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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: A Contrastive Analysis of Sign Expressions in Public Spaces

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Objectives

(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;

(3) To show, from the data on the alternative method, whether and to what extent differences in perspective can be observed in corresponding linguistic expressions between Japanese and German.

Plan for the Presentation

1. Background and Problems

2. Functional Equivalent Expressions

3. Research Question and Method

4. Results and Discussion

5. Concluding Remarks

Background

Every language has its preferred styles of expressions, which are related to perspectives from which linguistic expressions are formulated.

Many contrastive studies have investigated such perspectives. Among them, translation-based comparison has been often made, for example, Ikegami (2000), Nakamura (2004), Narita (2009), Nomura (2010).

These studies revealed that Japanese differs from English or German with respect to the perspectives from which sentences are formulated.

Different Perspectives: An Example

For example, Ikegami (2000) :

(1) 国境の長いトンネルを抜けると雪国であった。

Kokkyo no nagai tonneru o nukeru to

Boundary PartGen long tunnel PartAcc go.through when

yukiguni de atta.

snow.country CopPast

(2) “when going through the boundary long tunnel, the snow country was”

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

Problems

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

However, translations are often influenced by

a translator's individual dispositions or

the structural peculiarities of the source language.

Therefore, it can be pointed out that the use of translation for a comparison of linguistic expression patterns used in different languages has methodological problems with respect to comparability and objectivity.

More detailed discussion, cf. Nishijima (2013).

Functionally Equivalent Expressions

To compare corresponding expressions between two languages more objectively, one should analyze functionally equivalent expressions that are used in corresponding situations between respective societies where both languages are spoken, such as expressions commonly found on signs in public spaces like in subway stations.

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

a) descriptions of traffic signs, officially formulated;

b) sign expressions, freely formulated.

Expressions on signs in public space

a) descriptions of traffic signs, officially or legally formulated

“shiteihoukougai shinkou kinshi”
[prescribed.direction except go prohibition]

“vorgeschriebene Fahrtrichtung”
[prescribePP go.direction]

cf. Nishijima (2014)

b) sign expressions, freely formulated

English: “Watch your step.”
German: “Vorsicht! Stufe.”
[caution step]
Japanese: “ashimoto chuui .”
[foot.under caution]

Research Question

In general, functionally corresponding sign expressions in two languages are semantically equivalent.

Question:

Are differences in the perspectives observed in such expressions between Japanese and German, as pointed out in previous studies on comparing sentences in two languages with the help of translation?

If the question is affirmatively answered, then the claim of the differences in perspective can be widely confirmed with a certain percentage. The research described below is aimed at answering this question.

Methods

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

Field work conducted in Japan and Germany

from January 2011 to April 2013:

208 Japanese and 198 German sign expressions

A comparison of these Japanese and German sign expressions revealed 35 corresponding pairs.

This presentation will analyze them with respect to the perspectives from which linguistic expressions are formulated.

Results

Differences in perspectives were indeed observed in the corresponding sign expressions in the two languages.

But only in 8 of the 35 corresponding sign expressions (22.9%).

This presentation shows only one of the eight cases:

tsugi tomarimasu and *Wagen hält*

Two types of Perspectives

The first perspective is from within the situation where the expressions are observed, and it is found in the Japanese sign expression. These expressions depict a situation through the eyes of the readers of the expressions involved in the situations.

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 the objects that are focused on. They are described from the perspective outside the situation where the readers are involved.

tsugi tomarimasu / Wagen hält

When you get in a bus, you often see sentence (1) in Japan and sentence (2) in Germany, that are equivalent with the expression *STOP REQUESTED* in the US.

(1) *tsugi tomarimasu*.

(2) *Wagen hält*.

tsugi tomarimasu

tsugi tomarimasu.

next stop.POL.PRES

“(I/We) stop next”

The Japanese expression has no subject on the surface level and does not state who stops. But it conveys that *I* and *we* or *the bus*, in which we are getting on, 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, that is, experientially from the eyes of the invisible subject.

Wagen hält.

Wagen hält.

vehicle stop-PRES

“vehicle stops”

The sentence shows: The bus is observed and described from a perspective outside the situation where the passengers are in, because the bus is mentioned in the third person in the expression, as seen in the English translation of a Japanese literary text in the beginning.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this presentation is:

to answer the question of whether and to what extent differences in language perspective can be also observed in pairs of functionally equivalent sign expressions in Japanese and German.

→ Two types of perspectives also emerge in the comparison of sign expressions written in Japanese and German.

→ The percentage of difference is only about 23%.

Two types of perspectives

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 readers of the expressions involved in the situations. Therefore, the bus in which the readers are located is not mentioned objectively.

The second type of perspective is external to the situation, and it is found in the German descriptions. These descriptions concretely and objectively mention e.g. *Wagen* (bus) in which the readers are getting in. They are described from the perspective outside the situation where the readers are involved.

Percentage of Preference

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

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

It is necessary to require further research in various types of texts to examine whether such percentage can confirm the preference of perspective of each language.

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