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*Perspectives in Japanese and German:  
A Contrastive Analysis of Sign Expressions in  
Public Spaces*

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Perspectives in Japanese and German:  
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Yoshinori NISHIJIMA

Abstract: Research on the perspectives from which linguistic expressions are formulated has increased in the past 20 years due to the development of cognitive linguistics. For example, Ikegami (2000) showed that Japanese and English speakers employ different perspectives by comparing the opening sentence of a Japanese literary text with its English translation. Similarly, Narita (2009) compared sentences from literary texts with their translations in Japanese and German. However, these studies analyzing literary text translations contain little discussion on the validity of the translation-based comparison method, particularly in terms of comparability and objectivity. This paper has three purposes: (1) to claim that the original and translation-based methods are not always appropriate for perspective studies; (2) to propose, as an alternative method, comparing functionally equivalent formulas used on public signs, i.e., *Watch your step*, *Keep out*, and *Out of Service*; and (3) to show how Japanese differs from German in the perspectives from which corresponding expressions in the two languages are formulated. Expressions were collected from signs on buses, trains, and railway stations in Japan and Germany. Examples include *Haire-masen/Kein Eingang* ('No entrance'), *Senro-ni orite-wa ike-masen/Ausstieg verboten* ('Do not go down to the railway track'), and *ishitsubutsu-gakari/Fundbüro* ('Lost and found'). Functionally equivalent expressions were selected for the analysis. For example, a formula telling bus passengers that the bus will stop at the next station is *Tsugi tomari-masu* (next.TOP stop.HON) in Japanese and *Wagen hält* (vehicle.NOM stop.PRES) in German. These corresponding expressions can be compared syntactically and semantically. The former has no surface-level subject; it conveys that "I" and "we" or the bus will stop at the next station. The scene is described from the perspective inside the situation, i.e., from within the bus. The latter has a third-person subject, *Wagen*, signifying that the bus is observed from the perspective outside the situation. These different perspectives and their occurrence distributions are shown through the comparison of corresponding sign expressions. The analysis reveals that Japanese tends to formulate expressions from a perspective inside the scene where the event occurs, whereas German expresses sentences from the perspective outside the scene.

Key words: perspectives, linguistic formulation, sign expression, Japanese, German

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Different perspectives

Ikegami (2000) demonstrates a difference in language perspective by comparing a Japanese literary text and its English translation, as in (1).

- (1) *Kokkyo no nagai tonneru o nukeru to*  
boundary PART.GEN long tunnel PART.ACC go.through when  
*yukiguni de atta.*  
snow.country COP.PAST

The original sentence in (1) can be translated literally as ‘When going through the long boundary tunnel, the snow country was,’ as shown in (2). As seen immediately from this translation, the original Japanese sentence has no clear subject of the predicate *nukeru* ‘going through.’ Therefore, it is not necessarily obvious who or what went through the tunnel into the snow country.

- (2) ‘when going through the long boundary tunnel,  
the snow country was’

Thus, in the scene, it can be said that the event of going through the tunnel into the snow country is depicted from a perspective inside the situation, i.e., from inside the train, probably from the eyes of the story’s main character. What he/she observed is described subjectively or experientially as he/she saw it.

In contrast, the English translation in (3) has a subject, that is, the train. Therefore, it can be pointed out that the narrator observed the scene and described it from a perspective outside the situation where the main character is located, not from a perspective inside the train, as in the Japanese sentence in (1).

- (3) The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country.  
(translated by Seidensticker)

This comparison provides a very clear-cut analysis of the difference in perspective between Japanese and English. However, it is not clear whether the sentence in question is typical in Japanese or not, because only one sentence was selected and compared to its translation. Therefore, generally speaking, the comparison has some methodological problems.

### 1.2. Methodological problems

Previous contrastive studies on perspectives compared semantically corresponding sentences in two languages with the help of translations. Based on translation, the corresponding sentences of two languages can be contrasted because they describe the same event. However, translations are often influenced by a translator’s disposition or the structural peculiarities of the source language. Therefore, it can be pointed out that the use of translations for a comparison of the linguistic expression patterns used in different languages has methodological problems with respect to comparability and objectivity. This problem will not be discussed further here. For a more detailed discussion on the issue, see Nishijima (2013).

