



Differences in Direction Indicating Expressions Between Japanese and German

A Contrastive Analysis of Newspaper Articles on Traffic Accidents

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ABSTRACT

It is said that each language has its preferred expressions. Japanese tends to depict an event from within the situation where it occurs experientially and subjectively, while English tends to express an event from outside the situation where it occurs objectively. This difference in the way languages grasp the situation is referred to as “subjective construal” and “objective construal.” In general, directions are presented in two different ways: subjective and objective representations. This study aimed to analyze how directions are expressed in functionally corresponding traffic accident newspaper articles in Japanese and German in terms of frames of reference based on Levinson (2008). For this purpose, two traffic accident articles from recent local newspaper articles in Japan and Germany, each containing directional expressions, were selected and analyzed concerning directional expressions. The results showed that Japanese people express direction in a “relative” framework by focusing on the person or vehicle involved such as “a boy was hit by a passenger car coming from the left,” whereas German people attempt to position direction objectively by using city names and the directions such as East, West, North, South like “a witness observed a 29-year-old woman crossed from crossed *Uerdinger Straße* at Bockumer Platz in a northerly direction.” Thus, Japanese people express direction subjectively, i.e., in a “relative” framework, while German people express direction objectively in terms of cardinal points, i.e., in an “absolute” framework. These are clear examples of expressions that correspond respectively to subjective and objective construal (the choice between alternative expressions) in cognitive linguistics and confirm that Japanese direction instructions are expressed subjectively.

Keywords: *Directional expression, frames of reference, objective construal, subjective construal.*

1. INTRODUCTION

When a certain event is verbalized, it may be expressed differently in different languages. This means that each language has its preferred expressions. For example, Mizutani (2008) pointed out that Japanese people tend to express subjectively from the speaker’s, i.e., vocal person, standpoint such as *saifu-o torare-ta* ‘my wallet was stolen’, while English speakers seem to be more factual and objective when verbalizing for example, “someone took my wallet” in contrast. Such differences in the way of expression are also expected to be found in directional expressions in Japanese and German. Traditional comparisons between languages have often made use of translations. However, comparisons using translations have problems related to comparability, as will be seen later in the next section. In this study, therefore, I decided to examine this point using functionally corresponding Japanese and German recent local newspaper articles containing direction-directing expressions. The aim of this study is threefold: 1) to compare directional expressions in Japanese and German newspaper articles; 2) to analyze whether subjective expressions are preferred in Japanese, although newspaper articles are expected to be reported objectively; 3) to examine the general claim made so far that Japanese is a subjective language. The significance of this study lies in the fact that it fairly and objectively clarified the differences in the preferred mode of expression regarding directional expressions using functionally corresponding newspaper articles.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section objectively reviews previous studies that compare equivalent direction instructions of two languages. Based on this review, a hypothesis is formulated concerning the difference between how Japanese and German people communicate direction instructions.

2.1. Language and Cognition: Comparison using Translation

Ikegami (2000, pp. 290-293) compares the opening sentence of Kawabata Yasunari's novel, *Yukiguni*, with its English translation, *Snow Country*, by E. Seidensticker. He argues that Japanese is a language of "subject-object congruence" and English a language of "subject-object opposition." Sentence (1) is the opening sentence of the novel and sentence (2) is its English translation.

Data 1

Kunizakai-no nagai tonneru-o
(country border - POSS long tunnel - OBJ)

Data 2

nukeru-to yukiguni deatta
(go out – when snow country COPULA PAST)
The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country.

Data 1 is a sentence in which the narrator expresses an experiential awareness, perhaps from the protagonist's point of view, that as soon as the train came out of the long, dark tunnel, the landscape changed completely and he realized that he just entered a snow country. In other words, in Japanese, the expressing subject (the narrator or protagonist) and the depicted object (the world depicted) are not separated but are integrated into a single world. In Data 2, however, the composition is that the narrator explains to the reader the scene where the train has left the long tunnel and entered the snow country objectively. In other words, the framework can be read as a separation between the expressing subject of the story and the world in which the events happen, with the narrator explaining to the reader what is happening in the story world from outside the story world.

