Who Has Information?

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In any language the meaning of a word is defined by its usage (dictionaries only reflect the usage, not the other way around). So in one sense one can say that word meaning is socially conventionalized. In other words, the meaning of a word has a number of connotations of meaning that go well beyond the dictionary definition. In this essay we will discuss the idea of synonymity across languages. Are spigot and faucet synonymous in English? Not if a spigot, not a faucet, sticks out from the back of the house and a faucet, not a spigot, is installed in the kitchen! This suggests that there may be few, if any, synonyms in any language.

Synonymous words across languages are equally difficult to find. Take an example of the Japanese word for water mizu. You might say water and mizu are synonyms, but are they? Mizu refers to cold water and cannot refer to hot water (unless you are speaking of water as the substance H2O). In Japan, you will need oyu 'hot water,' not mizu, to make hot tea. Water in English refers to all kinds of water in its liquid states of H2O. This example illustrates that word meaning is located in its use, and different languages create words following their own conventions. Now the question is "Does the same principle apply to grammar?" In other words, is the same idea expressed in different ways across languages, beyond the differences arising from any semantic mismatches in the basic meanings of the constituent words? What is meant by the "same idea" in such a question?

This essay tries to deal with the issue of how different grammars (Japanese and English, for instance) express the "same idea," or fill the same or substantially similar functional need. To illustrate how the same idea an be expressed differently in Japanese and English, let us examine how the nature of any particular piece of information determines the way it is encoded in Japanese, including who controls the information being conveyed, and what the speaker's attitude about the reliability of information is, among other issues.

Ko, So, A, Do Words and Control Domains of Information

One illustration we can use to show how the Japanese language shows who "owns" information is the case of so called the ko-, so-, a-, do-words. In the first few weeks of a beginning Japanese language class, students learn about words such as kono 'this', sono 'that', and ano 'that (over there)' as a sort of pointing words indicating an object's nearness to the speaker. Thus kono hon 'this book' refers to a book within reach of the speaker (but far away from the addressee), sono hon 'that book within reach of the addressee (but out of reach of the speaker)', and ano hon 'that book out of reach from both the speaker and the addressee.' A similar, but not identical system, exists in English, where the word this is used like kono and the word that is used like sono. There is no simple equivalence to ano, so a parallelism between the languages breaks down here.

There is more to be said about these words, termed "deictic" by linguists, words in which the speaker indexes things and ideas in a particular context in which a given utterance is made. Beyond the physical distance and reachability in the case of kono and other members of this group, these words are used when referring to objects in an abstract world, the world of conversation, for instance. It turns out that the rules for using these deictics in the physical and abstract worlds are remarkably similar.

Suppose a woman was surprised to learn, while eating lunch at a local restaurant, that her company's chief financial officer, who is her immediate supervisor, was just arrested for embezzling. She might exclaim,

1. *Kore/*sore/*are wa taihen da!*

   This/*that/*that is serious!

(The symbol * is a shorthand notation meaning these versions, marked with a *, that is, Sore wa taihen da! and Are wa taihen da!, are inappropriate or grammatically incorrect for this situation, while Kore wa taihen da! is appropriate or grammatically correct.) Here the appropriate choice would be kore, not sore or are to refer to this turn of event. The general impression she gives, if she were to say any one of the inappropriate utterances, is that she is somehow unnaturally detached or distant from the event, unaffected or uninterested in this event. (Think about if "That is serious!" conveys the same sort of distant meaning in English if it was used in this situation. Would "This is serious" be more appropriate to show how this event is impacting the speaker?) In Japanese kore is the most appropriate choice here. Imagine another situation. This time, suppose Ali tells Bop about a musician she knows (and she assumes that Bop does not know him). She says his name is Sayama and continues

2. *Kono/*Sono/*Ano hito jitsu wa mae wa keisatsukan datta n desu*

   This/*That/*That man, to tell you the truth, was a policeman before.

