

An NSM Approach to the Meaning of *Tear* and Its Japanese Equivalents

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a contrastive analysis of verbs relating to the action of ‘tearing’ in English and Japanese; it employs the framework of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (hereafter, NSM) developed by Anna Wierzbicka and her colleagues

Generally speaking, there is no exact semantic correspondence between the verbs of different languages. This holds true for verbs relating to the action of ‘tearing’ in English and Japanese. *Tear* has more than one rough equivalent in Japanese: *saku*, *chigiru* and *yaburu* all mean ‘tear’, but they differ in some respects. The Japanese verbs exhibit a more specialised meaning than English *tear*, in that they vary in object, manner, and projected result. This paper will demonstrate the difference in cognitive structure between these verbs.

We will use NSM to fully explicate the meanings of these words and to reveal the shared semantic structures and distinctive aspects of each verb under investigation. The NSM methodology, based on semantic primes and a grammar of combinability, enables us to explicate language-specific concepts in a precise manner, while at the same time remaining free of ethno-cultural and/or linguistic bias.

This analysis provides evidence that as far as the concept of ‘tearing’ is concerned, Japanese and English cause their respective speakers to develop and use language-specific cognitive structures.

Keywords

semantics, Natural Semantic Metalanguage, English, Japanese, *tear*, *saku*, *chigiru*, *yaburu*

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1. Introduction

This paper undertakes a contrastive analysis of verbs relating to the action of ‘tearing’ in English and Japanese, using the framework of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (hereafter, NSM), which was developed by Anna Wierzbicka and her colleagues (e.g. Wierzbicka 1996; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002).

Generally speaking, there is no exact semantic correspondence between the verbs of different languages. This holds true for verbs relating to the action of ‘tearing’ in English and Japanese. *Tear* has more than one equivalent in Japanese: *saku*, *chigiru* and *yaburu* all mean ‘tear’, but they differ in some respects. In comparison to *tear*, these Japanese equivalents are semantically more specific. Thus, when translating *tear* into Japanese, linguists should pay attention to *what* is being torn and *how* people tear it. Our analysis demonstrates that as far as the concept of ‘tearing’ is concerned, Japanese and English provide their respective speakers with cognitive structures which are language-specific. We hope that this case study will contribute some insight into the field of comparative semantics.

Section 2 takes a brief look at the NSM approach. Section 3 explores the semantics of *tear* and its Japanese equivalents, and explicates each of these verbs. Finally Section 4 draws some conclusions.

2. The NSM Approach

We will use NSM to fully explicate the meanings of these words, at the same time revealing the shared semantic structures and the distinctive aspects of each verb under investigation. The NSM approach is based on semantic primes and a grammar of combinability. Semantic primes are a small set of universal meanings, which can be found as words or word-like components in all natural languages. They are indefinable and self-explanatory. In other words, they can be translated into any language and understood intuitively by all language users. So far, about sixty semantic primes have been identified: I, YOU, KNOW, GOOD and TO are some examples. By combining these simple basic concepts, we can reveal the meaning of a word which is specific to a

* We are grateful to Anna Gladkova, Cliff Goddard, Ian Langford, Putu Davies, Anna Wierzbicka, Zhengdao Ye, Kyung Joo Yoon, two anonymous referees and the audience at ALS 2005 for useful comments and stylistic editing. All errors are of course our own. The order of authors is alphabetical.

certain language. This reductive paraphrase method enables us to explicate the meaning precisely and exhaustively without applying cultural or linguistic bias.

3. The Semantics of *Tear*, *Saku*, *Chigiru*, and *Yaburu*

This section explores the similarities and differences between *tear*, *saku*, *chigiru*, and *yaburu*. Section 3.1 explains the event type which these verbs have in common. Section 3.2 compares the four chosen verbs in terms of instrument, object, manner and projected result. Finally Section 3.3 proposes explications for the verbs. To begin with, let us take a look at the event type which these verbs denote.

3.1 Event Structure

Following Vendler (1967), this paper classifies events into four types in terms of aspectuality: state, activity, achievement, and accomplishment. Agreeing also with Van Valin and LaPolla (1997), we assume that the four kinds of aspect can also operate in two modes: Basic and Causative (See Table 1)

	Basic	Causative
States	John knew the story.	John frightened the dog.
Activities	John ran.	John ran the dog.
Achievements	The balloon popped.	John popped the balloon.
Accomplishments	The ice melted. Carl ran to the store.	The hot water melted the ice. Carl ran the dog to the store.

Table 1. Event Types (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997)

The sentences in (1) below share the same event structure in that they all fall into the Causative Accomplishment type (See Figure 1) The structure of a causative accomplishment consists of two sub-events. The initial event is activity, and the final event is a state (Alsina 1999 among others). In the initial event, X (the Agent) acts on Y (the Patient) and Y undergoes a change of state; the result state of Y is described as the final event. *Tear* and our three Japanese examples all share this event structure.

