

The Structure of Meaning in English and Japanese : Pedagogical implications of some preliminary investigations

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This article begins from the dual premise that culture is a universal and essential human attribute, but that each separate culture and language is a particular manifestation thereof. It describes the semantic range of the polysemous English lexeme *break* and contrasts it with that of its Japanese correlates. Each of these correlates expresses but a portion of the semantic range of *break* ; none can be considered 'equivalents' in any overall sense. It seeks to discover the essence of the semantic structure of *break*, and offer a comprehensive definition that would include all of its meanings. The core meaning of *break* was found to be the foundation upon which virtually all of its extended, figurative uses are based. The implications of the disparity in semantic structure between Japanese and English for learning and teaching English are discussed, as well as the suitability of translation as a language learning and teaching method.

Key words : Language and culture ; particular semantic structure of a language ; lack of equivalents between languages ; role of translation in language teaching

Introduction

This article will treat language as a structured, fully integrated and inseparable element of culture as a whole. Following Geertz (1973) I will

define cultures as “systems of significant symbols” which serve to train and restrain human behavior along certain lines and to organize our experience into comprehensible categories. His dual concepts of the development of culture as the essential humanizing factor in our evolutionary transformation from our primate ancestors and that of *a* culture as the distinctive pattern of significant symbols that make each group of human beings who adhere to them distinct and set them apart from people belonging to other cultural groups form the theoretical basis of this article. In his view, we human beings are a species of “...incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture—and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it: Dobuan and Javanese, Hopi and Italian, upper-class and lower-class, academic and commercial.”¹ He might just as well have said American and Japanese, Ainu and Navaho, rich and poor, military and diplomatic. For in our expanded contemporary notion of culture, almost any organized group of human beings having its own distinct values and norms of conduct, its own language and communication style may constitute a culture. Hence, one may have to deal with cultural differences merely in moving from one company, organization, profession, or even family, to another, to say nothing of those encountered when crossing national or ethnic boundaries. Beside this ‘horizontal’ dimension, there is also a ‘vertical’ dimension of cultural differentiation, for example, from the physical and chemical sciences up to the arts and humanities. When such boundaries are crossed, the particular ways of dividing up and symbolizing the world change, and new ways of seeing, and representing are necessarily encountered. (McOmie, 1990).

The emphasis that Geertz placed on the particularity of culture is crucial to an understanding of the main topic of this brief article: the particularity of language, as a central, integrated part of culture. Although the thousands of human languages that exist in the world all have the common function of symbolically representing the external world of things and events as well as the inner world of thoughts and

feelings, each of them does so in its own unique way, in accord with its own particular physical and cultural environment. Lyons (1995) stated this fact succinctly: "Every language divides up the world, or reality in its own way."²

This uniqueness holds for languages closely related to each other, like English and Dutch, as well as for languages totally unrelated to each other like English and Japanese. In the latter case, however, the degree of difference and relative distinctiveness are likely to be greater, as will be described below in the case of the range of meaning of certain words in English and Japanese.

Nevertheless, most people who undertake the study of a language other than their native tongue, tend not to be consciously aware of the disparity in semantic structure (pattern of meaning) between languages in general, as well as not knowing the specific contrasts between their native tongue and the target language. As Suzuki Takao (1978) has noted "...when we study a foreign language, we often try to understand it first of all by unconsciously projecting upon it the structure of our own language... It is only natural that many discrepancies should appear."³

In other words, each culture has an overall structure in which each individual cultural and linguistic symbol stands in close opposition to the symbolic items surrounding it, and its meaning cannot be fully and correctly understood without knowledge of what those other items are. Language, as a central component of culture, has an analogous and related structure. The range of meaning of words in any particular language is shaped and constrained by the range of meaning and usage of the related words that surround it; one word cannot be used with a meaning assigned to another word, unless a process of linguistic change has occurred that will allow it to do so. Until then, we are obligated to refrain from arbitrarily assigning meanings to words according to our personal whim. Otherwise, communication between people would become very difficult and unreliable, if not impossible.

In his book Suzuki presented a table that illustrated the differences

in semantic range among languages even for such basic words as *water*. He compared the scientific term H_2O with the ordinary words used to designate this common substance in Malay, English and Japanese. I have extended his table below to include Russian (Table 1).

Table 1 Words for water in four languages

	H_2O		
Malay	ayër		
English	ice	water	
Japanese	氷 (kōri)	水 (mizu)	湯 (yu)
Russian	лѣд (lyod)	вода (vodā)	кипяток (kipyatōk)

From Table 1 above, one can see that Russian also has a separate word for ‘hot water,’ which is analagous to the Japanese term in the sense of boiling water. or boiled water kept hot to use in making tea, etc. Suzuki considered these different words used to designate H_2O in different languages to be “...a good illustration of how differently and arbitrarily each language slices the objective world.” One certainly cannot deny the differences, yet I would argue that they are not as ‘arbitrary’ as they might first appear. When one takes into account the different physical and cultural environments in which these languages developed and are spoken, then the differences among them seem more natural than arbitrary. Malay is spoken in a hot tropical environment where water does not naturally freeze. Hence, there is no need for a word to designate something that does not naturally exist. In such a hot environment, the drinking of tea and other hot beverages is also probably not as common. On the other hand, English, Japanese and Russian are all spoken in cold environments where water freezes in the wintertime, creating the need for a word to describe it. In Japan there are many natural hot springs, and long traditions of bathing and tea-drinking which together suggest the utility, if not necessity, of having a separate word for hot water. In Russia there are few natural hot

springs, but there is also a strong tradition of tea-drinking, especially during the long cold winters, with the water kept hot (*kipyatōk*) in a *samovar*, a kind of basic apparatus for boiling water similar to what is known as a *yuwakashiki* (湯沸かし器) in Japan. Nevertheless, the fact that there still exist more than 6,000 languages in the world, many of which share very similar environments, yet each dividing up and symbolizing the world in its own unique way, certainly supports the presence of an arbitrariness in language as well.