The kono version is most preferred and the other two are inappropriate. Why? In general kono, in the abstract domain, is appropriate when referring to information that the speaker asserts control over or has intimate connection to it. Thus, only kono in this case is appropriate, since the only the speaker herself, and not the addressee, knows Sayama.

In contrast when the speaker uses sono, like 3 below in response to sentence 2 above, she is characterizing or acknowledging that the information about the object referred to belongs to the addressee's control or domain.

3. *Hee, *kono/sono/*ano hito itsu kara shitte iru n desu ka?*

   Really? How long have you known him (lit. that person)?

Further consider the following example involving ano 'that.' Here assume the following context, where the speaker Ali and Bop both know Casey well. Ali and Bop are talking about Casey is getting married to a rich person.

4. a: *Casey ga kekkon suru tte shitte ru?*

   Do you know Casey is getting married?

   b: *N, *kono/*sono/ano hito ne okanemochi to kekkon suru n da tte*

   Yeah she (lit. that woman) is marrying a rich person, I heard.

Example 4b shows ano is used to mark a person both Ali and Bop know about. In this context, once Casey has been brought into conversation, she can be referred to with ano.

Thus the deictic behavior--or which one to choose when--is quite predictable even when their referents are abstract: use kore when the information falls into the speaker's domain of control, use sore when the speaker asserts that the object falls within the addressee's domain, and use ano when the object belongs to the common, mutually shared domain of information.

Handling New Information

Some grammar patterns in Japanese are exclusively used when the speaker knows or assumes the addressee does not share the same information. Making a telephone call to an office for the first time or to an office where the caller is not immediately recognized is phrased in the way shown in sentence 5, not sentence 6:

5. Nagasawa to iu mono desu ga...

   My name is Nagasawa... (or I am the person called Nagasawa)

6. *Nagasawa desu ga...

   *I am Nagasawa (or My name is Nagasawa)...

Sentence 5 in essence says "(I assume you do not know me but) my name is Nagasawa," while sentence 6 may be paraphrased as "I am Nagasawa (and I assume you recognize my voice)." The reason is that in Japanese the speaker must be vigilant whether or not this information (that is, the caller's identity) is shared information between the speaker and the addressee or information that is (or assumed to be) new to the addressee. If the speaker knows or assumes that the addressee does not know (about) Nagasawa, she must use the form in example 5. On, by the same token, if a man calls home and identifies himself like sentence 5 above will be considered odd or humorous.

Access to Information

The distinction Japanese makes about information's domain is as interesting as language's sensitivity to another distinction that is habitually made about who has direct access to information. In English, it seems patently clear that sentences likes "I am sad" and "Hanna is sad" share a common structure, that is, "X BE Y." And once this structure is learned, it is easy to apply it to any number of situations by filling the places marked by X and Y with the appropriate word. Thus we obtain "John is sad," "My dad is hungry," "You are carnivorous," et cetera. This simple paradigmatic substitution happens not to work in Japanese. There, predicates describing psychological and physical states (and "be sad" is one of them) appears most often with the first person subject and seldom with other subject types. The distinction on the accessibility of information is not as clearly marked in English in grammar as it is in Japanese, in which this type of encoding is strictly observed. The same can be said about one's physical state. So, if Alissa is stating that she is hungry, she'd say 8a or 8b:

8. a: Onaka ga suita

b: Onaka ga suite iru

I am hungry.

but if she is saying someone else, say Bop, is hungry, she'd say, for instance,

9. a: Onaka ga suite iru yō da

b: Onaka ga suite iru mitai

He is (lit. appears to be) hungry.

where yō da or mitai is added in order to indicate that she is making an observation about someone else's physical state, that that person is hungry, from the way he behaves.

What if Bop told her he was hungry? In this case, too, Alissa's information access is secondhand, since she is not able to feel his hunger. Thus indirectness of information or how she acquired information dictates which grammar pattern she should use when speaking in this language. In other words, Onaka ga suita acknowledges that the speaker has direct access to that information (and therefore this sentence can only be uttered by the person experiencing hunger), while Onaka ga suita yō da acknowledges that the speaker did not obtain direct access to this information but acquired it only secondhand, through hearsay, observation, and so forth. From this and other numerous examples, one can say that the Japanese language is quite sensitive to expressing how information has been obtained and the user must make a clear indication when speaking.