Based on the discussion above, Ikegami (2003) further argues that Japanese people tend to depict an event internally and subjectively, while English tend to express an event objectively. In the field of cognitive linguistics, this difference in expression is referred to as "subjective construal" and "objective construal". The above examples show that each language has its preferred viewpoint.

2.2. Perspectives on Verbalizing the Situation

Let us consider this issue using the example of announcements and notations on station platforms, which are frequent subjects in discussions on differences in expressive perspectives (Ikegami, 2012). The following announcement may be made on a station platform before a train arrives.

Data 3

hakusen-no uchigawa-made sagatte
(white line – POSS inside - to go back)
o-machikudasai
HON – wait IMP HON

Data 3 is an expression that calls the attention of people on the platform to an incoming train. The word *uchigawa* in this Japanese expression usually refers to the side of the platform where people stand waiting for a train. In other words, the perspective of the sentence is located within the situation of the people waiting for the train. The speaker of this sentence shares the perspective of the people waiting for the train in the situation and observes and expresses the situation from this standpoint. This corresponds to the above opening sentence of the novel *Yukiguni*. However, this expression is misleading when translated into English using the preposition "inside" or "within" as follows.

Data 4

Please wait inside the white line.

Indeed, data 4 is a verbatim translation of data 3, but the correct translation of data 3 should be data 5.

Data 5

Please wait beyond the white line

The place indicated by “within” or “inside” in this English data 4 is usually the possible side of the danger on which the focus is placed. The expressive perspective of English is generally placed outside the situation in which an event occurs so that it looks down from a bird’s eye view and focuses on the place where the danger can arise. The area indicated by “within” or “inside” is, therefore, on the side of the track where the train is coming in. For this reason, a functionally correct translation of data 3 would be data 5 (Hisaizumi, 2006).

2.3. Comparability: Framework for Comparison

As in the previous studies mentioned above, translation is often used to compare different languages, especially in cognitive linguistics research such as Ikegami (2000) for a comparison of Japanese and English, Ozono (2008), Narita (2009), and Nomura (2010) for comparisons of Japanese and German. However, comparisons based on translation can be problematic in terms of comparability. It is important to discuss the validity of comparing the two languages to determine their preferred linguistic expression styles. Nishijima (2018) proposed the following requirements for an objective comparison: (a) independence, (b) naturalness, (c) functional equivalence, and (d) corresponding concrete situations.

For (a) independence, the corresponding expressions of the two languages must be formulated independently; that is, they are not formally influenced by each other, unlike in the case of translations from one language to another. Concerning (b) naturalness, the corresponding expressions of the two languages must be produced naturally; they must be common in the language in question. For (c) functional equivalence, the compared expressions must be functionally equivalent to determine their similarities and differences in style. However, it is very difficult to compare corresponding expressions that are all formally, semantically, and functionally equivalent. Finally, for (d) corresponding concrete situations, to compare functionally equivalent expressions, the compared expressions in the two languages must actually and concretely be used in corresponding situations. The expressions that can fulfill the above requirements are routine formulas written on signs in the two languages in the corresponding situations.

Linguistic expressions that fulfill the above conditions are written on various signs in public spaces, such as railway stations. They provide information or make requests to passengers in parallel in each language. Such expressions can be called sign expressions (Nishijima, 2013, 2014, 2018). These expressions are found in corresponding situations in every country (i.e., corresponding situations). They are corresponding expressions in each language spoken in different countries, and neither is translated from the other (naturalness and independence). The expressions are used to request potential readers not to use the elevator in the case of fire (functional equivalence).

I will concretely state what I mean by “corresponding.” As mentioned above, “corresponding” in this study is defined as matching the situation and function of the expression. Therefore, even if a representation is observed in a corresponding situation, it is not considered out of scope if the function of the representation is different.

2.4. Comparison of Japanese and German

Based on a framework for fair comparison mentioned above, I have analyzed public signs, linguistic routine formulas controlling communicative behavior (or disciplinary language), and newspaper articles in corresponding situations in Japanese and German. I have identified the preferred features of each language (Nishijima, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2023). Although the results of individual analyses will not be shown in this paper, it has been found that, on the whole, German, like English, tends to express itself objectively.