These few examples of semantic differences among languages even for the most basic everyday words are but the tip of the proverbial iceberg. All human languages reflect and symbolize in some measure the particular physical and cultural environment in which they evolved. Thus, it is only natural that differences in meaning should arise therefrom.

Meaning and Use: the case of *break* vs. *kowasu*

In this section I will describe and analyze the structure of meaning and the range of usage of the English word *break* (OE *brecan*) compared to two other Germanic (Dutch, German) languages, and one Slavic language (Russian) and one non-Indo-European language (Japanese). Lyons (1995) listed six different formal definitions of meaning conceived of by semanticists. In this article I will make use of two of them only, that of ideational, conceptual association, and that of meaning as determined by, if not identical with, its use in the language. Using this dual conception of meaning, I will build upon and extend the semantic structural description of the English verb *break* compared to the semantic structure of the corresponding Japanese verbs as in Suzuki (1978).

By comparing the instances of usage of *break* in English with the corresponding Japanese verbs, Suzuki was able to provide a structural description of the concrete meaning of the verb *break* as follows: "to separate something into two or more parts by applying an external force other than an edged tool to it." He claimed that if one understood the meaning of *break* in this way, "...one will be able to determine

confidently whether or not the verb could properly be used.”

He limited his description to the concrete use of the verb, assuming that “the figurative use of break is based on roughly the same considerations.” One aim of this article will be to determine whether this assumption is justified, that is, whether a structural description of *break* that links its core, concrete meaning to all its figurative uses, and relates the latter to each other, may be found. Another goal is to apply this description to language teaching, in a way that would enable students to understand and also to use the figurative meanings of *break* reliably.

My analysis will consider the ways in which the concrete meaning of *break* have been extended into abstract realms through the use of metonyms and metaphors. As has been asserted by Taylor (2003), in the analysis of the multiple meanings of a particular word, it is often difficult to draw a clear line between polysemy and homonymy. He stated that homonymy may occur when the related meanings drift so far apart that they no longer seem linked semantically to each other. I will try to account for its full usage range with a unitary schematic meaning, and thereby demonstrate that in *break* we are dealing with a clear-cut case of polysemy. I will thus attempt to define a core meaning for *break* that will be sufficiently general to encompass all of its extending meanings, but still specific enough to distinguish it from conceptually related words such as *cut*, *destroy*, *fold*, *shatter*, *smash*, *snap*, *split* and *tear*.

However, even if such a definition did not include all its meanings, *break* might still qualify as a polysemous lexeme, since it would otherwise be too restrictive. Similar analyses of the polysemous nature of English words have been conducted by Allerton (1979) and Fillmore (1982). These studies have shown that chains of meaning emerge in the absence of a clear-cut, common semantic denominator. These meaning chains are composed of different links that have in common certain shared attributes. Any link in the chain can be the source for any number of extensions of meaning, which may create an “immense

structural complexity.”⁴

Taylor (2003) viewed most lexical items as more or less polysemous and consisting of discrete but related meanings that cluster in categories of family resemblance. Two of the most important kinds of links between these meanings are those of metonymy and metaphor. The former is usually built upon the contiguity of and association between discrete lexical items which result in transferred reference. Taylor defines it as “transfers between closely associated elements of a conceptual frame.”

The widespread use of metaphor as a fertile means of extending meaning was documented by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). They showed how an overarching metaphor such as “argument is war” gives rise to the many expressions in English which describe an argument or debate in military terms, such as “to lose an argument,” to “defend your point of view,” or “to go on the offensive.” They introduced various metaphorical image schemas such as the idea of life equalling a sort of journey, or applying spatial ideas to abstract relations, or the metaphor of a married couple being a whole, who if divorced are “split up” or “broken up” into their individual parts. In general, employing a metaphor involves the mapping of one domain of meaning, usually more concrete, onto another semantic domain, usually more abstract. Moreover, such conceptual metaphors, such as “time is space”, or “time is money,” are employed by different languages, to varying degrees of difference and similarity, in accord with their physical and cultural environments and historical experience.⁵

In line with tradition and present research trends, (eg Ruhl 1989) I will search for a single, unitary schematic meaning for the English word *break*, and conduct a comparative description and analysis of its range of meaning with that of its conceptual correlates in Japanese.

This attempt will run counter to the “practical semantics” of lexicographers who do not refrain from listing large numbers of different senses of individual lexical items. Moreover, they generally make no attempt to offer unifying definitions, even for very common words as

we shall see below.⁶ My own survey of meanings and uses for *break*, as both noun and verb, as listed in several recent monolingual English-English and bilingual English-Japanese dictionaries has confirmed this trend.