- (1) a. X tears Y.
 b. X *ga* Y *o* {*saku/chigiru/yaburu*}.
 X NOM Y ACC tear
 “X tears Y.”

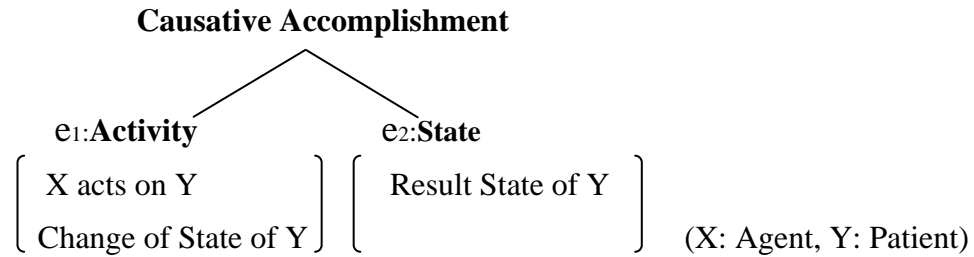


Figure 1. The Internal Structure of a Causative Accomplishment

3.2 Comparison of the Events Described by *Tear*, *Saku*, *Chigiru*, and *Yaburu*

3.2.1 The Instrument Used to *Tear*

English *tear* and its Japanese equivalents share a common instrument. As shown in example (2) below, all of the *tear*-like verbs in English and Japanese describe the process of separating something with one's hands. No type of cutting implement (knife, scissors etc) can be the instrument for any of these verbs.

(2) a. John tore the paper {with his hands/*with a knife }.

b. *Jon-ga kami-o {te-de/*naifu-de} {sai-ta /chigi-tta /yabu-tta}.*

John-NOM paper-ACC {hand-INST/knife-INST} {sai-PAST/chigi-PAST/yabu-PAST}

3.2.2 The Object: What is Torn

Turning now to the objects of action it is clear that the Japanese verbs are more restricted as to what kind of objects each can take, when compared to English *tear*. As shown in examples (3) ~ (5) below, Japanese employs different verbs depending on the object torn, depending on whether it is cloth, bread or wrapping paper; English possesses only one verb which covers all of these objects.

(3) a. John tore the cloth.

b. *Jon-ga nuno-o {sai-ta/*chigi-tta/*yabu-tta}.*

John-NOM cloth-ACC sai-PAST

(4) a. John tore the bread.

b. *Jon-ga pan-o {*sai-ta/chigi-tta/*yabu-tta}*.

John-NOM bread-ACC chigi-PAST

(5) a. John tore the wrapping paper.

b. *Jon-ga tutumigami-o {*sai-ta/*chigi-tta/yabu-tta}*.

John-NOM wrapping paper-ACC yabu-PAST

The core quality of the various objects, which is common to all of the verbs, is that these are ‘things that one can separate using the hands’. Such objects cannot be too ‘hard’ or too ‘soft’. If the object is too hard – wood for example – then one cannot separate it by hand; one would probably need some other instrument. On the other hand, if the object is too soft – jelly for example – then one could probably separate it using only one hand. Thus, the object must be something that one can rip apart only by using both hands, for which one needs no other instruments. This is the basic sense of the objects for *tear*; and it is common to the Japanese verbs as well.

In addition to this core meaning, Japanese verbs have other constraints on which objects they can take. *Saku* is restricted to ‘flat’ ‘thin’ objects made of ‘fibres’, for example newspaper, toilet paper, cloth etc. *Chigiru* applies to something which is ‘fragile’ in a sense, or ‘weak’; it acts on paper, bread, cotton, sponge cake or even delicate foods something like lettuce. *Yaburu* is restricted to things which are ‘flat’ and ‘thin’, but do not necessarily have ‘fibres’, such as a plastic bags.

Figures 2 and 3 below sum up the points discussed so far. They show the core meaning common to objects of all four verbs, as well as the additional semantic layers which apply to the objects designated for each Japanese verb.

tear things one can separate with the hands
saku things one can separate with the hands + flat + thin + fibres
chigiru things one can separate with the hands + fragile
yaburu things one can separate with the hands + flat + thin

Figure 2. The Features of Objects

		<i>tear</i>	<i>saku</i>	<i>chigiru</i>	<i>yaburu</i>
flat & thin	fibres	cloth			
		paper	+fibres		
	fragile		- fibres		
		bread			

Figure 3. The Objects of *Tear*

3.2.3 The Manner: How One Tears

Focusing now on the manner of ‘tearing’, English *tear* does not specify any particular manner. Japanese verbs, on the other hand, do indicate some definite ways of ‘tearing’, such as ‘along the fibres’ for *saku*; ‘with the fingers’ for *chigiru*; ‘making a sound’ for *yaburu*. Example (6) below shows how the verb *yaburu* can be combined with phrases related to the sound of the action. The phrase *biribirito* in example (6)b is an onomatopoeic expression which fits the verb *yaburu* but is not really suitable to the other verbs.

