

Pictograms and Japanese Construal in Cognitive Linguistics

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Abstract

Recent scholarship in cognitive linguistics reveals that Japanese speakers prefer subjective construal, while English speakers prefer objective construal. Japanese speakers conceptualize a scene subjectively, where the speaker involved is submerged in it. English speakers tend to represent events objectively from the perspective of a bystander or observer outside the scene. This paradigm has defined the difference between Japanese and English cognitive linguistics for the past three decades. However, recent trends in official Japanese public communications show that this paradigm needs to change. For example, for the forthcoming Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry announced in 2017 that they revised the standardized set of Japanese pictograms. The revision, however, is not a simple modification, but arguably reflects something larger: a shift in construal. Previous pictograms represented the object of the action alone with no subject, while new pictograms include the subject of the action. This means a shift in focus from an object/thing to a subject/person, addressing who makes an action and what kind of action. Old pictograms that lack the subjects of action reflect the exemplary characteristics of Japanese construal, that is, subjective construal. New pictograms, by contrast, are geared toward objective construal. By analyzing the modification of pictograms, this paper seeks to reconsider the characteristics of the Japanese way of construing scenes and events.

Keywords: Pictograms, Subjective Construal, Objective Construal, Cognitive Linguistics

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Introduction

Recent scholarship in cognitive linguistics reveals that Japanese speakers prefer subjective construal, while English speakers prefer objective construal. Japanese speakers conceptualize a scene subjectively, where the speaker involved is submerged in it. English speakers tend to represent events objectively from the perspective of a bystander or observer outside the scene. This paradigm often defines the difference between Japanese and English construal. However, as globalization advances, the recent official public communication in Japan is changing. This paper focuses on the visual medium of pictograms and the radical shift in their forms that occurred in 2017.

A pictogram is an ideogram that conveys its meaning through its pictorial resemblance to a physical object. It is also called a pictograph, and in computer usage, it is known as an icon. In Japan, pictograms have been used extensively since the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, when the Japanese system of pictograms for international visitors was conceived and images were made that would at once be easily understood by foreigners, conveying the necessary information to them. The pictograms from 1964 included symbols for banks, telephone kiosks, and toilets. Now pictograms are seen everywhere from maps to train stations to airports.

Let's take a look at some examples of Japanese pictograms. Pictograms are not universal but I have selected two easy-to-understand Japanese signs. As everyone knows, Figure 1 is a "No Smoking" sign. Figure 2 may or may not be slightly more difficult. Figure 2 is an emergency exit sign. Unlike Figure 1, the emergency exit sign is green, not red, most likely because green is associated with safety and with go in traffic contexts.



Figure 1: No Smoking



Figure 2: Emergency Exit

The revision in the Japanese system of pictograms

For the forthcoming Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry announced in 2017 that they had revised the standardized set of Japanese pictograms. I would like to draw your attention to the modifications that the government implemented to some of the long-used Japanese pictograms.

Please take a look at the following signs: Figure 3a is a baggage claim sign—which is used extensively at international airports in Japan, but the Japanese government modified it to the one shown in Figure 3b.



Figure 3a: Old Baggage Claim



Figure 3b: New Baggage Claim

Figure 4a is a sign familiar to Japanese and has long been used in maps and elsewhere. It indicates a hot spring. As you can see, the pictogram includes an icon for steam, yet many foreigners could not figure out what it meant. In fact, one of my Chinese friends asked me if it meant a noodle restaurant. Figure 4a was changed to Figure 4b.

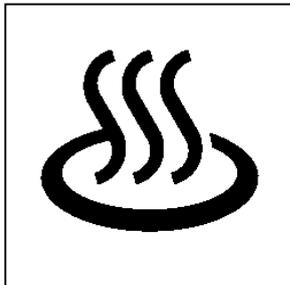


Figure 4a: Old Hot Spring

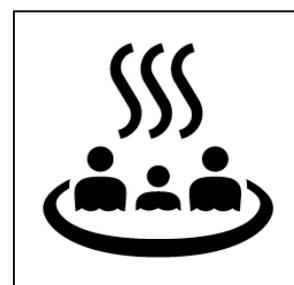


Figure 4b: New Hot Spring

Figure 5a is a sign used for a baby care room or a diaper changing room in public areas in Japan. It was modified to a new sign as shown in Figure 5b.



Figure 5a: Old Baby Care Room



Figure 5b: New Baby Care Room

Perhaps the most enigmatic sign for international visitors may be Figure 6a. It is a transit sign, used in Japan's international and national airports. Recently I gave a lecture to university students studying Japanese in Vietnam and asked them, "What do you think this Japanese sign means?" Many of them answered: "War." They read it as a sign showing military aircraft scrambling. It's good that the Japanese government decided to abolish it and created a new pictogram for transit that is peaceful in tone and message.

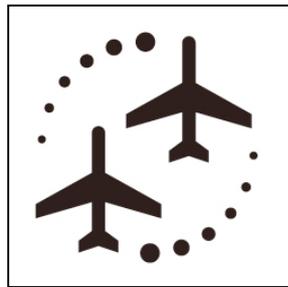


Figure 6a: Old Transit Sign



Figure 6b: New Transit Sign

The revision in the Japanese system of pictograms, however, is not a simple modification, but arguably reflects something larger: a shift in construal. Previous pictograms represented the object of the action alone with no subject, while new pictograms include the subject who takes the action. This means a shift in focus from an object/thing to a subject/person, addressing who takes an action and what kind of action.

