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## A Case Study of Comparative Idioms in Different Cultures

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### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Language and Culture is not as simple as assuming that if we can speak Language, we can understand Culture.

As Wittgenstein mentions "To imagine one language is nothing but to imagine one living style.". There is a relationship between language and the living culture and the way of thinking of the speakers of the language.

Languages evidently do differ in the way they symbolically reflect the world, that is, in the way they categorize or codify the experience of their speakers. The relationship between Language and Culture has historically been discussed using two approaches, they are, "linguistic relativism" and "linguistic determinism".

"Linguistic relativism" asserts that even if the objects of thoughts and experience are the same, the way of recognition is different as it depends on language. On the other hand, "Linguistic determinism" asserts that language is not the instrument which we use to explain our thoughts and experiences but it equips us with the function to influence the ways of our thoughts and experiences.

The linguist who really started people thinking rigorously about the problems of linguistic determinism or linguistic relativity as the study of relations between language, culture and thought, was Benjamin Lee Whorf. He believed that our view of the world, the way we can categorize our experience and conceptualize our environment, is effectively determined by our language. (Whorf, 1956)

His ideas were led in this direction by Sapir, with whom he studied. He started the most important of his several essays on the subject with this quotation from Sapir (1921) as follows:

"Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely

an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection." Supporting this "linguistic relativity", I would like to discuss in this paper how Japanese idioms reveal a unique relationship between language and culture when compared to English and Chinese idioms.

## **[I] The definition of Japanese idioms**

Hama Omura (1977) defines Japanese idiom: "If one expression consists of several words, its meaning will be different from the original word. As people get used to using this different meaning it becomes an idiom. For example, "kao ga hiroi" (in Japanese literally means "A face is wide.", but the real meaning means "to know a lot of people because one associates with various kinds of people in the society."

First of all, I would like to compare Japanese and Chinese.

## **[II] Comparative idioms between Japanese and Chinese**

Fu Ling Yan (1985: 30-31) compared Japanese idioms and Chinese idioms by dividing them into three categories of lexicons.

He chose 1,280 idioms from Japanese literature and 447 idioms from Chinese literature, and divided them into three categories, that is, (1) lexicons to do with eating and drinking, (2) lexicons of the names of animals, and (3) lexicons of the body.

Let us look at these in detail.

### **[II]-1 Lexicons to do with eating and drinking**

He concludes the Lexicons of eating and drinking in Chinese are much the same as those from Japanese. As Table 1 shows, the highest percentage of lexical items in Chinese and Japanese are the verb "to eat".

Yan suggests that "In this comparison, Japanese idioms use vocabularies about seasoning, for example, oil and taste. On the other hand, Chinese idioms use vocabularies about cooking utensils like a fry pan (锅) and a big fry pan (灶)." He indicates that such differences come from the different eating and drinking habits and language customs.

### **[II]-2 Lexicons of the names of animals**

He indicated that "The reason why Japanese idioms have the vocabularies like 'cat' and 'bird' is because they are influenced by the Japanese sensitivity towards nature." On the other hand, he pointed out the reason why Chinese idioms have

vocabularies like "horse", "cow" and "dog" is due to the influence of rural life in China.

**Table 1:** Top five lexical items to do with eating and drinking in Japanese and Chinese

Japanese Idioms		Chinese Idioms	
to eat	taberu (食べる) in Japanese 12	to eat	chi (吃) in Chinese 15
to drink	nomu (飲む) in Japanese 4	meals	fan (飯) in Chinese 10
oil	abura (油) in Japanese 4	fry pan	kuo (锅) in Chinese 5
taste	aji (味) in Japanese 3	to drink	fu (喝) in Chinese 4
bite	kamu (噛む) in Japanese 3	big fry pan	pan zuo (灶) in Chinese 3

(The numbers are raw numbers)

**Table 2:** The vocabulary list of animals

	Japanese		Chines	
1	insect	mushi (虫) in Japanese 7	horse	ma (马) in Chinese 7
2	cat	neko (猫) in Japanese 4	cow	nju (牛) in Chinese 5
3	horse	uma (馬) in Japanese 3	dog	kou (狗) in Chinese 5
4	bird	tori (鳥) in Japanese 3	fish	yu (鱼) in Chinese 2

### [III]-3 Lexicon of the body

Finally, I would like to discuss idioms of the body. Yan chose 45 words which are body idioms in Japanese literature, however, he found only 18 words in Chinese literature. The top 10 vocabulary lists are in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Top 10 body idioms

Japanese: Parts of the body:	1. eye-88	2. hand-68	3. mouth-32
	4. mind-29	5. leg-27	6. onself-25
	7. heart-22	8. ear-18	9. nose-17
	10. stomach-16		
Chinese: Parts of the body:	1. bone-10	2. hand-7	3. mouth-7
	4. eye-6	5. foot-6	6. tongue-5
	7. leg-3	8. back-3	9. nose-3
	10. shoulder-3		

In this data, we can see that the usage of "stomach" in Japanese is high whereas the vocabulary of stomach in Chinese is not often used.

