# Parallelism between Japanese and Ainu Nominalizations

**Taika Nagano**[†,‡] (nagano.taika@gmail.com) **Kanta Tateno**[§]

[†] The University of Osaka [‡] JSPS Research Fellow [§] University of Connecticut

The 33rd Japanese/Korean Linguistics Conference • University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign • Aug 7, 2026

## 1. In a Nutshell

TOPIC *No* in Japanese and *ruwe* in Ainu are polyfunctional, sharing similar functions.
☞①Nominalizer ②Sentence-final particle (Question/Declarative)

QUESTION What are the (lexical) semantic roles of *no* and *ruwe*?

PROPOSAL *-no/ruwe*: a definite determiner over situations.

## 2.1 *No* (Japanese)

- *No* in Japanese is polyfunctional: (i) GEN marker (ii) *One*-anaphora

**Nominalizer** (iii) Nominalizer (iv) Sentence-final particle

(1) Hanako-wa [Taro-ga kooen-o {hasir-u / hasit-ta} **no**] -o mi-ta.
Taro-TOP Taro-NOM park-ACC run-INF run-PST *no* -ACC see-PST
'Hanako saw Taro { running / run } in the park'

- ①*Taro-ga* (NOM) ②Compatible with the past suffix *-ta* ☞TP

**Q-Particle** (Optional): DirectQuestion(DQ, (2)) vs. IndirectQuestion(IQ, (3))

(2) Dare-ga ki-ta { Ø? / **no** / *ka? / *no-ka? / *(no)-desu-ka? }
who-NOM come-PST *no* COMP *no*-COMP *no*-HON$_A$-COMP
'Who came?' (DQ: Rising intonation) *No*: optional but obligatory with *desu*

(3) [Dare-ga ki-ta {*Ø/*no/ka/no(*-desu)-ka}] -ga zyuuyooda
who-NOM come-PST -NOM important
'Who came is important.' (IQ) ①Obligatory *-ka* ②Optional *no* ③✗*desu*

**Explanatory Particle**: Often used as *n(o) da*

(4) Kitto ame-ga fut-ta ?(**n-da**).
probably rain-NOM fall-PST *no*-COP
'Probably it rained.' (Najima 2007)

***No-da***
presents the inferred proposition as an explanatory fact.

- Without *no-da*, (4) is unnatural:

☞ *Kitto* 'probably' requires the proposition to be presented as an inference.

(5) Ame-ga fut-ta **no** (***da**) (**ka**)?
rain-NOM fall-PST *no* COP COMP
'Was it raining?'

- The declarative copula *da* is incompatible with direct interrogatives.

## 2.2 *Ruwe* (Ainu)

***Ruwe***: also polyfunctional (NMLZ, sentence-final particle)

**Nominalizer**

(6) [usa macikor nuwe ko-an **ruwe**] a-nukar
various woman's.treasures bounty APPL-exist *ruwe* 4.SBJV=see
'I saw that there were many women's treasures.'

**Q-Particle**: DirectQuestion Only (Nakagawa et al. 2016–2024:K8109171UP.103)

(7) numan hunna Ø=ek {Ø? / **ruwe** (an)?}
yesterday who 3SG=come *ruwe* COP.Q
'Who came yesterday?' (DQ: Rising intonation) (Tamura 2000:237)

- No examples of *ruwe* occurring in indirect questions have been found: (*ya*, instead)

(8) [ney wa Ø=ek ya] a=Ø=ko-pisi
where from 3SG=come COMP LOG.A=3OBJ=to.APPL-ask.about
'They asked her where she had come from.' (IQ) (Bugaeva 2008:69)

***Ruwe ne***: Evidentiality

(9) numan huci ek (**ruwe** ne)
yesterday grandmother come *ruwe* COP.DECL
'Grandmother came yesterday.'

With *ruwe ne*, the proposition is presented as an evidence-based situation (e.g., inferred from "traces" of the event).

- *Ruwe ne* cannot occur in interrogatives without ya.

(10) numan huci ek {Ø? / **ruwe**? / ***ruwe** ne? / **ruwe** (he)
yesterday grandmother come *ruwe* *ruwe* COP.DECL *ruwe* Q
an? / **ruwe** ne ya?} • *he*: Q-particle (PolarQ)
COP.Q *ruwe* COP.DECL COMP
'Did Grandmother come yesterday?' (Tamura 2000:233)

## 2.3 Distribution

| | ***no* (Jpn)** | ***ruwe* (Ainu)** |
|---|---|---|
| Nominalizer | OBLIGATORY | OBLIGATORY |
| Direct Q | OPTIONAL | OPTIONAL |
| Indirect Q | *ka* obligatory; $^{opt}$*no* | *ya* obligatory; **ruwe* |
| Declarative | *no-da* (explanatory) | *ruwe ne* (evidentiality) |
| Polar Q | *no(*-da)(-ka)?* | *ruwe ne *(ya)? / ruwe (he) an?* |

parallel
partial parallel
mismatch

## 3. Exploring Lexical Semantics of *no*

**Saito (2012)**: *no* as the head of FiniteP

(11) ...[$_{ReportP}$ [$_{ForceP}$ [**FiniteP** ... ***no*** ] *ka* ] *to* ]... (Saito 2012)

- This analysis captures the structural position of *no*, but leaves open whether *no* makes an independent semantic contribution.