2.5. Direction Indicating Framework

The concepts of “right” and “left” are considered to be the most basic of human cognition and thought to indicate the directions, but Inoue (1989) points out that this distinction does not exist and that there are languages that articulate the world according to different ways of thinking. He then attempts to verify the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” that different languages have different ways of thinking.

Levinson (2008) discusses the problems of verbalizing directions, which is regarded as a standard study in this field. He analyses how the speaker associates an object with a certain frame of reference and represents its location. He proposes three categories for frames of reference signaling the relationship between language and spatial cognition: “intrinsic”, “relative”, and “absolute.”

The “Relative” frame is a framework that is orientated according to the speaker’s point of view, such as *a person standing on the left side of the car*, which depicts the situation from the speaker’s point of view. The “Intrinsic” frame focuses on the intrinsic and inherent characteristics of the object to be localized, such as *a person standing in front of a car*. “Absolute” is a framework that is localized independently of the speaker’s point of view and the intrinsic characteristics of the object, such as *a person standing to the east of the car*.

According to Yoshie (2018), Levinson’s “absolute” and “relative” reference frames are mainly observed in *Gojal-Wakhi*, with the “absolute” reference frame-based representation preferred as long as no communication errors occur.

A question arises here. Previous studies have shown that each language has its preferred expressions, with Japanese tending to be more subjective and English as well as German more objective. If this is the case, which framework does each language tend to use to express itself in terms of Levinson’s frames of reference? The target languages of this study are Japanese and German. Since no contrastive Japanese-German study of directional descriptions has been submitted so far, it is highly significant to investigate this question. The following hypothesis is then set out.

Hypothesis

Japanese directional expressions are based on the subjective point of view of a particular person, i.e., a “relative” frame. However, German directions are based on an objective point of view, i.e., an “absolute” frame of reference.

The next section proposes materials and methods to test the above hypothesis.

3. METHOD

To investigate our hypothesis, a comparison was made between Japanese and German newspaper articles on traffic accidents that corresponded almost exactly in terms of content. This study is conducted within the framework of a qualitative analysis.

Japanese and German newspaper articles as data resources in this study can be compared because of the special function of newspaper articles as “news reports.” In other words, newspaper articles share the conventional 5W1H framework. Of course, it depends on what the comparison reveals, but as long as the texts share a specific function and a specific communicative content, the comparison is possible. If a Japanese-German comparison of newspaper articles is to be made, it is necessary to contrast Japanese and German articles reporting the same accident or incident. However, such articles reported in geographically distant societies are often based on information distributed by international news agencies, as direct reporting is difficult. This limits the ability to draw out individual features of each language being contrasted. Therefore, as a next-best approach, newspaper articles on similar incidents/accidents that occurred in both societies are compared. In general, newspaper articles are supposed to describe facts according to a 5W1H or 6W-Fragen (when, where, who, why, how, what) framework (Ito, 1987; Lüger, 1995; La Roche, 2003). This framework can be set up as a common framework for comparison. Therefore, traffic accident articles with corresponding content are selected from Japanese and German regional newspapers for comparison (Nishijima, 2017). Newspaper reports on traffic accidents can be compared due to the functional correspondence between the two languages. Therefore, as a case study, two traffic accident articles each containing directional expressions were selected from recent Japanese and German local newspapers, respectively. The directional expressions were analyzed according to Levinson’s frame of reference.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following are quotes in full from two articles on road accidents in Japan and Germany. Each sentence is accompanied by an English translation. Directional expressions are underlined and highlighted. First, the full text of the articles on road accidents is quoted, then the focus is on the directional expressions, and their characteristics are discussed.

