Title:
 Extra-Syntactic Subject Positions in Japanese Discourse: A Minimal Four-Layer Model

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Abstract

Japanese discourse frequently omits overt subjects, yet interlocutors rarely experience communicative breakdown. This paper proposes a minimal four-layer model of subject representation that operates beyond the grammatical sentence. The model provides a structural explanation for topic–comment phenomena, zero-anaphora, and intersubjective stance-taking, while avoiding culture-specific assumptions. Additional parallels with historical authentication systems (e.g., wax seals) illustrate how information outside the explicit text contributes to interpretation. The model also predicts characteristic patterns of AI misreadings when surface cues are absent. This theory is derived entirely from established international research on pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, and intersubjectivity, ensuring compatibility with existing debates.

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1. Introduction

Japanese utterances often appear ambiguous due to the omission of explicit subjects. However, native speakers routinely recover intended meaning with little effort. The standard explanations—topic-prominence, pragmatic subjects, and zero-anaphora—capture portions of the phenomenon but do not fully account for the stability and predictability with which listeners infer the correct agentive structure.
 This paper proposes a minimal structural model that identifies **up to four subject positions** active in cognition, only some of which appear in the grammatical surface. The approach intentionally avoids culture-dependent interpretations and instead focuses on abstract discourse mechanisms.

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2. Problem Statement

Certain utterances—especially evaluative statements, shared-experience expressions, or alignment-seeking remarks—remain communicatively complete even when no single subject can be assigned.
 For example:

> "You know, that thing X said earlier—amazing, right? Really unbelievable."

Although the sentence contains no overt subject markers, native listeners infer multiple agentive perspectives:
 (1) the speaker producing the utterance,
 (2) the speaker recalling a prior event,
 (3) the addressee as the evaluator, and
 (4) an anticipated stance of the addressee.

This cognitive layering suggests that Japanese discourse routinely encodes subject positions **outside** the syntactic frame.

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3. The Minimal Four-Layer Model

The proposed model identifies four abstract subject layers:

1. **Base Speaker (S)** – the agent producing the utterance.

2. **Recalled Speaker (S')** – the speaker in a prior event or evaluative frame.

3. **Addressee (A)** – the direct interlocutor.

4. **Anticipated Addressee Stance (A')** – the predicted evaluative position of the listener.

These do not correspond to different grammatical subjects but to **cognitively active agentive roles** available simultaneously during interpretation.
 The model remains strictly structural: it does not rely on cultural values, communication norms, or sociological interpretations.

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4. Cross-Linguistic Analogy: Wax Seals

Many written traditions employed multi-layered authentication systems—such as wax seals—where information relevant to interpretation existed outside the textual body: identity of the sender, institutional affiliation, validation by intermediaries, or the authority overseeing delivery.

This cross-linguistic analogy demonstrates that **extra-textual agent markings** are not unique to any single culture. The Japanese four-layer model simply identifies a spoken-discourse counterpart to this widely attested phenomenon.

5. AI Misreading Mechanism

Current language models often misinterpret Japanese zero-subject sentences because they rely primarily on syntactic cues.
When subject positions are distributed across S, S', A, and A', the absence of surface markers leads AI to collapse these layers into a single agent, producing characteristic misreadings.
The four-layer model predicts these failure modes and thus provides a practical diagnostic tool for computational linguistics.

6. Implications

This model provides:

- A unified account of topic–comment interactions

- A structural interpretation of zero-anaphora

- A precise description of intersubjective stance-taking

- A prediction framework for AI misreadings

- A cross-linguistic analogy situating the theory outside cultural essentialism

Because the theory is derived from internationally recognized cognitive and pragmatic research, it does not conflict with debates in Japanese linguistics or Japanese-language education.

7. Conclusion

Japanese discourse supports **up to four cognitively active subject positions**, only some of which appear overtly. Recognizing these extra-syntactic layers clarifies why zero-subject sentences remain interpretable and why AI systems struggle with them. The model offers a minimal, culture-neutral framework suitable for linguistic theory, cross-linguistic comparison, and computational applications.