The Oxford English Dictionary, considered the most authoritative by British speakers of English at least, warns the user that many of the uses of *break* are "...so contextual that, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to find places for them in a general scheme of its signification..." Nevertheless, undaunted by this note of caution, I will attempt to present below a concise outline of all the major, as well as some minor, meanings and uses of *break*, which I have taken from several different dictionaries and reworded and reorganized.

The Many Meanings and Uses of *Break*

As a verb :

1. Separate a hard physical object into distinct parts by sudden application of force, except by a sharp instrument, or under a strain, or from being dropped
2. Fracture or dislocate a bone in part of the body (arm, leg, neck, back, etc.)
3. Make something unusable, or damage its structural or functional integrity
4. Insert an interval between periods of work or study, or other activity, especially if it is boring or monotonous (take a coffee/tea break, vacation/holiday, etc.) ; rest
5. Interrupt the continuity of an action or state (sleep, nap, fast, silence, stillness, journey, conversation, train of thought, concentration, spell, etc.) ; stop for a while ; discontinue, or force to give up (addiction, habit, etc.)
6. Interrupt the uniformity of any quality (e.g. change in one's voice from overflowing emotion, or from a boy's reaching puberty)
7. Change suddenly, especially after a long period (weather or fever)
8. Change a larger denomination banknote for smaller ones or for

coins

9. Begin to do something, e.g., shine (sun at dawn); begin violently (a storm)
10. Cut short, suddenly end a bad situation (siege, spell, deadlock)
11. Reveal or be revealed; cause to become known (news, secret, story)
12. Ruin financially, make bankrupt (individual, company, organization)
13. Weaken the effect of (a blow, a fall), or become weakened by; impair or damage in health or strength
14. Crush in spirit destroy power or resolve of, (individual, group, army), overcome resistance of (rebellion), or defeat or frustrate the object of (a strike)
15. Beat a previous record of achievement (sports, sales)
16. Quarrel, cease association with (another person, etc.) (break with)
17. Train to obedience or discipline, tame; subject or habituate to (new recruit, animal)
18. Violate; fail to obey or keep a law, rule, requirement, contract, promise, one's word or faith, etc.
19. Make a way or path by separating obstacles
20. Solve or decipher a coded message
21. Gain entry into a house or other enclosed place by forcibly overcoming barriers
22. Open an object by force (e.g. a safe, bottle, can, etc.) (break open)
23. Burst or rupture a surface (skin); make a hole or otherwise damage the integrity of (seal, cover);
24. Create a rupture in the enemy's (or one's own) ranks
25. Escape or emerge from an enclosed place (jail, prison, bounds, cover, etc.)
26. Free oneself from a physical bond or restraint by loosing bonds or overcoming psychological barriers
27. Shatter against a rock or other barrier and lose its energy (a wave); after reaching a crest, turn downward, and dissolve into

foam (a wave)

28. Divide a set into parts (e.g. by selling to different buyers)
29. Sever a connection or circuit ; disconnect (electical circuit)
30. Move apart, and show a gap (clouds)
31. Come out or emerge from darkness ; rush out suddenly ; burst forth (e.g. the sun through the clouds)
32. Suddenly come to peoples' notice (e.g., break into print)

Some more specialized uses :

1. Military. Disperse in confusion ; make a rupture in ranks (troops)
2. Horseracing. Change gait of a horse (trotting or pacing)
3. Tennis. Win a game against an opponent's service
4. Boxing. Command two fighters to come out of a clinch (referee)
5. Military. Demote an officer
6. Stock exchange. Fall sharply (prices)
7. Cricket or baseball. Change abruptly the direction or trajectory of a ball after pitching or bouncing.
8. Billiards. Make the first stroke at the beginning of a game
9. Military. Unfurl (a flag, etc.)
10. Phonetics. Subject a vowel to fracture
11. Military. Fail to return to one's ship after absence on leave
12. Crime. Disprove (an alibi)

As a noun :

1. An instance or act of breaking
2. A broken place, gap, or opening : more general than breach
3. An interruption of continuity in anything concrete, or in a course of action or time, or in a discourse or in a composition, or in the rhythm of a verse.
4. A short interval between lessons, or interruption of or pause in work, usually in mid-morning and/or afternoon, such as a coffee break.
5. An opportunity ; a lucky chance ; an instance of bad fortune
6. The break of day : the dawn
7. A sudden dash, especially in order to escape from somewhere

8. Cricket. A change in direction of a bowled ball on bouncing
9. Billiards. A series of points scored during one turn ; the opening shot that disperses the balls.
10. Music, in jazz, etc. A short unaccompanied passage for a soloist, usually improvised.
11. A discontinuity in an electrical circuit

In the above lists I have tried to consolidate and group together semantically most of the major and minor uses of *break*, beginning with the basic, concrete meaning. Even so, some of the separate uses are obviously closely related to each other, such as No. 2, which is but a specific case (human body) of the general meaning defined in No. 1. The many figurative uses of *break*, beginning with No. 3, seem to be clearly derived from No. 1, and more or less related to each other conceptually, as specified below. On the whole, all the diverse senses seem sufficiently related to support the notion that *break* is a single polysemous verb and noun. It gives us sufficient grounds to formulate the following definitions :