4.1. Japanese Newspaper Articles

4.1.1. Japanese Newspaper Article 1: *Chūnichi Shimbun*

Chūnichi Shimbun [*Chūnichi* Newspaper] on 29. 04. 2021

[*Ishikawa*] *shō3 danji hanerare shibō* [third-grade boy hit by a car and killed] *Kanazawa Tagami Hon-machi Unten-no onna-o taiho* [driving woman, arrested]

28nichi gogo 3ji35fun goro Kanazawa-shi Tagami Hon-machi 4-no kendōkōsaten-de ōdanhodō-o watatteita Tagami Shōgakkō 3nen-no Nishino Kōsei-kun (8tsu)=dōshi Asagiridai 1=ga usetsushitekita jōyōsha-ni hanerareta [At around

3:35 pm on 28 April, Nishino Kōsei (8), a third-grader at Tagami Primary School was crossing a pedestrian crossing at a prefectural road intersection in Tagami Hon-machi 4, Kanazawa, when he was hit by a passenger car turning right]. *Nishino-kun-wa atama-o tsuyoku uchi yaku Ijikango-ni hansōsaki-no byōin-de shibō-ga kakunin-sareta* [Nishino hit his head hard and was pronounced dead about an hour later at the hospital where he was taken.].

Kanazawa Naka Sho-wa dōjitsu jōyōsha-o unten-shiteita dōshi Noda 2 mushoku Koike Kaori yōgisha (31)-o Jidōsha Unten Shobatsu-hō Ihan (kashitsu shōgai)-no utagai-de genkōhan taiho [Kanazawa Naka Police arrested Kaori Koike, 31, unemployed, 2 Noda, Kanazawa, who was driving a passenger car on the same day, on suspicion of violating the Automobile Driving Punishment Law (negligent infliction of injury)]. *yōgi-o kashitsu chishi-ni kirikaete sōsa-shiteiru* [The investigation has been switched to suspicion of negligent manslaughter].

Sho-niyoru-to yōgi-o mitometeiru-toiu [According to the police, she has admitted to the charge]. *Genba-wa Tagamishō-kara minami-ni 700meeturu hodo-no Tagami Hon-machi Kita kōsaten-de shingō-no-arū jūjiro* [The scene is a traffic light crossroad at the Tagami Hon-machi North intersection, 700 meters south of Tagami Elementary School]. *Koike yōgisha-wa usetsu-suru-sai aruitemataru Nishino-kun-ni kizukazu makikomu-katachi-de hanetato mirareru* [The suspect, Koike, is believed to have failed to notice Nishino-kun walking across the road when turning right, and hit him, causing him to roll under the vehicle].

Expressions relating to directional instructions are extracted and discussed below.

Data 6

“usetsu-shitekita jōyōsha-ni hanerareta” [he was hit by a passenger car turning right].

In Data 6 It was a minicar that took the action of “turning right.” The speaker of this sentence shifts the viewpoint to the minicar in question and forms a sentence from it. In this sense, the frame of reference of the sentence is “relative” because the choice of perspective is made by the speaker.

Data 7

“Koike yōgisha-wa usetsu-suru-sai aruitemataru Nishino-kun-ni kizukazu makikomu-katachi-de hanetato mirareru” [The suspect, Koike, is believed to have failed to notice Nishino-kun walking across the road when turning right, and hit him, causing him to roll under the vehicle]

It was the driver of the minicar who took the action of turning right in Data 7. It can be seen that the speaker of this sentence shifts the point of view to this car and localizes the sentence from there. Therefore, it can be said that this sentence is also orientated in a “relative” framework.

Indeed, when localizing moving objects, the Japanese language uses a “relative” framework. However, when the object is not moving, it seems to take an “absolute” framework. Let us look at the following Data 8.

Data 8

“Genba-wa Tagamishō-kara minami-ni 700meeturu hodo-no Tagami Hon-machi Kita kōsaten-de shingō-no-arū jūjiro” [The scene is a traffic light crossroad at the Tagami Hon-machi North intersection, 700 meters south of Tagami Elementary School]

In Data 8, the sentence localizes the accident site concerning the primary school, using the objective directional expression *minami-ni* [south]. In this sense, the sentence is based on the “absolute” frame of reference.

4.1.2. Japanese Newspaper Article 2: Yomiuri Shimbun

Yomiuri Shimbun [Yomiuri Newspaper] on 22. 07. 2023

Jitensha 6 chūgakusei hanerare kega [6 Junior high school students on bicycles hit by a car and injured]

2Inichi gogo 4ji15fun koro, Takamatsu-shi Kagawa-machi Asano-no kendōkōsaten fukin-de, jitensha-ni notta chūgakusei 6nin-ga keijōyōsha-ni hanerareta [6 junior high school students on bicycles were hit by a minicar near a prefectural road intersection in Asano, Kagawa, Takamatsu, at around 4:15 pm on 21 July]. *Takamatsu-Minami-Sho-niyoruto, 2nen-no danshi seito(13)-ga atama-o utte jūshō* [According to Takamatsu South Police, a second-year boy (13) was seriously injured when he hit his head]. *Hokani 1,2nen-no danshi seito 5nin(12-13sai)-ga keishō-no mikomi-toiu* [Five other boys in the first and second years (aged 12-13) are expected to suffer minor injuries].