(6) a. John tore the paper.

b. *Jon-ga kami-o biribirito {?sai-ta/?chigi-tta/yabu-tta}.*
 John-NOM paper-ACC with sound yabu-PAST

The manner of tearing is also closely related to an expected result, so a deeper analysis will be advisable. In part 3.2.4 below we turn to the correlation between these verbs and their projected results.

3.2.4 The Projected Results of *Tear*

Now we will consider the differences between these verbs in terms of their projected results. Adverbial phrases indicating the results of ‘tearing’, such as ‘in a straight line’, ‘into small pieces’ and ‘raggedly’, can be combined with some of these verbs and not with others. By attending to these variations, it is possible to reveal the projected result, or in other words the prototypical intention of each verb.

- (7) a. John tore the cloth {in a straight line/ into small pieces/raggedly}.
- b. *Jon-ga nuno-o {massuguni/?komakaku/*gizagizani} sai-ta.*
 John-NOM cloth-ACC {in a straight line/?into small pieces/*raggedly} sai-PAST
- c. *Jon-ga pan-o {*massuguni/komakaku/*gizagizani} chigi-tta.*
 John-NOM bread-ACC {*in a straight line/into small pieces/*raggedly} chigi-PAST
- d. *Jon-ga tutumigami-o {*massuguni/?komakaku/?gizagizani} yabu-tta.*
 John-NOM wrapping paper-ACC {*in a straight line/?into small pieces/?raggedly}
 yabu-PAST

As shown in example (7)a, English *tear* does not require any specific result (but it still can). In other words a person tearing something does not have to intend some specific result, as long as the object will become ‘two things’ as a result of tearing. Again Japanese verbs are more specific as to what kind of result is expected from the action.

As example (7)b shows, the verb *saku* expects the torn object to have straight edges. As mentioned in the section on manner, since the action *saku* is usually done ‘along the fibres’ of the object, naturally the result will be something having straight edges.

In the case of *chigiru*, shown in example (7)c, the prototypical intention is to achieve something small. The result of the action would thus be two things, of which one at least is small. As already pointed out in the section on manner, *chigiru* is performed with fingers rather than the entire hand.

Finally (7)d indicates that the verb *yaburu* has no intention regarding the kind of result it expects to achieve. In this respect adverbial phrases which suggest any kind of intention – such as making straight edges or reducing something to small pieces – do not suit *yaburu*. The result of *yaburu* is two objects with ragged edges in most cases. This is related to the manner already ascribed to this verb. Because people *yaburu* carelessly and roughly without careful intent, the dynamism of the action will probably produce a sound (*biribiri*) during the action. *Gizagizani yabutta* does not sound fully natural (hence the question mark beside the word ‘*gizagizani* (raggedly)’ in (7)d) because the verb *yaburu* itself includes the sense of ‘raggedly’. Thus the phrase *gizagizani yaburu* sounds redundant.

Figures 4 and 5 below sum up the discussion so far and demonstrate the difference between the four verbs in terms of manner and projected results.

tear two things
saku two things + straight edges
chigiru two things + one of them is very small
yaburu two things + ragged edges

Figure 4. Result

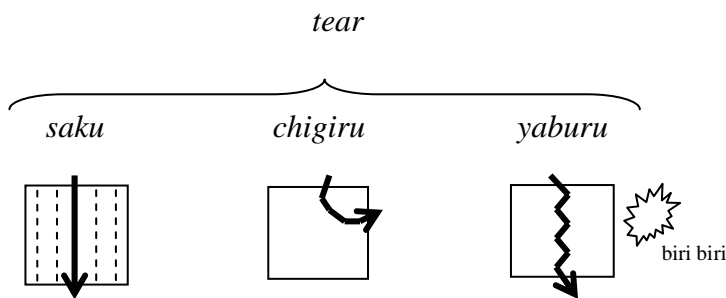


Figure 5 Manner and Projected Result

3.3 Explications

This section proposes explications for the verbs discussed in this paper. As the discussion in previous sections indicates, the sense of English *tear* also constitutes a core part of the meaning of its Japanese equivalents. Therefore the explications of the Japanese verbs are based on the explication of the English *tear*; they also have some extra components.

This section will explicate each verb one at a time, focusing especially on what has been discussed so far, namely instrument, object, manner and projected result. The basic structure of these explications is based on the explication of the English verb *cut* by Wierzbicka and Goddard (to appear). In the explications below [M] stands for ‘semantic molecule’.