The same can be said about one's psychological state. If Bop feels sad, he'd say Boku wa kanashii. But to say "Kaori is sad," Japanese would not allow and Bop would not say *Kaori wa kanashii "Kaori is sad." Instead, Bop would say something like Kaori wa kanashigatte iru or Kaori wa kanashi sō da "Kaori appears to be sad." Again, this is because the language makes a clear distinction between information about which the speaker has firsthand knowledge (as in

the case of stating "I am sad") and one about which the speaker obtained secondhand (as in the case of stating "Kaori is (showing signs of being) sad" or "Kaori is (appears to be) sad"), not only in this example but also in a number of related areas.

Degree of Confidence in the Veracity of Information, as Controlled in the Choice of Nominalizer when Embedding

Handling new information in a special way also shows up in the choice of how information is quoted in a sentence. Take for instance sentences like

7. Yukari ni ojisan ga kita koto o tsutaeta

I told Yukari that her uncle arrived.

8. Yukari ni ojisan ga kita tte tsutaeta

I told Yukari that her uncle arrived.

The distinction made here in Japanese does not appear to come through in English. In sentence 7 the speaker believes that Yukari's uncle arrived is true, while, in sentence 8, the speaker is neutral. You can see that a grammar distinction is made about whether or not the speaker believes that information obtained is true or she is neutral about its veracity. In addition to this nominalizer koto, Japanese has another no. Both koto and no are used for information that the speaker thinks is true, while to, a bit more like quoting, allows the speaker to be neutral about the quality of information.

How was Information Received?

The language is also sensitive to how information is obtained and this shows up in grammar. Consider the following examples, all essentially stating that "It will rain today." The last bits of each of the sentences-the predicate parts-differ from each other.

Furimasu in 11 is used when the speaker is very confident about raining, that it will rain.

The source of this judgment, though apparently reliable, is not specified. In sentence 12 the speaker expresses that she obtained the information visually, by looking at the sky, for instance, and concluding from it that it would rain. It suggests that rain would start any minute, impending. In 13, it is clear that the speaker obtained this information about the weather by hearing from someone or reading in something (TV? Radio? Neighbor? Newspaper?). This sō desu expresses information that was obtained primarily through hearing and less frequently though other means. Sentence 14 is more general as to the source of information which led the speaker to believe that it would rain. The source or modes of obtaining this information is not made explicit. In the last one, sentence 15, the information is based on primarily visual information but an aggregate of other types of information may have also contributed.

11. Kyō wa ame ga furimasu

12. Kyō wa ame ga furi sō desu

13. Kyō wa ame ga furu sō desu

14. Kyō wa ame ga furu yō desu

15. Kyō wa ame ga furu mitai desu

English makes this sort of semantic distinction by choosing the appropriate verb. For 11, we might say "it will rain today (and I am sure of it)," for 12, "Today it looks like rain," For the rest of the sentences, 13 through 15, the distinction in English is less clear, and they all have an English equivalent like "I heard that it will rain today."

Conclusion

Through a number of examples, it was shown that information is not handled in Japanese in the same way it is in English. In this area of grammar, Japanese seems more specific and capable of showing more shades of meaning through grammar than English can. This does not of course mean that English is incapable of expressing these nuances. The English language has different means of accomplishing the same functional task, although perhaps more clumsily. In both vocabulary and grammar, then, we can conclude that synonymity or one-to-one correspondence between these two languages in meaning or in structure, or more generally, between any two languages, does not exist. Thus the task of, for instance, a translator of an English novel into Japanese will have to learn strategies to address these issues outlined in this section. For a learner of Japanese, she will have to get used to learning new distinctions that may not exist (or exist differently) in her own language.

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Suggested Reading

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