the investigation aims to find out the number of high schools where the students actually <u>like</u> their <u>respective</u> school songs.*
Desired Reading: *In school A students like school A's song, in school B students like school B's song, etc.*

(8) Soko$_{*i/j}$-no gakusei-ga mittu-izyoo-no koukou$_i$-no kouka-**ga** suki-da.
it-GEN student-NOM three-or.more-GEN high.school-GEN school song-**NOM** like-PRES
'More than three high schools$_i$' students like their$_{*i/j}$ school song.'

(9) Mittu-izyoo-no koukou$_i$-no kouka-**ga** soko$_{*i/j}$-no gakusei-ga suki-da.
three-or.more-GEN high.school-GEN school song-**NOM** it-GEN student-NOM like-PRES
'Lit. Their$_{*i/j}$ students like more than three high schools$_i$' school song.'

Co-reference is impossible: contrary to the canonical baseline (6)–(7), object scrambling in (8)–(9) does not create a new binding relationship. To paraphrase, object scrambling **cannot** be A-movement in NOC.

I take the contrast in binding to mean that subjects in NOC are in a higher position. The derivation is schematized as below: Suppose canonical subjects are in [Spec TP]; object A-scrambling is adjunction to TP (Saito 1985). The unavailability of object A-scrambling in NOC suggests that NOC-subjects are higher than [Spec TP] (here labeled ?P, to be identified in the next section). This pushes the object in OSV into a higher position (identified as [Spec CP] in Miyagawa (2003), which involves A'-scrambling.

a. canonical object scrambling: [$_{TP}$ O [$_{TP}$ S [$_{vP}$ … <O> V]
b. NOC object scrambling: [$_{CP}$ O [$_{?P}$ S [$_{TP}$ …]]]

2. Derivation

We have seen above that in NOC, both subjects and objects are in a structurally higher position compared to their canonical counterparts. This is not merely a coincidence; in fact, I propose that there is a causal relationship between the height of subjects and objects in NOC.

2.1. Object raises to Spec AspP

Let's start from the objects. I assume that in NOC, the stative predicate projects an extra AspP between TP and *v*P. The nominative case of the object is licensed via object movement to Spec AspP, c-commanding the Asp head (Boskovic 2007). The label here does not matter (Tada 1992 in fact, with a different motivation from mine, also argues for object-movement to a position between TP and vP, which he identifies as Spec AgrOP; see also Maeda et al., 2022 for a similar approach); what is important is that this projection licenses nominative case independent of either TP or *v*P; moreover, this position is above the base-generated position of the subject, contra Koizumi (1998), Kasai (2018), Yatsushiro (1999), among others. The object movement is schematized as follows:

(10) [$_{TP}$ [$_{AspP}$ O$_{NOM}$ [$_{vP}$ S <O> V]

To support this, I bring a new piece of evidence from a case paradigm under conjunction. In the example below, two verbs are conjoined under the stative potential morpheme *-rare-* (which is also suggested by the intended interpretation). Here we see that, under coordination, the object can receive only accusative case, not nominative case.

(11) a. *Hanako-ga mado-**ga** [$_{VP}$ *pro* ake], (katsu) [$_{VP}$ *pro* shime]-rare-ru.
Hanako-$_{NOM}$ window-$_{\mathbf{NOM}}$ open (and) close-$_{POT\text{-}PRES}$
Intended: ‘‘Hanako can open and close the window.’
b. Hanako-ga mado-**o** [$_{VP}$ *pro* ake], (katsu) [$_{VP}$ *pro* shime]-rare-ru.
Hanako-$_{NOM}$ window-$_{\mathbf{ACC}}$ open (and) close-$_{POT\text{-}PRES}$
‘Hanako can open and close the window.’

More importantly, (11) contrasts directly with coordination of V-*rare-* under the tense morpheme (cf. Tomioka 1993, ex. 15). I complete the paradigm and show here that all four possible case combinations are grammatical.

(12) Chris-ga [nihongo-ga/-o hanas-e], [kankokugo-ga/-o yom-e]-ru.
Chris-$_{NOM}$ Japanese-$_{NOM}$/-$_{ACC}$ speak-$_{POT}$ Korean-$_{NOM}$/-$_{ACC}$ read-$_{POT\text{-}PRES}$
‘Chris can speak Japanese and can read Korean.’

The contrast above strongly suggests that objects need to be in a local relationship with the AspP head (*-rare-*, or its allomorph *-e-*) for NOM licensing. For the ungrammatical (11)a, this is not satisfied because &P intervenes between the coordinated VP and the nominative licensing *-rare-*. In contrast, this is not a problem for (12), because the stative potential morpheme (and therefore AspP) is present inside each conjunct.