1. Literal or concrete meaning of *break*
To separate a hard object (other than paper or cloth) into two or more parts by a sudden application of force by other than a sharp instrument.
2. Figurative or abstract meanings of *break*
To render something useless or damage its structural or functional integrity ; to suddenly change from one state, direction, opinion, or status to another ; to alter one's fidelity to a promise or tradition, or to a relationship with someone ; to end one's adherence to a contract or law ; to interrupt the continuity of some state or action ; to transform into smaller units or more basic elements ; to create an opening or gap in something, to weaken the force of something, or the power to resist something or someone ; to seriously damage one's health ; to rupture the surface of something ;

to fail to achieve something ; to end or begin some action or state ; to alter the tone or pitch of one's voice, either temporarily or permanently ; to experience a change in fortune, either for better or worse

Finally, I offer a definition of the core meaning of break, one broad enough to include most or all of its literal and figurative meanings, and further distilled from the above definitions into the following key expressions: *forcefully separate into parts, make something useless, or impair its utility, suddenly change, interrupt continuity, begin or end or violate some state, or action, size, location, tone, fortune, speed, direction, opinion or status, relationship, commitment, law or rule, tradition or expectation, come or bring to notice*

While this sort of maximally condensed, and refined semantic distillation may not cover all of the actual and potential uses of break, no such all-encompassing definition is likely to be found. Nevertheless, it goes well beyond any dictionary definition that I have so far encountered and also far surpasses the definition offered by Suzuki (1974), which did not include any of the extended, figurative meanings and uses of *break*. In contrast to most other dictionaries, The Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995) also attempts to distill out in clear fashion the core meanings of the various uses of *break* by highlighting separately the key concepts underlying each one. For the verb these are the notions of using force, dividing, interrupting, ending, disobeying, coming or bringing to notice, moving (waves) and changing (from one state to another.) As the reader may judge, these notions are very similar to my key ideas listed above, but they are fewer in number and are not organized into a single comprehensive definition.

Armed with this notion of its essential meaning, a Japanese or other foreign learner of English, would be much more likely to understand and to use *break* correctly in various contexts, and correspondingly less likely to make the sort of typical mistakes primarily caused by over-generalization from his native language.

Moreover, if the process of extension of meaning into figurative realms by metaphor and metonymy, a process that occurs in human language generally, was explained and demonstrated to the students, much of the otherwise potentially bewildering diversity in meaning of *break* would become logical and comprehensible.

In the case of *break* this extension of meaning into abstract senses seems to have occurred predominantly by a process of metaphor, and much less so by metonymy. Examples of both cases abound in Japanese and other languages, and if students are made aware of them, their ability to understand and even use them creatively in English or other languages would be likely to increase. Figure 1 below shows how these two processes of extending the basic meaning of a word have likely occurred in two instances in the case of *break*. In the first case, a machine being out of order is clearly associated with the separation of some of its key parts from each other. Waves breaking against the shore or rocks reminds one of objects being dropped against the floor or ground. In the second case, that of metaphor, if an eight-hour work day (9:00 to 5:00) is imagined as a long cylindrical object, for example, one can 'break' it in the middle and create an hour-long lunch interval, and chop each piece in half again and create a shorter mid-morning, and mid-afternoon coffee break. Similarly, if one imagines a

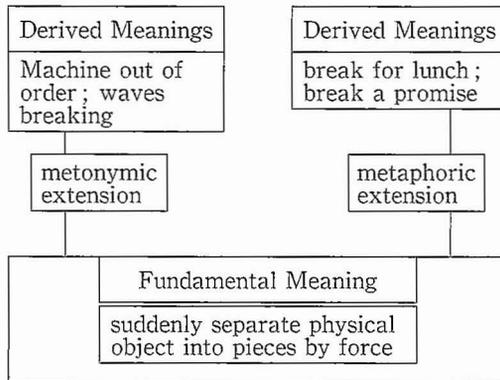


Figure 1 Concrete and derived meanings of *break*

promise to be a physical object of some sort, it becomes an easy matter (semantically, at least) to ‘break’ it and thereby ‘render it useless.’

Cognates and Correlates of *break* in Dutch, German and Russian

Now let us look at the corresponding verbs for *break* in two other Germanic languages, Dutch and German. In Dutch, one of the most closely related languages to English in grammar and vocabulary, the verb *breken* has a very similar phonological shape and basic structure of meaning. Besides the literal meaning of breaking a glass, or a bone, it also shares some of its figurative meanings, such as, the idea of breaking the law, or a record, or one’s promise, as well as the now almost archaic ‘breaking bread’ in the sense of having a meal. However, it does not normally use the noun form *een breuk* in the sense of ‘a coffee break’, except under the influence of English, preferring to use the word *pauze* as in *koffie pauze*, instead. The German verb *brechen* is also similar to the English verb *break* in form and structure, although somewhat less so than Dutch. It also prefers to use *Pause* in the meaning of a ‘rest’ rather than the noun form *Bruch*. It does not share the sense of a ‘lucky break’ but uses the word *Glueck* instead. It does use a variation of *Bruch* in the sense of daybreak, *Tages-Anbruch*. It also uses *Wellenbrecher* (‘wave breaker’) in the sense of the compound noun *breakwater*.