Linguistic phenomena

Recent scholarship in cognitive linguistics tells us that Japanese speakers prefer subjective construal, see Ikegami (2008, 2011), Nakamura (2009), Shimizu (2010) among others. Japanese speakers conceptualize a scene subjectively and the speaker is often omitted from a sentence. This becomes clearer by comparing what a Japanese speaker and an English speaker would say respectively, when he or she gets lost and asks for information.

English:

- (1) a. Where am I?
- b. ?Where is here?

Japanese:

(2) a. ?Watashi wa doko?
I TOP where
'Where am I?'

b. Koko wa doko?
here TOP where
'Where is here?'

In English, you might typically say, "Where am I?" You would never say: "Where is here?" In English, the speaker is indicated by the pronoun as a subject. In contrast, in Japanese, we would never say, "Watashi wa doko?" Though it literally means "Where am I?," this way of putting it is impossible—unless you want to convey an implied message that you are nuts. When a Japanese speaker gets lost, he or she would typically ask, "Koko wa doko?" literally this means "Where is here?" It is unnatural and even sounds strange if one expresses oneself as the sentence subject using the first-person pronoun "I" (Watashi) in Japanese. This is permissible only when you are looking at a map to see where you are and are speaking to yourself.

Now consider another example. The following example shows what a Japanese speaker and an English speaker would say respectively, when he or she wants water:

English:

(3) a. I want water.

b. *Want water.

Japanese:

(4) a. ?Watashi wa mizu ga hoshii.
I TOP water NOM want
'I want water.'

b. Mizu ga hoshii.
water NOM want
'I want water.'

The English speaker clearly indicates oneself as the subject of the desire, whereas in Japanese the subject is omitted—unless a context warrants it. For instance, if you are with your friends in a café, and they order coffee, but you want water, then the subject "I" appears in the sentence to differentiate yourself from the rest of the party. In other words, in Japanese, the speaker is expressed as a subject only when there is a context for comparison.

Please take a look at another example. The following example shows what a Japanese speaker and an English speaker would say respectively, when he or she went out and found the moon shining:

English:

(5) When I went out, I saw the moon is shining.

Japanese:

(6) Soto ni deru to, tsuki ga kagayaite ita.
outside to go when moon NOM shine-ING be-PAST
'When I went out, the moon is shining.'

In English, the speaker who sees the moon shining is clearly indicated as the subject. In contrast, in Japanese, the speaker is omitted from a sentence. The sentence (6) does not say who went out or who saw the moon shining.

These linguistic phenomena represent the difference in construal between the two languages. Though slightly simplistic, I would like to formulate the difference for the purposes of this paper: Japanese speakers prefer subjective construal, and the speaker as a subject is included in the scene, so there is no need to express it. On the other hand, English speakers prefer objective construal, and it is necessary to represent events objectively from the perspective of a bystander or observer, so that the speaker is indicated as a subject.

The characteristics of Japanese construal

With this formulation in mind, let's return to the issue of the modification of Japanese pictograms. Old pictograms visibly lack the subjects of action, which reflects the exemplary characteristics of Japanese construal, that is, subjective construal. Japanese speakers typically place themselves within the scene to be construed. In many cases it is not necessary to express the self-evident or obvious subject of an action.

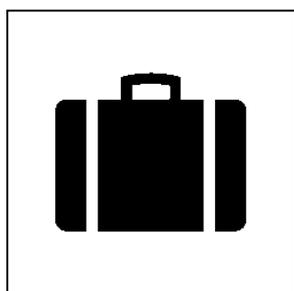


Figure 3a: Old Baggage Claim

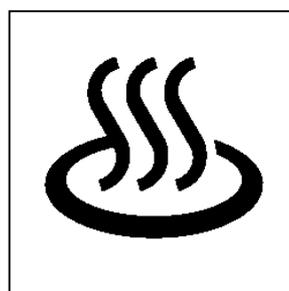


Figure 4a: Old Hot Spring

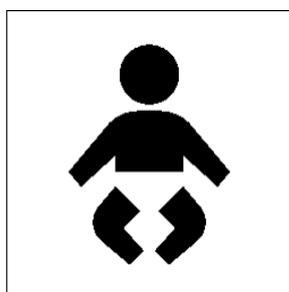


Figure 5a: Old Baby Care Room

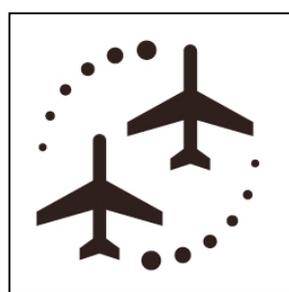


Figure 6a: Old Transit Sign

New pictograms, by contrast, are geared toward objective construal. The subjects of actions are visibly embedded in the scene, in which the (heretofore invisible) subject becomes the object of expression and observation.



Figure 3b: New Baggage Claim



Figure 4b: New Hot Spring



Figure 5b: New Baby Care Room



Figure 6b: New Transit Sign

Conclusion

From the above, we can reasonably conclude that pictograms reflect construal as well as linguistic phenomena. The revision in the Japanese system of pictograms implemented by the Japanese government for the Tokyo Olympic Games does not signal a mere change in form, but possibly a shift in construal. As globalization advances, misunderstandings and conflicts may arise from differences in construal, becoming a serious issue, not just linguistically but culturally and politically as well. Therefore, I believe that cognitive linguistic research will play an increasingly important role in this more global future.

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