

A Contrastive Analysis of Traffic Signs in Japanese and German : The Difference of perspective

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A Contrastive Analysis of Traffic Signs in Japanese and German: The Difference of Perspective

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1. Introduction

Every language has its preferred styles of expressions, which are related to the perspectives from which linguistic expressions are formulated. That is to say, perspectives are viewpoints from which the speaker observes an event and describes it using linguistic expressions. Many contrastive studies have investigated such perspectives, and among them, translation-based comparison has been often made. For example, Ikegami (2000) and Nakamura (2004) compared Japanese and English, and Narita (2009), Nishijima (2010), and Nomura (2010) compared Japanese and German. These studies revealed that Japanese differs from English or German with respect to the perspectives from which sentences are formulated. However, the previous studies have some methodological problems. The aim of the current paper¹⁾ is threefold: (1) to describe the methodological problems in previous contrastive studies on language perspectives; (2) in order to avoid these methodological problems, to propose an alternative method for a more objective comparison of the perspectives in two languages; and (3) to show, from the data obtained on the alternative method, whether and to what extent differences in perspective can be observed in corresponding linguistic expressions between Japanese and German.

2. Description of the problem

2.1. Different perspectives: An example

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 PARTGEN long tunnel PARTACC go.through when
yukiguni deatta.
 snow.country COP.PAST
 "The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country."
 (lit. "when going through the boundary long tunnel, the snow
 country was") (translated by Seidensticker, cited in Ikegami,
 2000, p. 292)

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

This comparison provides a very clear-cut analysis of the difference in perspective between Japanese and English. However, it has some methodological problems.

2.2. Methodological problems

Previous contrastive studies on perspectives compared informationally corresponding sentences in two languages with the help of translations. Based on the 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).

2.3. Functionally equivalent expressions

To compare corresponding expressions in two languages more objectively, one should analyze informationally or functionally equivalent expressions that are used in corresponding situations between 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 spaces can be divided into two groups as follows:

- (a) freely formulated sign expressions such as “watch your step” (Japanese and German counterparts: “*ashimoto chuui* [foot.under caution]” and “*Vorsicht! Stufe* [caution step],” respectively); and
- (b) officially or legally formulated descriptions of traffic signs, such as “turn right” (Japanese and German counterparts: “*shiteihoukougai shinkou kinshi-migi* [prescribed.direction.except go prohibition-right]” and “*vorgeschriebene Fahrtrichtung-recht* [prescribe.PP go.direction-right],” respectively).

This paper discusses only linguistic expressions on traffic signs, that is, those belonging to group (b), and will not mention the sign expressions in

(a) further because the latter have been analyzed in Nishijima (2011). For a detailed discussion on sign expressions, see Nishijima (2011).

2.4. Traffic signs

In general, traffic signs provide information to road users for traffic safety.²⁾ They are grouped mainly into four types³⁾: regulatory signs (e.g., *no parking*), warning signs (e.g., *uneven road*), information signs (e.g., *motor vehicles only*), and directional signs (e.g., *motorway distance sign*). Many traffic signs are internationally standardized and expressed by pictures. Their functions are also explained linguistically. Linguistic explanations of corresponding traffic signs in two languages can be informationally or functionally equivalent. For example, *shin'nyu kinsbi* ("entrance prohibited") in Japanese and its German counterpart *Verbot der Einfahrt* ("prohibition of entrance") are informationally and stylistically equivalent.

However, few studies have investigated the linguistic expressions of traffic signs. Among the previous studies of traffic signs, one will be briefly described here. In general, Japanese tends to express concepts implicitly, whereas English prefers explicit expressions. Previous studies demonstrated that these different tendencies are reflected in various expressions. Mine's (2008) comparison of Japanese and American English traffic signs pointed out that Japanese prefers implicit expressions whereas English prefers explicit ones. However, Mine did not analyze traffic signs with respect to perspectives from which descriptions are formulated.

2.5. Research question

In general, linguistic descriptions of functionally corresponding traffic signs in two languages are informationally equivalent. However, this raises the question of whether and to what extent differences in the perspectives can be also observed in such descriptions between Japanese and German, as pointed out in previous studies on comparing 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. Research

3.1. Method

To answer the research question, linguistic descriptions for corresponding traffic signs in Japan and Germany were collected from websites about traffic signs in both countries and compared.