As for Russian, belonging to the Balto-Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family, and so more distantly related to English, the corresponding verb *lomátʹ* (ломать) lacks similarity in phonological form, but retains the fundamental meaning of “to separate something into two or more pieces by bending or hitting it forcefully” or “to separate the parts of something.” It also shares the extended meanings of damaging, or making something unusable, breaking old customs, or an enemy’s resistance, or abruptly changing one’s life or character. It may also be used in the sense of ‘breaking a fever’ However, in other abstract senses, such as, ‘to break the law,’ or ‘interrupt someone’s conversation,’ ‘to weaken,’ ‘to go broke’ (financially) other Russian

verbs are used. In addition, the verb phrase *lomat' golovu* ('break one's head') can have the idiomatic meaning of 'to rack one's brains' over some difficult problem or puzzle, which English *break* does not have.

Japanese-English bilingual dictionaries

Finally, turning to Japanese, a language totally unrelated to English, we discover an even greater disparity between the range of meaning and usage of *break*, and that of the many corresponding Japanese verbs, each of which overlaps only a narrow portion of it.

Suzuki (1973) observed that the larger bilingual dictionaries tended to have longer lists of 10-20 Japanese words which correspond to the meaning of *break* in particular contexts. He felt that students become confused by this piecemeal, fragmented approach to English meaning via Japanese.

In the introduction to the Random House Japanese-English, English-Japanese dictionary (1995) the author Seigo Nakao thanks his editors for their efforts to "...solve the numerous problems that I confronted owing to the drastic differences between Japanese and English." One important way in which these differences manifest themselves is in the radical discrepancies in ranges of meaning and usage between many English and Japanese words. This is clearly visible in the case of *break*, as well as for many other basic English words such as *eat*, *drink*, *wear*, *see*, *watch*, *look*, *hear*, *listen* and so on. Suzuki also discussed the meanings of *drink* and *wear*, versus their Japanese counterparts, but I will confine myself to a discussion of *break* in this article.

How well do bilingual dictionaries intended for serious Japanese students of English convey what Sapir (1921) referred to as "the genius of the language". Specifically, in the third edition of the Genius bilingual English-Japanese dictionary (2001), a short definition of the core meaning of *break* that in essence corresponds to my definition above is offered. Furthermore, it states that the meanings of *muri ni akeru* (無理に開ける) 'to force open,' *yaku ni tatanaku suru* (役に立たなくする)

‘to render useless’ are figuratively derived from the former, in the same way as the meaning of *koshō suru* (故障する) ‘to break down’ or ‘to develop trouble’ is figuratively (metonymically) derived from the intransitive form *kowareru*, (壊れる) as I have also argued in this article. This should have been a useful guide to serious Japanese students of English. However, in the fourth edition (2006), this definition has been removed. In its place the basic meaning (基本義) of *break* is shown to correspond to the meanings of the Japanese verbs *kowasu* (壊す) and *tatsu* (断つ). The former sense is then further parsed into *kowasu*, *waru* (割る) and *oru* (折る), and then even more narrowly into *kowareru*, *hakai* (破壊) *suru*, ‘destroy,’ *muri ni akeru*, and *yaku ni tatanaku suru*. The latter sense is further divided into *chudan suru* (中断する) ‘to interrupt’ and thence subdivided into *chudan suru*, and *yaburu* (破る) ‘to tear’ and *kyū ni arawareru* (急にあらわれる) ‘to suddenly appear.’ This new (old) approach to understanding the various meanings of *break* only through the meaning of the various and only partially corresponding Japanese verbs seems like a serious step backward rather than forward. It moves even farther away from the kind of ‘structural approach’ to understanding the core meaning of *break* as recommended by Suzuki. As such, it is likely to confuse even more Japanese learners who are striving to understand that meaning. It attempts to do the impossible: fully elucidate the unique meaning structure of one language (English) in terms of the structure of another wholly unrelated language (Japanese). Ultimately, the overall meaning pattern of *break* needs to be elucidated not in terms of the many (20 or more) Japanese words whose ranges of meaning only partially intersect with it, but in its close relationship to the other, conceptually-related English words such as *cut*, *destroy*, *rip*, *shatter*, *smash*, *snap*, *split* and *tear* which impinge upon and confine it, like the differently-shaped, interlocking pieces in a jigsaw picture puzzle.

As for the various Japanese translation ‘equivalents’ for English *break*, my preliminary survey of English-Japanese, Japanese-English bilingual dictionaries, combined with my own long experience as both

a learner of Japanese and teacher of English in Japan emboldens me, perhaps unwisely, to attempt to define some of the essential semantic contrasts which underlie many of the typical mistakes in lexemic selection (word choice) which I have repeatedly encountered.

The Japanese correlates of English *break*

Although *kowasu* is the one Japanese verb most frequently associated with the core, concrete meaning of *break*, it actually corresponds to it only in the figurative sense of *dame ni suru*, (ダメにする) or to 'make useless,' as listed in Nakao (1995) above. It lacks the definite sense of separation into parts that is essential to the core meaning of *break*. This lack is demonstrated by its application to a large object such as a car in a transitive sense, as in the sentence: *watashi no yujin wa kuruma wo kowashita* (私の友人は車を壊した)

Overgeneralizing from this usage in their native language, Japanese students may translate this sentence into Japanese as *My friend broke his car., which is impossible in English, unless one possesses super-human strength. The meaning of this sentence in English is better understood as: 'My friend wrecked (crashed) his car,' which conveys the idea of 'rendering useless' without any sense of actual separation into parts. Similarly, this definite absence of the meaning of 'separation into parts' for *kowasu*, can also be inferred from the sentence: *kare wa onaka wo kowashita* (かれはお腹を壊した) 'He got (has) an upset stomach (stomache).'