Recall that we have already seen in (4)–(5) that nominative objects are in a structurally higher position than accusative objects, out of the scope of *v*P-adjoined *-mo*; The requirement for a local relationship between AspP and the NOM-object is straightforwardly explained if objects raise out of *v*P to Spec AspP for nominative case licensing.

Further evidence for my analysis comes from *sae*-preposing, which suggests that although the object undergoes raising, the landing position must be lower than TP.

In Japanese, a verbal constituent (which I term XP) can be preposed if it is followed by a focus particle such as *sae* ‘even’, with the light verb *suru* ‘do’ inserted to support T (Hoji et al., 1989). Crucially, all constituents within XP must be preposed along, otherwise ungrammaticality will incur, as Hoji et al., shows below. While the subject can be stranded (13)b, stranding the object (13)b–c, or the verbal adjunct (13)d–e is illicit. This should be taken to mean that while subjects are outside of XP, objects and verbal adjuncts are within XP.

(13) a. John-ga [$_{XP}$ sushi-o tabe]-sae si-ta.
John-$_{NOM}$ sushi-$_{ACC}$ eat-even do-$_{PAST}$
‘John even ate sushi.’
b. [$_{XP}$ sushi-o tabe]$_i$-sae John-ga t_i si-ta.
sushi-$_{ACC}$ eat-even John-$_{NOM}$ do-$_{PAST}$
c. *[tabe]$_i$-sae John-ga [$_{XP}$ sushi-o t_i] si-ta.
eat-even John-$_{NOM}$ sushi-$_{ACC}$ do$_{PAST}$
d. [$_{XP}$ sono sara-ni sushi-o oki]$_i$-sae John-ga t_i si-ta
that dish-$_{DAT}$ sushi-$_{ACC}$ place-even John-$_{NOM}$ do-$_{PAST}$
Lit. ‘Even place sushi on that dish, John did.’
e. *[sushi-o oki]$_i$-sae John-ga [$_{XP}$ sono sara-ni t_j] si-ta
sushi-$_{ACC}$ place-even John-$_{NOM}$ that dish-$_{DAT}$ do-$_{PAST}$

Yatsushiro (1999:96) further shows that nominative objects (here *eigo* ‘English’) don’t pattern with canonical subjects as in (13)b, but with XP-internal constituents – they must be preposed along with *sae*.

(14) a. Taro-ga [$_{XP}$ eigo-ga hanas-e]-sae si-ta.
Taro-$_{NOM}$ English-$_{NOM}$ speak-$_{POT}$-even do-$_{PAST}$
'Taro can even speak English.'
b. [$_{XP}$ eigo-ga hanas-e]-sae Taro-ga si-ta.
English-$_{NOM}$ speak-$_{POT}$-even Taro-$_{NOM}$ do-$_{PAST}$
'Even speak English, Taro can do.'
c. *[hanas-e]-sae Taro-ga eigo-ga si-ta.
speak-$_{POT}$-even Taro-$_{NOM}$ English-$_{NOM}$ do-$_{PAST}$

Suppose that canonical subjects are in [Spec TP]; the above means that nominative objects cannot be in [Spec TP]. Otherwise, stranding the nominative object would have been possible, contrary to (14)c.

To briefly recap, while indeterminate (4)–(5) and coordination data (11)–(12) suggest that NOM objects differ from ACC objects in that they do undergo raising out of *v*P, the *sae*-preposing pattern shows that the landing position cannot be as high as [Spec TP]. Therefore, it should be the case that it lands in a position between [Spec TP] and [Spec *v*P], which I identify as [Spec AspP].

2.2. Subject raises to [Spec A/A'P]

Recall that in (6)–(9), NOC-object scrambling patterns differently from canonical object scrambling, in the sense that it cannot be A-movement. In section 1, I attributed this to subject being in a high position in NOC. Now I will lay out the analysis.

I assume with Bošković (2024) that there is a subject position, [Spec A/A'P], which is higher than [Spec TP] but lower than [Spec CP]. Subject being in [Spec A/A'P] explains why object scrambling in OSV cannot be A-movement, since the latter would require adjunction to [Spec TP]. Bošković (2024) argues that [Spec A/A'P] is the position for a number of non-canonical subjects, for example locative inversion subjects, subject wh-questions ('Who left?') and focalized subjects (i.e. only-DP subjects). Importantly, [Spec A/A'P] is not simply an A-position; it has both A and A'-properties.

In NOC, object scrambling proceeds as in (15): First, the object raises to [Spec AspP] for nominative case-checking. As a result, it is situated in a position above [Spec vP], the base-generated position of the subject (a). Now, to receive NOM, the subject needs to be in a c-command relationship with T. However, since the canonical subject position [Spec TP] is an A-position, subject A-movement into [Spec TP] across another NP will incur locality violation (b). As a result, the subject skips [Spec TP] and lands in [Spec A/A'P] instead for case-assignment (c). Now given the mixed A/A'-properties associated with [Spec A/A'P], the movement in (c) will not incur an RM-violation. As the final step, the object scrambles to [Spec CP], and the movement is necessarily A'-movement (d).