3.2. Materials

As was mentioned above, traffic signs can be divided into four main groups: (a) regulatory signs, (b) warning signs, (c) directional signs, and (d) informational signs. (a) Regulatory signs instruct road users what to do (or not do) under a given set of circumstances. (b) Warning signs indicate a hazard ahead. (c) Directional signs indicate direction, distances, or routes. Finally, (d) informational signs give relevant information to smooth the flow of traffic. In Germany, traffic signs are divided into three groups because the last two types of signs are categorized into one group as "*Richtzeichen* (directional signs)."⁴⁾ A comparison of Japanese and German traffic signs revealed 52 corresponding pairs: 29 regulatory signs, 19 warning signs, and 4 directional signs. This paper will select the data of regulatory signs and analyze them with respect to the perspectives from which linguistic expressions are formulated.

4. Results


Differences in perspectives were indeed observed in the linguistic expressions of corresponding traffic signs in the two languages, but in 8 of the 29 corresponding traffic signs (27.6%). This paper presents the eight cases: road for motorcars, road for cyclist, road for bicycles, pedestrians walkway, one-way street, weight limit, height limit, and width limit of vehicles. They can be roughly divided into two groups: (a) different road


types (by intended use) and (b) different limits of vehicle size.

4.1. Four types of roads

4.1.1. Road for motorcars

The Japanese and German traffic signs and their linguistic descriptions for roads limited to motorcars are shown in (2) and (3), respectively:


- (2)  Japanese traffic sign: *jidousha sen'you*
motorcar exclusive.use
“for cars”


- (3)  German traffic sign: *Kraftfahrstraße*
motorcar.street
“motorcar street”

The Japanese traffic sign in (2) translates as “for cars.” The situation that is restricted, that is, the road, is not mentioned explicitly. In contrast, in the linguistic explanation of the German sign, “motorcar” and “street” are mentioned explicitly. Note that in German, the vehicle that road users use and the situation that is restricted are both mentioned explicitly.

4.1.2. Road for bicycles

The Japanese and German traffic signs and their linguistic descriptions for roads limited to bicycles are shown in (4) and (5), respectively:


- (4)  Japanese traffic sign: *jitensha sen'you*
bicycle exclusive.use
“for bicycle”


- (5)  German traffic sign: *Radweg*
bicycle.way
“bicycle way”

The differences in the descriptions of the Japanese and German signs are similar to those in examples (3) and (4). The Japanese traffic sign is explained linguistically as “for bicycle.” The situation that is restricted, that is, the road, is not mentioned explicitly. In contrast, in the linguistic explanation of the German sign, “bicycle” as vehicle and “way” as the situation are both mentioned.

4.1.3. Road for bicycles and pedestrians

– Japanese and German traffic signs and their linguistic descriptions for roads/paths limited to pedestrians and bicycles are shown in (6) and (7), respectively:

- (6)  Japanese traffic sign: *jitensha oyobi hokousha sen'you*
bicycle and pedestrian exclusive.use
“for bicycle and pedestrian”

- (7)  German traffic sign: *gemeinsamer Rad- und Gehweg*
Shared bicycle- and go.way
“shared bicycle- and walk-way”

The differences in the descriptions of the Japanese and German signs are similar to the examples described in Sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2. The Japanese traffic sign uses the phrase “for bicycle and pedestrian.” In this description, the situation that is restricted, that is, the road, is not mentioned explicitly. In contrast, on the German sign, “bicycle and walk” and “street” (on which the road users move) are mentioned explicitly.

4.1.4. Path for pedestrians

The Japanese and German traffic signs and their linguistic descriptions for paths limited to pedestrians are shown in (8) and (9), respectively:



Japanese traffic sign: *hokousha sen'you*
pedestrian exclusive.use
“for pedestrian”




German traffic sign: *Gebweg*
go.way
“walk-way”

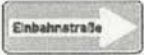
Once again, the Japanese and German signs display the same difference. The Japanese traffic sign is explained linguistically as “for pedestrian.” In this description, the situation that is restricted, that is, the road, is not mentioned explicitly. In contrast, in the linguistic explanation of the German sign, “walk” and “street” (on which the road users move) are both mentioned explicitly.