Again thinking that *kowasu* was 'equivalent' to *break* in all contexts, a Japanese student might make the typical error of translating that common phrase into English as *I broke my stomach, or *My stomach is broken. However, in the case of one's stomach, this use of *break* is impossible in English, because it would seem to clearly imply that it has broken into two or more pieces, which would be a much more serious condition than a mere upset stomach or tummyache. Yet we can say 'I broke my watch,' or 'My watch is broken,' in the concrete sense of 'separating into pieces' or in its derived meaning of 'making useless.'

This is possibly because as a watch is a complicated device containing many parts, not all of which are visible, we may reasonably assume that some of those unseen parts may be separated into pieces. From this assumption it follows that the watch has been rendered useless.

The verb *kiru* (切る) has a diversity of uses in Japanese, but corresponds to *break* only in the very narrow sense of breaking an electrical circuit. In its core meaning, it is basically unlike *break*, being associated with the use of a sharp instrument of some kind. Accordingly, in its other concrete meanings it corresponds to such English words as cut, slice, clip, chop, saw or shred. Interestingly, however, in at least one abstract sense, *dareka to te wo kiru* (だれかと手を切る), it is said to have the meaning of ‘to break off a relationship.’

The verb *kudaku* (砕く) has some meanings which *kowasu* lacks. In particular, it may mean to break something into pieces, such as ice, but can also mean to ‘smash or shatter into smithereens’ and even to pulverize or grind something into powder, which latter senses *break* lacks. In its intransitive form *kudakeru*, it shares the metonymic sense of waves breaking against the shore or into white foam.

The verb *kuzureru* (崩れる) corresponds to a few further meanings of *break*, such as troops breaking ranks and giving way in battle, or a change for the worse in the weather, or a sudden break (decline) in stock prices, or a break in the surface of the skin (blisters). As a transitive verb *kuzusu* corresponds more to the meanings of destroy, demolish, pull (tear) down (wall, house). It is only in the expression ‘Can you break a twenty?’, in the sense of receiving change back in smaller bills and coins for a \$20 bill that it shares one of the many figurative meanings of *break*.

The Japanese verb *oru* (折る) can stand for *break* in the sense of breaking an arm or leg, or the lead of a pencil, or a piece of chalk, but when the object is paper, it must mean fold, or turn down (pages in a book) and so on. In other contexts it might mean to damage (trees in the park). These examples tell us, as Suzuki has noted, that *oru* differs from the core meaning of *break* in that it does not necessarily require

that an object actually be separated into parts, only that it be divided into distinguishable sections by a fold or crease.

As for the Japanese verb *waru* (割る), it can like *kowasu* be used in the senses of accidentally breaking (or shattering) a dish, or window-pane, etc., intentionally breaking a biscuit or bar of chocolate into smaller pieces, or breaking open an egg or watermelon. In those senses it is closer to the core meaning of *break* than is *kowasu*, but still far from being a perfect fit. It may also mean to crack something (a nut, a mirror, etc.), or to split up wood for fuel. In addition, it has the important meanings of to divide (numbers, funds, accounts) and to mix or dilute alcoholic beverages with water, etc., which senses *break* completely lacks.

Finally, there is the verb *yaburu* (破る), which corresponds to some of the abstract meanings of *break*, as in to break a contract, a promise, the law or a record, etc. In other abstract senses, it would be better translated as to defeat or beat (enemy, rival team). In a concrete sense, its meaning seems closer to the English verb 'tear' (paper, cloth), as in the case of physically (and perhaps dramatically) tearing up a contract.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of Japanese verbs that correspond to the great variety of meanings of *break*. If one looks in a large English-Japanese dictionary, one many find listed as many as twenty or more Japanese words corresponding to its meaning in various contexts. However, these several examples should be more than enough to convince the reader that it is quite useless to even consider any Japanese verb as the 'equivalent' of *break* in any meaningful sense.

The above figures (Figures 2, 3) are schematic representations of the range of meaning and usage of *break* compared to several corresponding English and Japanese verbs. Figure 2 is meant to show schematically that *break* exists in close mutual opposition to its semantically related words in English. It occupies a unique range of meaning and usage, only partially overlapping with them. It is moreover constrained by them from encroaching further into their semantic territory. Figure 3 is meant to show that all of the corresponding verbs in Japanese also

