

How Do People Understand Linguistic Empathy? The Case of Japanese Giving Verbs

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This study aims to reveal how people understand *linguistic empathy* (i.e., empathy encoded in language) using two of the Japanese giving verbs, *age-ru* (which I use instead of *ya-ru*) and *kure-ru*. Kuno (1987) describes the difference between *ya-ru* and *kure-ru* in terms of *empathy*, the degree to which a speaker takes the perspective of a participant in a sentence: these verbs differ in that speakers adopt the subject's (giver's) perspective when using *ya-ru* while the dative object's (recipient's) perspective when using *kure-ru*. However, little is known regarding how people understand linguistic empathy. This study hypothesizes that people actually adopt the perspective of a participant in a sentence when they understand it, based on the *situation model*, where people are supposed to understand language by simulating its content in their mind (Zwaan 2004).

To test this simulation view, an experiment was conducted using a sentence-image matching task in which participants were asked to see pictures after reading sentences and decide as fast and accurately as possible if the pictured events matched the described events. All the sentences contained either *age-ru* or *kure-ru*, and all the pictures were drawn from the perspectives of either subjects or dative objects.

The prediction was that participants would be faster at responding to the pictures drawn from the subject's perspective and dative object's perspective when reading *age-ru* and *kure-ru* sentences, respectively. However, the results were contrary to this prediction: the participants were faster at responding to the pictures drawn from the dative object's perspective when reading *age-ru* sentences, and the subject's perspective when reading *kure-ru* sentences.

These results can be explained by the concept of *salience* in Cognitive Grammar, which prescribes that participants are more salient when they receive empathy (Langacker 1991). Therefore, subjects in *age-ru* sentences and dative objects in *kure-ru* sentences are more salient than those in *kure-ru* sentences and *age-ru* sentences, respectively. In the pictures from the subject's perspective, dative objects are drawn more extensively and thus visually more salient than subjects. Similarly, in the pictures from the dative object's perspective, subjects are visually more salient. Therefore, when the salient participant in a sentence was also the salient in the picture, the participants were faster to verify the picture. This is why the results were contrary to the prediction. Consequently, people understand empathy by conferring salience on the participant with whom the speaker empathizes.

References

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