

Online image searches as indicators of lexical nuance between Japanese and English

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Many users of bilingual dictionaries, especially inexperienced users such as students, assume that all lexical entries are cognitive equivalents and are completely interchangeable. However, as true cognitive equivalents are rare, most bilingual dictionaries offer translational equivalents that are similar provided that the usage contexts are comparable (Adamska-Salaciak, 2013). In fact, in most cross-linguistic situations lexical items exhibit near-synonymy (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002) and are more likely to be plesionyms that have almost the same, but not the exact same, meaning (Hirst, 1998). While bilingual dictionaries strive to provide the context necessary for near-synonymous meaning, most can only offer a few examples, and only those that are the most typical (Adamska-Salaciak, 2013). Failing to understand the actuality of bilingual dictionaries can often lead to inappropriate lexical choices by novice L2 users that lack nuance of semantic meaning and/or pragmatic distinctions.

The Internet includes a vast number of images that have been labeled with keywords. These keywords can be searched to find images that demonstrate both the semantic meaning and pragmatic context of a lexical item and can be thought of as a visual language corpus. This visual corpus can be used in similar ways to a textual corpus (e.g. frequency counts) to bring nuance to cross-linguistic lexical pairs.

For example, the lexical pair of *okorareru* and *scold* is often found in Japanese-English bilingual dictionaries as equivalents. Both have the meaning of *engaging in negative evaluation in an emotive way*. An online image search of the term *scold* yields three general types of images: parents scolding children, teachers scolding pupils, and humans scolding pets. However, an image search of *okorareru* also yields these three types of images as well as images of bosses scolding workers. In fact these types of images seem more prominent. So while a sentence such as (*watashi wa*) *jōshi ni okorareta* in Japanese would be both linguistically and pragmatically correct. The English equivalent, *I was scolded by my boss*, would be linguistically correct but not pragmatically accurate. Instead the more appropriate English expression *yelled at* as in *I was yelled at by my boss* yields more appropriate images of bosses criticizing employees.

In this presentation I will examine six commonly misused Japanese-English lexical pairs and show how online image searches can be used to discover cross-linguistic nuances. Three lexical pairs commonly misused by Japanese speakers in English: *okorareru-scold*, *kusuri-drug*, and *asobu-play*; and three lexical pairs commonly misused by English speakers in Japanese: *entrance-genkan*, *welcome-irashaimase*, and *fan-otaku* will be discussed. Attendees should come away with an understanding of the ways that visual representations of vocabulary can highlight subtle semantic, conceptual, and pragmatic differences in cross-linguistic-comparisons.

References

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