

Licensing Subject Marker Omission in Japanese Song Lyrics:

A Poetic Modality Phrase Approach

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1. Introduction

Unlike previous studies that merely observed the diachronic distribution of *ga* and *no* in Japanese lyrics, Ishii and Miyazaki (2026b) specifically target their omission, revealing a systematic increase in case-drop since the 1970s. Standard accounts of colloquial case-drop attribute it to information-structural conditions such as groundhood and non-contrastivity. However, these conditions fail to predict omission patterns in lyrics, where focal or discourse-new subjects are routinely unmarked. This paper proposes that such omission is not a byproduct of informal reduction but a structurally licensed phenomenon governed by the Poetic Modality Phrase (Poetic ModP). Integrating this corpus data with generative syntax, we demonstrate how Poetic ModP employs a constrained Move F mechanism to license the absence of nominative marking while preserving the subject's surface position.

2. Framework and Problem

The baseline for colloquial case-drop is Oshima's (2024) account, which restricts zero-marking to non-contrastive, predictable arguments. Lyrics, however, challenge this: in *Ame Ø furu machi* "rain-Ø fall town" ("Anata nara dōsuru," 1970), the discourse-new subject *ame* is unmarked, violating Oshima's constraints. This discrepancy necessitates distinct licensing conditions. We adopt Ishii and Miyazaki's (2026a) Poetic ModP, situated in the split-CP between ForceP and FinP. Comprising [Mod:Discourse] and [Mod:Focus], this projection activates "Poetic Licence," allowing the reconfiguration of syntactic operations. Specifically, the Move F mechanism allows the abstract Case feature to raise to Poetic Mod⁰, formally licensing omission without violating island constraints. This framework unifies lyrical syntax with phenomena like Kakarimusubi and Role Language.

3. Main Analysis

Under the Poetic ModP framework, subject particle omission in lyrics is derived through Move F rather than mere suspension of Case-valuation. The derivation proceeds as follows. When a lyrical clause is generated, the Poetic Mod⁰ head in the left periphery is valued with features such as [+concise] and [+metrical], reflecting the genre's rhythmic-stylistic requirements. Simultaneously, the subject DP (e.g., *ame*) occupies [Spec, TP] in the usual manner. At this point, Poetic Licence—triggered by the active Poetic Mod⁰—diverts the derivation from the colloquial path. Instead of T⁰ valuing nominative Case on the subject DP via ϕ -Agree, the abstract Case feature of the subject undergoes Move F out of the DP and raises to Poetic Mod⁰ in the CP domain. Because Move F targets only the formal Case feature and does not pied-pipe the entire DP, it circumvents island constraints (e.g., the Subject Condition) that would block phrasal movement, allowing the subject to remain in its canonical position without perturbing surface word order. The raised Case feature enters an Agree relation directly with the [+concise, +metrical] features on Poetic Mod⁰. This Agree relation formally licenses the omission of the nominative particle *ga/no*: since the Case feature is already satisfied in the CP layer, T⁰ is not required to overtly spell out the case morpheme, and the particle is simply not merged. The derivation thus converges as grammatical within the poetic register, yielding a bare subject that is rhythmically lighter and metrically

aligned.

This Move F-based analysis inherits a key restriction: omission is only licensed when Poetic Mod⁰ is active and bears the requisite poetic features, thereby constraining the operation to specific registers and prosodic environments. The model therefore predicts hierarchical sensitivity to metrical position—omission is most natural when the subject aligns with a strong downbeat or line-initial position, where [+metrical] is robustly satisfied, and least natural when rhythmic ambiguity would lead to processing overload. This prediction is borne out by our corpus data, which show that omission rates are boosted in formulaic, rhythmically stable genres but remain sensitive to syntactic complexity.

The analysis also captures the diachronic shift observed in our corpus. The post-1970s surge in omission correlates with the rise of Japanese folk and new music, which institutionalized lyrical concision as a stylistic norm. Within Poetic ModP, this is modeled not as lexical change, but as a reparameterization of the feature inventory of Poetic Mod⁰: the [+concise] feature, once marginal, stabilized as a conventionalized licensing condition, systematically permitting Move F even in contexts that violate colloquial zero-marking constraints.

4. Discussion

To counter claims that Poetic ModP is an ad hoc construct, we highlight its explanatory scope and the restrictiveness of Move F. First, it unifies synchronic and diachronic data: Kakarimusubi, Role Language, and lyrical omission all involve feature-level movement to a left-peripheral modal head licensed by register-specific features. Second, Move F distinguishes Poetic ModP from FocP; because only the Case feature moves, the operation is insensitive to contrastive focus but highly sensitive to metrical prominence. This yields falsifiable predictions: (i) cross-genre extension to rap, haiku, and theatrical dialogue; (ii) psycholinguistic processing asymmetries (faster integration for licensed omissions under clear metrical conditions); and (iii) diachronic tracking of feature activation. Finally, this refines AI linguistics. While LLMs generate poetic text evaluated mainly by surface acceptability, Poetic ModP provides a structural criterion to distinguish unlicensed statistical noise from rule-governed creative deviation. Formalizing “Poetic Licence” as constrained Move F offers a rigorous framework for modeling human creativity and evaluating AI syntactic competence, demonstrating that fine-grained theoretical architecture is essential for understanding language's structured flexibility.

5. References

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