(15) a. [$_{AspP}$ O_{NOM} [$_{vP}$ S <O> V]]
b. *[$_{TP}$ S_{NOM} [$_{AspP}$ O_{NOM} [$_{vP}$ <S> …V]]]
c. [$_{A/A'P}$ S_{NOM} [$_{TP}$ [$_{AspP}$ O_{NOM} [$_{vP}$ <S> …V]]]
d. [$_{CP}$ O_{NOM} [$_{A/A'P}$ S_{NOM} [$_{TP}$ [$_{AspP}$ <O_{NOM}> [$_{vP}$ …]]]

My analysis necessitates that A-movement in Japanese is subject to locality constraints, which means that an intervening argument could block A-movement of a lower argument[4]. This is indeed the case. The illicit (15)b is reminiscent of the unacceptability of 'long-passives' in Japanese (Kiguchi 2006:47): When the sentence undergoes passivization, only the indirect object 'carpenter' can receive the nominative case, but not the direct object 'house'.

(16) a. Taro-ga daiku-ni ie-o tate-sase-ta.
Taro-$_{NOM}$ carpenter-$_{DAT}$ house-$_{ACC}$ build-$_{CAUS}$-$_{PAST}$
'Taro made carpenters build a house.'

[4] OSV A-scrambling should have a different analysis, e.g., TP-level adjunction (Saito 1985) as we laid out before.

b. Daiku$_i$-ga t_i ie-o tate-sase-rare-ta.
carpenter-$_{NOM}$ house-$_{ACC}$ build-$_{CAUS\text{-}PASS\text{-}PAST}$
'Carpenters were made to build a house.'

c. *Ie$_i$-ga daiku-ni t_i tate-sase-rare-ta.
house-$_{NOM}$ carpenter-$_{DAT}$ build-$_{CAUS\text{-}PASS\text{-}PAST}$

Kiguchi (2006) argues that in (c), since there is an intervening indirect object, movement of the direct object to the subject position violates the locality constraint. Since both (15)b and (16)c involve A-movement of an argument across another argument, I take Kiguchi (2006) as supporting evidence for blocking out (15)b with locality considerations.

Interestingly, the locality restriction is observable on the indirect objects in NOC as well. For ditransitive verbs, the A/A'-properties of the direct object scrambling co-vary with the case of indirect object. (17) shows that the indirect object can optionally receive NOM[5] from the potential morpheme *deki* 'can'. As the baseline, since the indirect object is not c-commanded by the direct object, the pronominal *it* is not bound by the QP 'whichever'.

(17) Mary-ga soitsu$_{*i/j}$-no sensei-**ga/-ni** dono-gakusei$_i$-mo syookai-deki-ru.
Mary-$_{NOM}$ it-$_{GEN}$ teacher-$_{\mathbf{NOM/-DAT}}$ whichever-student-mo introduce-$_{POT\text{-}PRES}$
'Mary can introduce whichever student$_i$ to their$_{*i/j}$ teacher.'

(18) shows a surprising contrast based on the case on the IO: when the IO receives DAT, it can be bound by the scrambled DO; when IO receives NOM, binding is not possible.

(18) a. Dono-gakusei$_i$-mo Mary-ga soitsu$_{i/j}$-no sensei-**ni** t syookai-deki-ru.
Whichever-student-mo Mary-$_{NOM}$ it-$_{GEN}$ teacher-$_{DAT}$ introduce-$_{POT\text{-}PRES}$
'Mary can introduce whichever student$_i$ to their$_{i/j}$ teacher.'

b. Dono-gakusei$_i$-mo Mary-ga soitsu$_{*i/j}$-no-sensei-**ga** t syookai-deki-ru.
Whichever-student-mo Mary-$_{NOM}$ it-$_{GEN}$ teacher-$_{NOM}$ introduce-$_{POT\text{-}PRES}$
'Mary can introduce whichever student$_i$ to their$_{*i/j}$ teacher.'

For why binding is possible in (18)a, I refer the readers to Kiguchi (2006). What is important for us is the parallel between (18)b and (15)b; (18)b again shows that A-movement across a NOM-indirect object in NOC is impossible and lends further support to extending the intervention analysis to the NOM-direct object in (15)b.

3. Conclusion

In this article, I provide a new empirical argument that in Japanese nominative object construction, the object undergoes movement to [Spec AspP], a position between [Spec TP] and [Spec vP] for case-licensing. More importantly, the subject in NOC is also in a high structural position, which I identify to be [Spec A/A'P]. I provide an analysis based on locality restrictions regulating A-movement across another argument.

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[5] See Takano (2003:811) for a similar example.

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