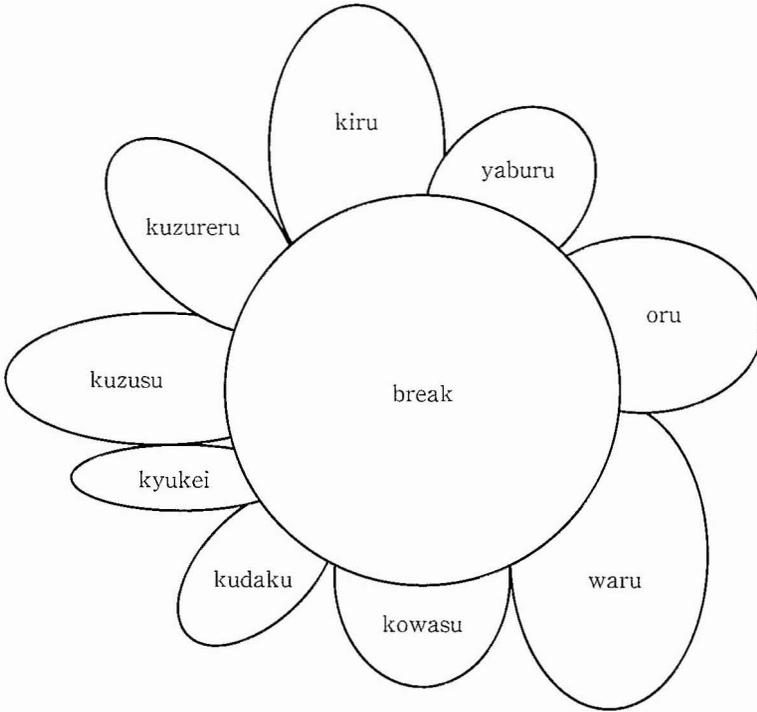


Figure 2 Break and its Japanese counterparts

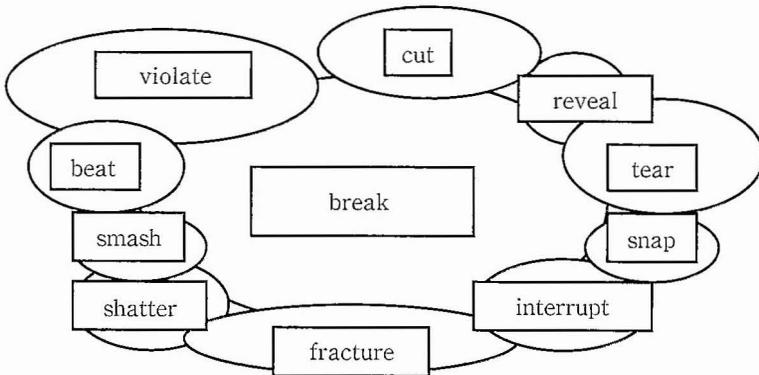


Figure 3 Break and its conceptually-related words in English

overlap only partially in meaning. It was inspired by a similar graph in Suzuki (p.16) but it includes more Japanese verbs, and differs in the important respect that *kowasu* does not lie fully within the range of meaning of *break*.

Implications for Learning and Teaching English

Now we turn from a description of the gap between what linguists know about the difference in structure and range of meaning of words in different languages to a discussion of how to close the gap between that knowledge and the dominant method of teaching foreign languages through emphasis on translation of 'equivalents.'

Suzuki claimed that: "For the most part, the traditional method of teaching foreign languages has not been concerned with a consideration of the structural framework of language. It has tended to point out so-called equivalents of individual items (i.e., 'This word should be translated this way in this particular context. '), even though these equivalents may be applicable in only a few instances. The most typical examples of this approach are, unfortunately, found in dictionaries."

I believe that the main reason for this emphasis on equivalents is an artifact of the dominant approach of teaching via translation. This is something like a thousand-year old tradition in Japan, ever since the first Japanese monks seriously began to study the Chinese classics. Needless to say, it is very difficult to break with such weighty traditions; they do not die out easily. Translation certainly has its place; it often plays a crucial role in enabling people from different cultures to both understand each other and appreciate each other's cultural heritage. However, in my opinion, its use as a learning or teaching tool in the process of acquiring a foreign language, especially at the beginning to intermediate levels, should be strictly limited to those instances where it can more efficiently convey the meaning of a word or phrase than could an explanation of it in English or Japanese. This especially applies to words and expressions that have only one meaning, or use, such as technical terms, which much more closely approximate a

semantic equivalency.

If one aims to acquire skill in actual use of a foreign language, as opposed to knowledge about it, it seems to me self-evident that the best way to learn a foreign language is on its own terms, directly through its own sound system, its own grammar, its own vocabulary and overall structure. If one really aims to use that language as a tool for communication with those who speak it, then one should be entering into and absorbing its special view of the world, and not imposing on it that of another language.

Suzuki rightly observed that it should not be expected, nor is it necessary, "to be proficient in a foreign language if one is not part of real life situations in which the language is used, especially if the teacher is not a native speaker of the language being taught." Indeed, I have myself long felt that it is unfair to criticize Japanese secondary education, in particular, for not producing fluent speakers of English, when it was not designed to do so. It is not unlike finding fault in a Cadillac because it cannot fly. That being said, I think the fact that Suzuki could make such an observation strongly suggests that it is for just this reason that Japanese English education in secondary schools, especially, has gone off so much in the direction of preparing students for college entrance examinations and so far away from the goal of training them to be fluent and confident speakers of the language.

Suzuki emphasized the importance of teaching students "...how each language slices the world differently, each at different angles and in different ways... Unfortunately, classroom teachers have neglected this aspect of language more than one might imagine."⁷ I also believe this to be of crucial importance. If implemented, such an approach would have profound implications for teaching language and culture. It would be a huge first step toward educating students, and equipping them to live in a multicultural and multilingual world, and a big step away from requiring them to learn by rote the mathematical formulas and translation equivalents needed to pass college entrance examinations.