4.1.5. One-way street

The Japanese and German traffic signs and their linguistic

descriptions for one-way traffic are shown in (10) and (11), respectively:

- (10)  Japanese traffic sign: *ippou tsuukou*
one.side go.through
“one-way traffic”


- (11)  German traffic sign: *Einbahnstraße*
one.way.street
“one-way street”

The differences in the descriptions of the Japanese and German signs pattern with the previous examples. The Japanese traffic sign is explained linguistically as “one-way traffic,” and the direction is given. In this description, however, the situation that is restricted, that is, the road, is not mentioned. In contrast, in the linguistic explanation of the German sign, not only the direction, but also the “street” (on which the road users move) is mentioned.

4.2. Three types of limitation of vehicle size

4.2.1. Weight limit

The Japanese and German traffic signs and their linguistic descriptions for weight limit are shown in (12) and (13), respectively:

- (12)  Japanese traffic sign: *juuryou seigen*
Weight limit
“weight limit”



- (13) German traffic sign:
Verbot für Fahrzeuge über angegebenes tatsächliches Gewicht
 prohibition for vehicle.Pl over state.PP actual weight
 “Prohibition for vehicles over stated actual weight”

The Japanese sign mentions the “weight limit.” However, the German sign mentions both “Prohibition” and “vehicle with concrete weight information.” Note that in German, objects that are subject to control are mentioned, and the function of the sign is also mentioned as prohibition. Therefore, in German, “object” and “prohibition” are clearly mentioned, and the object has a detailed description.

4.2.2. Height limit

The Japanese and German traffic signs and their linguistic descriptions for height limit are shown in (14) and (15), respectively:



- (14) Japanese traffic sign: *takasa seigen*
 height limit
 “height limit”



- (15) German traffic sign:
Verbot für Fahrzeuge über angegebene Höhe einschließlich Ladung
 prohibition for vehicle.Pl over state.PP height including
 load
 “prohibition for vehicles over indicated height including load”

The differences in the Japanese and German descriptions are similar to those in the “weight limit” example of Section 4.2.1. The Japanese sign

employs the simple description of “height limit.” The German sign, in contrast, mentions “prohibition,” “vehicle,” and “other information.” That is, vehicles that are subject to control are concretely mentioned, as is the function of the sign.

4.2.3. Width limit

The Japanese and German traffic signs and their linguistic descriptions for maximum width are shown in (16) and (17), respectively:



Japanese traffic sign: *saidai haba*
maximum width
“maximum width”



German traffic sign:
Verbot für Fahrzeuge über angegebene Breite einschließlich
prohibition for vehicle.Pl over state.PP width including
Ladung
load
“prohibition for vehicles over indicated width including load”

The differences in the explanations of the two corresponding signs are similar to those in the two previous examples. The Japanese sign uses the simple description “width limit.” In German, “prohibition,” “vehicles,” and “other detailed information” are included. That is, the function of the sign is clearly mentioned, as are the objects that are subject to control.

5. Discussion

5.1. Object unmentioned

As illustrated by the examples in Section 4, in Japanese expressions,

it is not obvious what is subject to control. The expressions mention only “for” to describe types of roads and “limit” in regard to size (e.g., weight, height, and width), but they do not mention roads or vehicles explicitly. This suggests that the Japanese descriptions do not focus on roads or vehicles in question objectively, but rather on the situations that road users are in, that is, roads. In other words, the descriptions are formulated from a perspective within the situation where road users see the signs, that is, experientially from the eyes of the road users. In Japanese, roads and vehicles need not be mentioned because they can be regarded as an extension of road users who are using the roads where the signs are placed.

5.2. Objects mentioned


In contrast, in German, “*Straße*” and/or “*Weg*” are referred to in all five traffic signs described in Section 4.1, and “*Fahrzeuge*” are mentioned in all three signs in Section 4.2. Furthermore, in the latter cases, detailed information is added. This suggests that the German descriptions are formulated from a perspective outside the situation where the restrictions are focused, that is, the roads on which the road users move, and the vehicles that will go on the roads in question are concretely and objectively described.