3.3.1 *Tear*

X was tearing Y

- a) at one time, person X was doing something to thing Y for some time ACTION AND
- b) because of this, something was happening to Y at the same time ITS EFFECT

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| c) X was doing this to Y like people do something to some things | PROTOTYPICAL |
| d) if these things are not hard[M] | OBJECT |
| e) when they think about them like this: | AND |
| f) “If I do something to Y with my hands[M] | PROTOTYPICAL |
| g) Y won’t be one thing any more | INTENTION |
| h) Y will be two things | |
| i) I want this not to be one thing anymore | |
| j) I want it to be two things” | |
| k) I don’t have to know what the edges[M] of these two things will be like” | |
| l) X was doing this to Y with [his] hands[M] | INSTRUMENT |
| m) when X was doing this to Y with [his] hands[M], they were moving
in some way, not in other ways | MANNER |
| n) when they were moving in this way, they were touching some parts of Y | |
| o) because of this, something was happening to Y in these places | |
| p) at this time, some parts of Y were in one of X’s hands[M] | |
| q) some other parts of Y were in X’s other hand[M] | |

Components c) ~ h) display the prototypical object for the verb *tear*, that is ‘things one can separate using both hands’ as discussed in 3.2.1 above. Components i) and j) describe the prototypical intention of the verb *tear*, which, as discussed in 3.2.4, is simply ‘to obtain two things’ without any specific features. Component l) refers to the instrument of the action, which is common to the other verbs as well.

3.3.2 *Saku*

X-ga Y-o sai-te-i-ta

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| a) at one time, person X was doing something to thing Y for some time | ACTION AND |
| b) because of this, something was happening to Y at the same time | ITS EFFECT |
| c) X was doing this to Y like people do something to flat[M] thin[M] things | |
| d) if these things are not hard[M] | PROTOTYPICAL OBJECT |
| e) when they think about them like this: | AND |

- e) when they think about them like this: AND
- f) “If I do something to Y with my hands[M] PROTOTYPICAL
- g) Y won’t be one thing any more INTENTION
- h) Y will be two things
- i) I want this thing not to be one thing anymore
- j) I want it to be two things
- k) I want one of these things to be a small thing”**
- l) X was doing this to Y with [his] fingers[M] INSTRUMENT**
- m) when X was doing this to Y with [his] fingers[M], they were moving**
- n) when they were moving in this way, they were touching some parts of Y
- o) because of this, these parts of Y were moving at the same time in the same way
- p) at this time, some parts of Y were in one of X’s hand[M] MANNER
- q) some other parts of Y were in X’s other hand[M]

The characteristic feature of the verb *chigiru*, which differs from the other verbs, is that the instrument is ‘fingers’ rather than ‘hands’, as shown in component m). Component k) describes the prototypical intention of *chigiru*, to obtain ‘something small’.

3.3.4 *Yaburu*

X-ga Y-o yabu-tte-i-ta

- a) at one time, person X was doing something to thing Y for some time ACTION AND
- b) because of this, something was happening to Y at the same time ITS EFFECT
- c) X was doing this to Y like people do something to some flat[M] thin[M] things**
- d) if these things are not hard[M] PROTOTYPICAL OBJECT AND
- e) when they think about them like this: PROTOTYPICAL
- f) “If I do something to Y with my hands[M] INTENTION
- g) Y won’t be one thing any more
- h) Y will be two things
- i) I want this thing not to be one thing anymore
- j) I want it to be two things
- k) I don’t have to know what the edges[M] of these two things will be like”**

- l) X was doing this to Y with [his] hands[M] INSTRUMENT
- m) when X was doing this to Y with [his] hands[M], they were moving MANNER
- n) when they were moving in this way, they were touching some parts of Y
- o) because of this, these parts of Y were moving at the same time in the same way
- p) something was happening to these parts at the same time
- q) people could hear it**
- r) at this time, some parts of Y were in one of X's hands[M]
- s) some other parts of Y were in X's other hand[M]

The explication for *yaburu* differs from that of *tear* in terms of object, intention and manner. Component k) shows that in the case of *yaburu* one does not have to know what the result will be like. Component q) refers to the sound that can result from the action *yaburu*.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, English *tear* has more than one approximate equivalent in Japanese. The three Japanese counterparts of *tear* are *saku*, *chigiru*, and *yaburu*; they differ from *tear* and from one another in some respects. In comparison to *tear*, these Japanese equivalents are semantically more specific. This paper has tried to illustrate the difference in cognitive structure among these verbs. Therefore when translating English *tear* into Japanese, one should pay attention to *what* is being torn, *how* people tear it and what kind of result they intend to achieve.

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