SUPPLEMENTARY GRAMMAR NOTES TO
AN INTRODUCTION TO MODERN JAPANESE
PART 1: LESSONS 1–15

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Lesson 3: Grammar

I. Particles

"Particles" are attached to a noun, a phrase, a sentence, etc. They are usually short, and some have similar functions to those of prepositions in English (e.g., in, at, with). Particles, however, come after the elements to which they are attached.

(A) Types of Particles

Particles are classified into the following four types. The examples are taken from those introduced in Lessons 1-3.

1. Grammatical Particles: ga (subject), o (direct object),
   ni (place of existence), no (noun modification)
2. Semantic Particles: wa (topic and contrast), mo (similarity)
3. Sentence Particles: ka (question), ne (tag question)
4. Conjunctive Particles: NO EXAMPLES SO FAR

Grammatical (or "case") particles are attached to nouns and indicate grammatical functions within a sentence, such as subject, direct object and indirect object. There are more particles of this type than of other types.

Semantic particles are attached to nouns and noun + grammatical particle combinations (and certain forms of verbs and adjectives). These particles do not change the grammatical functions but add additional meanings to the elements they follow. When combined with grammatical particles, semantic particles such as wa and mo replace ga and o, but co-occur with all others; e.g., X ni wa, and X ni mo, but not X o wa or X ga mo, etc.

Sentence particles appear at the end of sentences. The particle ne for tag questions is new in this lesson. Both types of questions are answered with "yes" or "no."

1. Tanaka-san wa gakusee desu ka. "Is Mr. Tanaka a student?"
2. Tanaka-san wa gakusee desu ne. "Mr. Tanaka is a student, isn't he?"

Conjunctive particles appear at the end of clauses. (A "clause" is a sentence within a sentence.) The functions of conjunctive particles are similar to those of conjunctions such as and, but, and because in English.

(B) The Particles 'ga' and 'wa' -- New vs. Old (or Shared) Information

The particle ga indicates the "subject" of a sentence. Since the subject is often the topic of the sentence at the same time and wa replaces ga in such a case, ga appears only in limited situations.
Use ga after a subject when you bring up the subject or an event anew. In the former case, X ga... expresses the meaning, "It is X who (or which) is/does ...," and hence, the subject (the element PRECEDING ga) becomes the main focus of the sentence.

The particle wa indicates the "topic" of a sentence. The topic may be the subject (which is often the case), direct object, location, or anything. The element preceding wa is something which has been mentioned or implied previously or something which can be surmised from the context. The element FOLLOWING wa becomes the focus of the sentence. This is why a question word can only appear after, not before, wa.

The kind of difference expressed by ga and wa is sometimes conveyed by the articles a and the and/or stress in English. Example 3 is a more common type of sentence than Example 4 in Japanese as well as in English, so use wa, rather than ga, after the subject in such sentences. (We will discuss the particles ga and wa in more detail later.)

3. Sumisu-san wa Amerika-jin desu. "Mr. Smith is an AMERICAN."
4. Sumisu-san ga Amerika-jin desu. "Mr. SMITH is the American." OR
   "It is Mr. SMITH who is an American."

II. NOUN (X) no NOUN (Y) "X's Y; Y of X; etc." [NOUN MODIFICATION]

Modifiers always precede the words to be specified in Japanese. When X (a noun or a pronoun) modifies Y (another noun), X takes the particle no and precedes Y. The particle does not have a concrete specific meaning of its own, but simply indicates that the first noun modifies the second noun.

Since the last noun is the main noun, "X's Y; Y of X; Y at X" and so on in English will all be expressed with X first in Japanese. The phrase, X no Y (no Z...), as a whole is a noun phrase, and it functions as a noun within a sentence. Remember that the particle no cannot be used when an adjective or a verb modifies a noun.

1. Tanaka-san no kaban "Ms. Tanaka's bag" [OWNERSHIP]
2. onna no tokeee "a woman's watch" [DESIGNED FOR WOMEN'S USE]
3. Nihon-jin no senseee "a Japanese teacher" [= The teacher is Japanese]
4. Tookyoo no tatemono "buildings in Tokyo" [LOCATION]
5. Kankoku-go no hon "a book written in or about the Korean language" [CONTENT]
6. Kore wa watashi no Nihon-go no sensee no kasa desu. "This is my Japanese (language) teacher's umbrella."

Note that proper nouns (i.e., names) usually do not take no; therefore, Examples 7 and 8 are quite different.