**Kuno (1973)**: *no* vs. *koto* 'NMLZ'

- Both *no* and *koto* function as nominalizers, but their distributions are not identical.

(12) a. John-wa [sekai-ni heiwa-ga otozure-ru {**no**/**koto**}] -o
John-TOP world-to peace-NOM visit-PRS NMLZ -ACC
mat-tei-ru.
wait-PROG-PRS
*Lit.* 'John is waiting for a piece to come'

(12a): An abstract or generic event
(12b): A concrete, temporally bounded event

b. John-wa [Mary-ga kuru {**no**/***koto**}] -o mat-teiru
John-TOP Mary-NOM come-PRS NMLZ -ACC wait-PROG.PRS
'John is waiting for Mary to come'

- (12) suggests that *no* is semantically more closely associated with a concrete situation or event, whereas *koto* favors a more abstract propositional interpretation.

***Nanka***: induces a low-expectation reading

(13) Taro-**nanka**-ga ki-ta #(**no**)?
Taro-*nanka*-NOM come-PST *no*
'Did even someone like Taro come?'

The event of Taro's arrival is presupposed; the question targets the unexpectedness of Taro as the participant.

- *No* licenses the low-expectation interpretation by presenting Taro's arrival as a situation already accessible in the discourse context.

☞ *No* thus appears to contribute a meaning related to the identification and anchoring of a situation, rather than serving merely as a nominalizer.

## Selected References

**[1] Bondarenko, T. (2022).** *Anatomy of an Attitude.* Ph.D thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. **[2] Kuno, S. (1973).** *The Structure of the Japanese Language.* MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. **[3] Tamura, S. (2000).** *The Ainu Language*, volume 2 of ICHEL Linguistic Studies. Sanseido Co., Ltd., Tokyo, Japan.

## 4. Proposal: Semantics of *no*/*ruwe*

**A definite determiner over situations** Just as *the dog* picks out one dog *in the situation we are talking about*, *no*/*ruwe* picks out one *situation* inside it.

(14) $[\![no\ /\ ruwe]\!] = \lambda P_{\langle s,t\rangle}.\ \iota s' \in D_s\,[\underbrace{s' \text{ exemplifies } P}_{\text{① PICK ONE}} \wedge \underbrace{s' \preceq s_{topic}}_{\text{② INSIDE } s_{topic}}]$ (② presupposed)

① The smallest situation verifying $P$ — a **thing**, not a proposition
(cf. $D_s \subseteq D_e$; exemplification: Bondarenko 2022).
☞ nominal distribution; *no* = concrete event vs. *koto* = fact

② A plain **part–whole** relation to the topic situation.
☞ evidential flavour (you are *in* it ⇒ you perceive it); *nanka* needs *no*

**No subjectivity in the semantics**
② is objective; speaker-orientation lives only in how the free variable $s_{topic}$ *is resolved*:
☞ ROOT: **speaker** QUESTION: **addressee** EMBEDDED CONTEXT: **attitude holder**.

(15) Ame-ga fut-ta **no**?
rain-NOM fall-PST *no*
'Did it rain?' ⇝ *you* were in a position to see it

☞ Evidentials cross-linguistically shift perspective in questions (San Roque et al. 2017)
– consistent with $s_{topic}$ being **contextually resolved** (✗ lexically speaker-bound)

**No/ruwe never makes a question** — it only says *which* situation is at stake; Q-force is added on top (by *ka*/*ya*):

a description $\xrightarrow{no}$ *the* situation, inside $s_{topic}$ $\xrightarrow{Q}$ ask about it

(a) *No*/*Ruwe* **optional** in direct questions

(b) *no-ka* = *explanandum* (Q over an already-picked situation) vs.
*ka* (bare) = *explanans* (alternatives still open)

(16) Taro-wa [Hanako-ga sigoto-o yame-ta {**no**/**no ka**}] -o setumei-si-ta.
Taro-TOP Hanako-NOM job-ACC quit-PST -ACC explain-do-PST
'Taro explained {Hanako's quitting / whether Hanako quit}.'

**Grammaticalization?—Synchrony, not diachrony**
Nominalizer-to-Particle is crosslinguistically common (Aikhenvald 2005);
The parallel between *no* and *ruwe* does not imply a shared historical origin. Rather, we argue that both constructions converge on the same semantic function.

## 5. Prediction: polar ≠ wh

*No*/*Ruwe* contributes **no alternatives** → question alternatives come from elsewhere:

☞ **wh-questions**: alternatives are supplied lexically by the wh-phrase

☞ **polar questions**: alternatives require a dedicated polar operator

- Ainu keeps the two apart **morphologically**:
*he* occurs only in polar Qs & never with wh; *an* (COP.Q) occurs in both.
- Japanese **syncretizes** them as *ka* (root polar ≈ Ainu *he*; embedded C ≈ Ainu *ya*), but the ROOT/EMBEDDED asymmetry in Japanese still shows the seam:
☞ EMBEDDED (WH): $^{OK}$*no-ka* ROOT: ***no-ka***.
- *No-desu-ka* functions as a root-only polite interrogative construction (cf. (3) ***no-desu-ka* (embedded)) → ✗ a compositional polar *-ka* & compatible with WH

**Upshot** The polar/wh split targets the *Q-morphemes*, not *no*/*ruwe* themselves — exactly as expected if they are situation-individuators, not question-formers.