### 1.3. More objective method for comparison

To compare corresponding expressions in two languages more objectively, one should analyze semantically and functionally equivalent expressions that are used in corresponding situations in the respective societies where the two languages are spoken, such as expressions commonly found on signs in public spaces (e.g., subway stations).

Expressions on signs in public space can be divided in two groups:

- a) descriptions on traffic signs, officially or legally formulated  
e.g., *Shiteihōkō gai shinkōkinshi* [prescribed.direction.except go.prohibition] and *Vorgeschriebene Fahrtrichtung* [prescribed.PP go.direction];
- b) sign expressions, freely formulated  
e.g., *Watch your step* (Japanese and German counterparts: *Ashimoto chūi* [foot.under caution] and *Vorsicht! Stufe* [caution step], respectively).

This paper discusses only freely formulated linguistic expressions on signs, i.e., those belonging to group (b), and will not mention the linguistic expressions in (a) further because the latter have been analyzed in Nishijima (2014a). For a detailed discussion of the linguistic expressions on traffic signs, see Nishijima (2014a).

## 2. Sign Expressions

### 2.1. Four types of corresponding expressions

Sign expressions in corresponding situations in Japan and Germany can be divided into two groups:

- Group 1: There are no correspondences.
- Group 2: There are correspondences.

Group 1 can be further divided into two sub-groups:

- 1a) Sign expressions found in Japan with no corresponding expressions in Germany:  
*Kakekomi jōsha-wa kiken desu kara o-yame kudasai*  
rush.onto boarding-TOP danger COP.HON because HON.stop please  
'Please stop rushing onto a train because of danger.'

Because the behavior described in (1) is not common in Germany, there are not any corresponding sign expressions (for a discussion of politeness in sign expressions, see Nishijima 2014b).

- 1b) Sign expressions found in Germany with no corresponding expressions in Japan:  
*Eingang nur mit gültigem Fahrausweis*  
entrance only with valid.DAT ticket  
'Entrance only with valid ticket'

Railway stations in Japan normally have ticket gates that prevent people without tickets from passing through. Therefore, there are no expressions corresponding to (1b) in Japan.

This presentation will focus on corresponding expressions and will not mention the sign expressions of Group 1 further.

If corresponding expressions are observed in the two countries (Group 2), then they can be theoretically further divided into two types:

2a) Functionally and semantically equivalent

*Keshōshitsunai kin'en*  
restroom.inside forbidden.smoke  
'In restroom, smoking is forbidden'  
*Im Waschraum nicht rauchen*  
in washroom not smoke  
'In washroom, no smoking'

The function and meaning of the corresponding expressions in (2a) is commonly the prohibition of smoking in an airplane bathroom.

2b) Functionally equivalent, semantically different

*Tesuri-ni o-tukamari kudasai*  
handrail.DAT HON.hold please  
'Please hold handrail'  
*Auf eigene Gefahr*  
on own risk  
'At your own risk'

The function of the corresponding expressions in (2b) is to promote safe use of the escalator. Their meanings are different. The German expression mentions risk taking, while the Japanese one mentions holding the handrail.

Note that functionally different but semantically equivalent expressions are logically impossible.

## 2.2. Research question

In general, linguistic expressions on functionally corresponding sign expressions in two languages are (semantically) equivalent. However, this raises the question of whether and to what extent differences in the perspectives can be also observed in such expressions between Japanese and German, as pointed out in previous studies that compared sentences in two languages with the help of translations. If the question can be answered affirmatively, then the claim of the difference in perspective can be widely confirmed and with a certain percentage. The research described below is aimed at answering this question.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Method

To answer the research question, corresponding sign expressions in Japan and Germany were collected in both countries and compared.