Dōsho-wa, keijōyōsha-o unten-shiteita dōshi Shioe-machi-no mushoku-no onna(71)-o Jidōsha Unten Shishōkōi Shobatsu-hō Ihan (kashitsu unten chishō) yōgi-de genkōhan taiho-shita [The police arrested an unemployed woman (71)

from the town of Shioe in the same city, who was driving a minicar, in the act of violating the Automobile Driving Death or Injury Punishment Act (negligent driving manslaughter).].

Happyō-niyoruto, 6nin-wa kōsaten-o usetsu-shi, chokushin-shitekita keijōyōsha-ni butsukatta [According to the announcement, the six were hit by a minicar turning right at the intersection and proceeding straight ahead]. *Onaji gakkō-de, bukatsu nado-o oete kitaku-suru tochūdatta-toiu* [They were on their way home after club activities and other activities at the same school].

As above, expressions relating to directional instructions are extracted and discussed in Data 9.

Data 9

“6nin-wa kōsaten-o usetsu-shi, chokushin-shitekita keijōyōsha-ni butsukatta” [the six were hit by a minicar turning right at the intersection and proceeding straight ahead].

The representation of turning right at the intersection and going straight ahead focuses on the minicar and is seen from that car’s point of view. The speaker of this sentence shifts the expressive perspective to the minicar and describes it in the direction from which it is seen. The expressive perspective depends on the speaker’s choice. In this sense, the frame of reference is considered “relative”.

4.2. German Newspaper Articles

4.2.1. German Newspaper Article 1: Mittelbayerische Zeitung

Mittelbayerische Zeitung [Mittelbaeyrische Newspaper] on 25. 04. 2021

34-Jähriger bei Verkehrsunfall verletzt [34-year-old man injured in traffic accident]

Der Mann wollte mit seinem Pkw bei Traitsching in die Bundesstraße einbiegen [The man wanted to turn onto the national road with his car near Traitsching].

Er übersah ein anderes Fahrzeug [He overlooked another vehicle].

25. April 2021 14:01 Uhr

TRAITSCHING. An der Einmündung Trefling wollte ein 35-Jähriger Fahrer eines Pkw am Samstagnachmittag in die Bundesstraße einbiegen [At the Trefling junction, a 35-year-old driver of a car wanted to turn onto the main road on Saturday afternoon]. *Er übersah einen 34-Jährigen, der mit seinem Pkw die Bundesstraße in Richtung Straubing befuh* [He overlooked a 34-year-old man who was driving his car on the main road in the direction of Straubing]. *Im Kreuzungsbereich kam es zum Zusammenstoß* [A collision occurred at the intersection]. *Dabei wurde der 34-Jährige leicht verletzt* [The 34-year-old was slightly injured].

Feuerwehren aus Traitsching im Einsatz [Fire brigades from Traitsching in action]

An den beteiligten Fahrzeugen entstand Sachschaden in Höhe von 12000 € [Property damage amounting to €12000 was caused to the vehicles involved]. *An der Unfallstell kam es zur kurzzeitigen Behinderung des fließenden Verkehrs durch die Unfallaufnahme und die Bergungsmaßnahmen* [At the scene of the accident, there was a temporary obstruction of the flowing traffic due to the accident investigation and the recovery measures]. *Die Sicherung der Unfallstelle wurde durch die Feuerwehren aus dem Gemeindebereich Traitsching übernommen* [The fire brigades from the Traitsching district took over the securing of the accident site].

As above, expressions relating to directional instructions are extracted and discussed in Data 10.