It is only natural to assume that the way in which our own native

language divides up the world into semantic segments is the same for all other languages. Therefore, in our increasingly globalized and interdependent world, one of the most important tasks facing teachers of language and culture is to educate students about the universal features of human cultures and languages in general, as well as the unique structural nature of each individual culture and language in particular. Once they realize this consciously, they should become more cautious about assuming that the words in their own language have approximately the same range of meaning and association as the words in other languages. This is especially important for students whose first language is not related, or only remotely so, to the target language, as in the case of Japanese learning English.

Another important task should be to show them that words with multiple meanings (polysemy) or separate words with the same sound but different meanings (homonymy) are common in all languages. However, there is no reason to assume that these meanings are ever exactly 'equivalent' to each other. In addition, the use of metonymy and metaphor are also generally employed to extend the literal, or concrete meanings of words. Indeed, metaphorical creativity in the broadest sense is said to be "...part of everyone's linguistic competence."⁸

Lyons noted that students will often be unable to find the exact context of a word and so will have to guess its meaning. If they already know the basic meaning of the word, it will give them a great advantage and help them to guess correctly. If students could be helped to understand the basic meaning of *break*, and the ways in which this meaning is figuratively extended to a variety of senses, then it is more likely that they would be able to use the word correctly and even creatively in a variety of contexts.

An informal survey of some of my students has confirmed that most of them had the same sort of experience in junior and senior high school of memorizing lists of English vocabulary and their Japanese 'equivalents,' and translating English phrases into Japanese. That their experience is not atypical is borne out by the fact that mistakes in basic

vocabulary use (word choice) by so many Japanese college students are so common. This strongly suggests that the fundamental methods and approaches to teaching English in Japanese secondary schools have not changed very much, if at all. While these methods may help to prepare students to pass university entrance exams, they do not help them become fluent and confident speakers of English. The general emphasis on translation and memorization of 'equivalents' in Japanese secondary language education also encourages the overuse of and an excessive dependence on bilingual dictionaries.

In this connection, I wish to state that I completely concur with the opinion expressed by Mr. Garcia-Caro Nunez (2006) in the previous issue of this journal that these dictionaries are "more of a hindrance than a help."⁹ In fact, I think that they do real damage to the prospects of most students ever acquiring real fluency in English. The full range of meaning and usage of English words can never be intuitively grasped, in the manner of a native, or other fluent speaker of English, by continual reference to Japanese words, which have an inherently, and often drastically different range of meaning and usage. The advantages conferred by use of a monolingual English dictionary intended for learners of English in this respect are enormous. When English words are defined in terms of other related English words, the student can begin to acquire some sense of the overall interlocking pattern of meaning and usage into which each word fits. At the same time as they expand their vocabulary, they lessen their dependence on using a dictionary in order to express themselves in English. In contrast to a bilingual dictionary, which binds the student ever more closely to it, a monolingual dictionary will gradually enable students to enter the world of English meaning and liberate them from dependence on a dictionary. It should also teach them that words in English, or any other language, are semantically surrounded by related words, and are in a dynamic state of mutual opposition to them, and have their range of use circumscribed by them.

As teachers we need to know how to help our students progress from

being naive language learners, unaware of the phonetic, grammatical and semantic differences between their own native language, and the language they are studying, to being sophisticated, proficient language learners, who know how to learn and ultimately become fluent in another language.

Writing some thirty years ago, Suzuki imagined the confusion that many Japanese high school students of English must experience when presented with several Japanese 'equivalents' for the English verb *break* depending on the context in which it was used. He believed that this problem was caused by "...the lack of realization of the teacher's part that meaning and usage in language have structure, and that this structure varies from language to language."

While there may be more realization of this semantic structure among teachers today, the continued emphasis on translation forces the students to approach English structure via Japanese structure, and so prevents them from ever understanding the unique structure and logic of English in its own terms. As a result, English seems illogical and incomprehensible to them, even though it is just as logical in its own way as Japanese is in its way.

Conclusions

This article has discussed the polysemous nature of English *break*, as both a verb and noun, and proposed a comprehensive definition for it. It contrasted *break* as a verb with several conceptually-related Japanese verbs, and revealed that all of them overlap semantically with only a narrow portion of the range of meaning of *break*, and some of them do not even share its core meaning. A comparative analysis of the semantic range of other basic English lexemes, contrasted to their related English and Japanese words, would also be likely to demonstrate their unique range of usage.

Given the great disparity in semantic structure (meaning pattern) between Japanese and English, an approach to learning English primarily through translation from Japanese 'equivalents' seems unlikely to

ever produce fluent and confident users of the language. Although the use of bilingual dictionaries may be efficient in certain cases, their general use in the process of learning a foreign language at the beginning to intermediate level should be discouraged. Real command of the target language is only achieved when one becomes able to move directly from perceiving and conceiving the real world directly into its own unique symbolic and semantic world, without reference to one's native language. In this respect, the judicious use of a learner's monolingual dictionary could be very advantageous to a student's overall progress toward a command of the target language.

Notes

1. Clifford Geertz (1973), p.49.
2. John Lyons (1995), p.90.
3. Suzuki Takao (1978), p.13.
This is a translation from *Kotoba to Bunka* 『ことばと文化』 (Iwanami Shoten, 1973).
4. John R. Taylor (2005), pp.108-9, 110, 111.
5. Taylor, pp.129-35, 138, 140-41.
6. Taylor, p.148.
7. Suzuki, p.24.
8. Lyons, p.60.
9. Alfonso Garcia-Caro Nunez (2006), p.107.

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