#### 3.2. Materials

Fieldwork was conducted in Japan and Germany from January 2011 to April 2013, during which time 208 Japanese and 198 German sign expressions were collected. A comparison of the Japanese and German sign expressions revealed 35 corresponding pairs. This presentation will analyze them with respect to the perspectives from which the linguistic expressions are formulated.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Differences confirmed

Differences in perspectives were indeed observed in the corresponding sign expressions in the two languages. The two types of perspectives are explained here again:

The first perspective is from within the situation where the expressions are observed, and it is found in the Japanese descriptions. These descriptions depict a situation through the eyes of the readers who are involved in it. On the other hand, the second perspective is external to the situation, and it is found in the German descriptions. These descriptions concretely and objectively mention the objects that are focused on. They are described from the perspective outside the situation where the readers are involved.

However, the contrast of perspectives appears in only 8 of the 35 corresponding sign expressions (22.9%). This presentation focuses on two of the eight cases:

*Tsugi tomarimasu* (つぎ止まります) and *Wagen hält*  
*Nomemasen* (飲めません) and *Kein Trinkwasser*

#### 4.2. *Tsugi tomarimasu* and *Wagen hält*

In Japan, buses often display sentence (1), whereas in Germany, sentence (2) is used. The two sentences are equivalent to the expression *STOP REQUESTED* in the U.S.

- (1) *Tsugi tomarimasu.*
- (2) *Wagen hält.*

##### 4.2.1. *Tsugi tomarimasu*

*Tsugi tomarimasu.*  
next stop.HON  
'(I/We) stop next'

The Japanese expression above has no subject on the surface level and does not state

who or what stops. Yet it conveys that *I* and *we* or *the bus* we are in is going to stop at the next station. The bus, which *we* are in, is not mentioned explicitly.

The scene is described from a perspective inside the situation where the passengers are involved, i.e., experientially from the eyes of the invisible subject.

#### **4.2.2. *Wagen hält***

*Wagen hält.*  
vehicle stop.PRES  
'Vehicle stops'

The sentence above shows the following: The bus is observed and described from a perspective outside the situation that the speaker and the hearer are in, because it is mentioned in the third person, as seen in the English translation of a Japanese literary text at the beginning of this presentation.

#### **4.3. *Nomemasen* and *Kein Trinkwasser***

In Japan, restrooms often display sentence (3), whereas in Germany, sentence (4) appears. Both are equivalent to the expression *NOT DRINKING WATER* in the U.S.

##### **4.3.1. *Nomemasen***

*Nomemasen*  
drink.able.HON.NEG  
'(I/We/You) cannot drink.'

This sentence has no subject and object on the surface level and does not state who cannot drink what. It conveys that *I*, *we*, or *you*, who see the sign and may want to drink something, cannot drink a liquid that is near the sign. What is not for drinking is not mentioned explicitly, and therefore, it can be recognized only by the person who sees the sign, as in the case of *Tsugi tomarimasu* above.

The scene is described from a perspective inside the situation where someone sees the sign expression directly, i.e., experientially from the eyes of the invisible subject.

##### **4.3.2. *Kein Trinkwasser***

*Kein Trinkwasser*  
no drink.water  
'No drinking water'

This sentence shows that the water nearby the sign is not for drinking. The water is observed and described from a perspective outside the situation where someone sees the sign because the water is mentioned as the third person object in the expression.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The aim of this presentation was to answer the question of whether and to what extent differences in language perspective can be observed in pairs of functionally equivalent sign expressions in Japanese and German. The results show that two types of perspectives indeed emerge in the comparison of sign expressions in Japanese and German and that the percentage of difference is only about 23%.

### 5.1. Two types of perspectives

The first perspective is from within the situation, and it is found in the Japanese sign expressions. These expressions depict a situation through the eyes of the readers of the expressions involved in the situations. Therefore, the bus in which the readers are located and the water that they see are both not mentioned objectively.

The second type of perspective is external to the situation, and it is found in the German sign expressions. These expressions concretely and objectively mention, for example, the *Wagen* (bus) the readers are in and the *Wasser* (water) which the readers see. They are formulated from the perspective outside the situation in which the readers are involved.

### 5.2. Percentage of preference

This presentation addressed sign expressions and confirmed the difference in perspective in functionally equivalent texts, though the percentage of difference (about 23%) is small.

In the previous analysis of corresponding expressions, the percentage of emerging different perspectives is about 28% (Nishijima, 2014a).

Further research is needed with various types of texts to examine whether such percentages can confirm the preference of perspective in each language.

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