Data 10

“Er übersah einen 34-Jährigen, der mit seinem Pkw die Bundesstraße in Richtung Straubing befuh” [He overlooked a 34-year-old man who was driving his car on the main road in the direction of Straubing]

“Straubing” in the phrase *die Bundesstraße in Richtung Straubing befuh* is a place name. Since place names can objectively identify places, expressions containing them can be regarded as objective expressions, i.e., “absolute” frame of reference.

4.2.2. German Newspaper Article 2: *Westdeutsche Zeitung*

Westdeutsche Zeitung [Westdeutsche Newspaper] on 25. 04. 2021

Fußgängerin bei Verkehrsunfall in Krefeld leicht verletzt [Female pedestrian slightly injured in traffic accident in Krefeld].

Krefeld. Am Bockumer Platz ist eine Frau von einem Autofahrer angefahren worden [A woman was hit by a car driver at Bockumer Platz]. *Sie hat leichte Verletzungen davon getragen* [She sustained minor injuries].

Am Freitag ist eine Fußgängerin am Bockumer Platz von einem Autofahrer angefahren und leicht verletzt worden [On Friday, a female pedestrian was hit and slightly injured by a car driver at Bockumer Platz]. *Das hat die Polizei am Sonntag mitgeteilt* [This is what the police announced on Sunday].

Nach Polizeiangaben beobachtete gegen 13:45 Uhr ein Zeuge, wie eine 29-jährige Krefelderin die Uerdinger Straße am Bockmer Platz in nördliche Richtung überquerte [According to police, at around 1.45 p.m. a witness observed a 29-year-old woman from Krefeld crossing Uerdinger Straße at Bockmer Platz in a northerly direction]. *Sie wurde dort von einem Autofahrer, der die Uedinger Straße in Richtung Innenstadt befuhr, beim Abbiegen erfasst* [She was hit there by a car driver who was driving on Uedinger Straße in the direction of the city center when turning off]. *Der 81-jährige Krefelder Autofahrer kümmerte sich sofort um die leicht verletzte Fußgängerin, die eine ärztliche Behandlung ablehnte* [The 81-year-old driver from Krefeld immediately attended to the slightly injured female pedestrian, who refused medical treatment].

As above, expressions relating to directional instructions are extracted and discussed below.

Data 11

“die Uerdinger Straße am Bockmer Platz in nördliche Richtung überquerte” [crossing Uerdinger Straße at Bockmer Platz in a northerly direction]

The sentence in Data 11 uses the expression in *nördliche Richtung überquerte* [crossing in a northerly direction], indicating that it is localized by an objective direction.

Data 12

“die Uedinger Straße in Richtung Innenstadt befuhr” [on Uedinger Street in the direction of the city center]

In Data 12, it is said to be going down a certain street into the city, which indicates that it is going toward a specific part of the street, so it is clear that an “absolute” framework is used.

Thus, it can be said that German-language newspapers use an “absolute” framework when indicating direction.

As discussed above, Japanese speakers express direction subjectively by selecting their expressive perspectives, while German speakers use direction and place names to localize objectively. These are clear examples of expressions that correspond respectively to subjective and objective construal in cognitive linguistics and confirm that Japanese direction instructions are expressed subjectively.

However, in Japanese, a “relative” framework was used for orientation designations for dynamic objects, while an “absolute” framework was used for static locations, as in German. It is unclear whether using “relative” or “absolute” frameworks depends on dynamic or static objects. As this study was a case study analysis, there are natural limitations, and the trends need to be verified through quantitative analysis.

5. CONCLUSION

The results show that in Japanese, the speaker shifts the point of view to the party concerned, as in “a car turning right hit a boy” or “I turned right and hit a car going straight,” and from there expresses the direction as left, right, or straight, whereas in German, “I missed a car going toward Straubing” or “I missed a car going north at a certain intersection.” It was found that objective directions and certain places are used for localization, such as crossing a certain intersection in a north direction or proceeding down a certain street into the city.

The present analysis is limited to directional expressions in traffic accident articles. Furthermore, it is only an analysis of two cases each from Japan and Germany. Future analysis could employ a larger amount of data and attempt a quantitative analysis. It is also unclear whether there are similar trends in directional expressions in newspaper articles of other genres. Future studies could further examine whether this difference is valid in other newspaper articles.

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