5.3. Expressed explicitly or implicitly

In German, linguistic descriptions of all the three traffic signs shown in Section 4.2 indicate “prohibition” objectively. However, in Japanese, only “limit” is mentioned, which is regarded as an implicit prohibition because prohibition presupposes a “limit” or restriction. This suggests that German descriptions use mainly explicit expressions, whereas Japanese descriptions rely on implicit expressions. Contrasting traffic signs written in Japanese and American English, Mine (2008) pointed out that implicit expressions are preferentially used in Japanese traffic signs, different from the case in American English. His claim that implicit expressions are preferentially used in Japanese is confirmed in the comparison between Japanese and

German traffic signs. However, there are some corresponding expressions that are formulated implicitly in both Japanese and German:

The traffic signs in (18) and (19) indicate the maximum speed on roads in Japan and Germany, respectively:

- (18)  Japanese traffic sign: *saikou sokudo*
maximum speed
“maximum speed”

- (19)  German traffic sign: *zulässige Höchstgeschwindigkeit*
allowed maximum speed
“allowed maximum speed”

The Japanese sign mentions only the “limit speed,” whereas the German sign refers to “permission” and “maximum speed.” Therefore, the difference is in the presence or absence of *zulässig* (“allowed”). Neither expression, however, explicitly mentions what the road users should do or not do in the situation. The reason the German expression does not state its function clearly cannot be explained appropriately in the current study.

6. Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper is to answer the question of whether and to what extent differences in language perspective can be also observed in Japanese and German by comparing pairs of linguistic descriptions of functionally equivalent traffic signs in the two languages. In this paper, only a part of the data has been analyzed. However, the discussion has revealed that two types of perspectives also emerge in the comparison of traffic signs written in Japanese and German, though the percentage of difference is only about 28%.

The first perspective is from within the situation, and it is found in the Japanese descriptions. These descriptions depict a situation through the

eyes of the road users involved in the situations. Therefore, the road users do not see the road on which they are located objectively. Furthermore, they regard vehicles that they drive as a psychological extension of themselves.

The second type of perspective is external to the situation, and it is found in the German descriptions. These descriptions concretely and objectively mention vehicles that are subject to control. They are described from the perspective outside the situation where the restriction is applied.

In addition, it is revealed that German descriptions tend to use explicit expressions, whereas Japanese descriptions employ largely implicit expressions.

Previous studies on the perspectives from which linguistic expressions are formulated analyzed literary texts and ordinary routine formulas (cf. Nishijima, 2010). This paper addressed linguistic expressions of traffic signs and confirmed the difference in perspective partly also in “legal texts,” though the percentage of difference is small. Further research should clarify whether and to what extent the preferred styles of each language are observed in various types of texts.

Notes

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- 2) For detailed information on traffic signs in Japan and Germany, see the official websites of the Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism and the German Federal Ministry of Justice (in the References list).
- 3) <http://www.mlit.go.jp/road/sign/sign/douro/road-sign.htm> (Accessed on the 20. November, 2013)
- 4) http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/stvo_2013/BJNR036710013.html (Accessed on the 20. November, 2013)

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Japanese traffic signs

<http://www.mlit.go.jp/road/sign/sign/>

<http://www.mlit.go.jp/road/sign/sign/douro/ichiran.pdf>

<http://www.police.pref.yamaguchi.jp/0410/jitensya/jitensya4.html>

<http://www.city.osaka.lg.jp/contents/wdu020/enjoy/jp/transportation/08.html>

German traffic signs: Straßenverkehrs-Ordnung (StVO)

http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/stvo_2013/BJNR036710013.html

World traffic signs:

http://www.mlit.go.jp/road/sign/sign/douro/s_world.htm

<http://www.mlit.go.jp/road/sign/sign/douro/wscomp.htm>

交通標識の日独比較

——表現視点の違い——

西嶋 義憲

どの言語にもその言語らしい表現があるが、それらは表現視点と関係している。表現視点とは、話者が事態を観察し、言語によってそれを表現する際に立つ視座のことである。多くの対照研究はそのような視点に焦点を当て、日本語は英語やドイツ語と異なる視点から表現する傾向にあることを明らかにしてきている（たとえば、池上 2000, 成田 2009 など）。しかしながら、従来の研究は方法論上の問題があるようだ。本稿の目的はつぎの3点にある：1) 表現視点に関する従来の対照研究における方法論上の問題点を指摘する；2) 2言語間の表現視点をより客観的に比較するための別の方法として日独で対応する交通標識の説明表現を対象にした分析を提案する；3) その方法により、対応する表現間における表現視点の違いについてどのようにそしてどの程度異なるのかを明らかにする。交通標識の説明表現を対照した結果、たしかに日本語表現ではドイツ語のそれとは異なる表現視点が確認された。しかしながら、異なる視点の出現率は約28%であった。このような数値はこれまでの研究では提出されてこなかった。この数値の妥当性を検証するためには、今後、さらに別のタイプのテキストを比較することが必要であろう。