

In-out orientation for expressing the self and others in Japanese: a case of “uchi” vs. “soto”

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This paper points out an in-out orientation found in Japanese. The contrast of “uchi” vs. “soto” can be literally translated as “inside” vs. “outside.” Horn (1989: 268-273) explained oppositions by dividing contrary opposition and contradictory opposition. The opposition of “soto” and “uchi” has a flexible boundary. It can either be contrary or contradictory. In other words, the way we categorize “being inside” and “being outside” is often subjective and cognitively and pragmatically different. For example:

(1) Motto uchi ni haitte kudasai.

More inside to enter please: POL. (Please come further inside.)

Japanese “uchi” does not only express being physically “inside” but also to express self or self-related connotations. Previous insightful research such as Christofaki (2018), Hasegawa & Hirose (2005), Jaszczolt (2018), Miwa (2005), Takekuro (2006), Tanaka (2012), Wetzel (1994) and so on worked on this topic from various perspectives, but some of important extended issues have not been fully explored. This paper attempts to further explain the cognitive and pragmatic understanding of “uchi” vs. “soto.” In cognitive linguistics, Johnson (1987:40) stated, “We understand our experience as broken up according to basic categories (of objects, events, states, properties, relations, etc.).” This viewpoint is consistent with Langacker’s analysis of negation (1991:134). Adapting these views, “uchi” is being inside of a certain container/group, and “soto” is outside. Only “uchi” has self-referential usages, and the word “soto” is not semantically extended to describe “some other people,” or “not me,” or “not us.” This paper examines the less discussed underlined meanings of “uchi”: a house, one’s house, my house, our house, a home, a household, one’s family, one’s husband, one’s wife, the inside, and the interior. Specifically there are two major Chinese characters in Japanese which both read “uchi.” They are “家” and “内”, which simply correspond to “house” and “inside.”

(2) Uchi no miso shiru no aji wa tenkaippin da. [NJED]

my wife NOM miso soup NOM taste TOP absolutely superb COP.

(The miso soup that we have at home (my wife makes) is absolutely superb.)

(3) Kono chokoreto wa uchi no seihin da.

This chocolate TOP our NOM product COP. (This chocolate is one of our (firm’s) products.)

(4) Tanaka Tarou uchi (田中太郎内) (Written and signed on behalf of Taro Tanaka by his wife)

Example (4) is one of the typical and classical ending parts of a letter. Here, a wife’s name is not written. However, the receiver knows that the wife wrote the message instead of her husband. In this case, generally the Chinese character “uchi (内)” is handwritten in a smaller size, which shows the modesty of the writer. This example logically follows Lakoff and Johnson (1980)’s “SIGNIFICANT IS BIG,” which conveys a writer’s intended level of politeness. Also, there is a colloquial expression, “uchira,” which means “we” especially among young people. Japanese “ra” is a plural marker, but it not only describes being plural but also giving solidarity and camaraderie among peers. Finally, this paper mentions the expression “otaku” which means a nerd or a geek. “Otaku” was originally used by some anime and manga fans as a way of addressing others with similar interests. Today it also conveys an image of obsession and the detriment of their social skills, and therefore has a negative connotation. Etymologically “otaku” is “o” (honorific) plus “taku” (house) which in combination means “your house,” and thus originally politely and indirectly implies “you,” but the honorific politeness nuance has now almost disappeared when referring to a nerd. Miwa (2005) and Tanaka (2012) mention that Japanese is found to have 51 markers to express “I.” “Uchi” is not the most formal and prominent expression compared to “watashi” which is one of the most formal expressions for the self. Still, “uchi” is a perfect example to reflect the central idea for expressing the self: the examples of Japanese “uchi” might particularly and clearly show the feature of ego-centricity, but we might be somehow universally ego-centric, and might make a flexible and dynamic distinction between in-groups and out-groups.

References

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