Yutaka Miyaji (1983: 247-249) discussed Japanese idioms as follows:

"To get angry is expressed in idioms like 'hara ga tatsu' (in English the literal meaning is 'the stomach stands'). However, a lot of foreigners cannot understand this usage, because they have been taught that anger is shown in the head, face and eyes."

I discussed Japanese and Chinese idioms in the three categories referred to in the work of Fu Ling Yan above. It is very interesting to understand not only the differences of vocabularies in idioms but also the differences of culture between the Japanese and Chinese.

In the following section, we can do this by looking at English and Japanese in detail.

### **[III] A discussion of "Body idioms" in English and Japanese**

All human beings have the same physical structure as *Homo sapiens*. However, the definition of physical parts (how we name physical parts) is different. Moreover, even for the same part of the body, there is often no special name in another language. (eg. "leg" and "foot" in English becomes "ashi" in Japanese.) Expressions are different due to factors of society, culture, customs, and ways of thinking. Foreign language learners find it very difficult to use idiomatic expressions appropriately, if they do not understand the appropriate meanings and contexts of the expressions.

#### **[III]-1 Comparative Body idioms in Japanese and English**

I would like to give one example. Tetsuya Kunihiro (1981) suggests "The word 'head' in English is one word, but in Japanese it has three meanings, that is, neck, head, and face."

This difference in the meaning of head also occurs in idioms involving the word head.

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| Example 1. | to shake one's head (in English)   |
|            | to shake one's neck (in Japanese)  |
| Example 2. | to put one's head on one side (in English)   |
|            | to shake one's neck (in Japanese, <i>kubi o kashigeru</i> )                                    |
| Example 3. | to put one's head out of a window and see (in English)   |
|            | to put one's face out of a window and see (in Japanese, <i>mado kara kao o dashite miru.</i> ) |
| Example 4. | to use one's head (in English)   |

to use one's head (atama o tsukau.)

Several idioms in Japanese consist of words like face, head, neck and throat, but similarly English idioms do not use these words.

- Example 1. to make a bonze (in English)  
to make round one's head (atama o marumeru in Japanese)
- Example 2. to hang oneself (in English)  
to bind one's neck (kubi o kukuru in Japanese)
- Example 3. to drop in at the office (in English)  
to show one's face at the office (kaisya ni kao o dasu in Japanese)
- Example 4. desire eagerly (in English)  
to want to have like holding out the hand from one's neck  
(nodo kara te ga deru hodo hoshii in Japanese)

I would like to discuss the comparative idioms between English and Japanese in works of literature in the following section.

### **[III]-2 Methods of classifying idioms for comparison between English and Japanese**

I would like to suggest the following three classifying factors.

- (1) Similar English and Japanese idioms
- (2) Japanese idioms with a different English idiomatic meaning.
- (3) Japanese idioms requiring a different expression in English.

These categories are better explained if we discuss some examples.

- (1) Similar English and Japanese idioms

Example: In Japanese if people are terribly surprised in a certain situation, the idiom "meno tama ga deru" is used. The literal English meaning is "eyeballs come out". In other words, it means "eye-popping out" in English.

- (2) Japanese idioms with a different English idiomatic meaning

Example: The meaning of "hito no ashi o hipparu" in Japanese means "to try to get in someone's way" and "to drag someone down". However, if it is translated literally into English it reads "to pull someone's leg", which has the completely different idiomatic meaning in English of having a joke at someone else's expense.

- (3) Japanese idioms requiring a different expression in English

Example: The meaning of "Keiko ga kuchi o kiru." in Japanese translates, literally as "Keiko cuts her mouth.". However, the real English meaning is "Keiko starts the conversation."

I suppose such expressions as (3) are the most difficult to understand and learn the meaning of, since they span different concepts of culture. I would like to discuss this using some more examples.

**[IV] Comparative idioms between English and Japanese in literature**  
**— focusing on the expressions of "hara" idioms**

**[IV]-1 The meaning of "Hara" in Japanese**

The literal meaning of "hara" is simply "stomach" located near the middle of our body, and also health and well-being. "Hara" is a point in our body which gives us mental and physical balance. "Hara" is one's contact with nature; or rather, "hara" is nature within our body. Traditionally, it has been believed that hara houses the spirit of courage, integrity, purity, flexibility, and mushin (or "no-mind"). This metaphysical meaning of "hara" is subject to varied interpretations and misinterpretations.

Michihiro Matsumoto (1988: 29-30) tells an interesting story of "hara" as follows:

"The Japanese intellectual kept silent, while smiling enigmatically and nodding in assent all the time. Erik Erikson, in the capacity of discussion leader, asked the Japanese, 'What is your view?'"

"Oooh, everyone's view" was the reply.

"Pardon?"

"Aaah, what they feel is what I feel."

"But everyone has a different argument."

"They're all the same to me."

"What makes you think their opinions are the same?"

"Because they are all thinking in their head."

"What's wrong with thinking in the head?"

"Such thinking gives rise to 'yes' or 'no'."

"What do you mean?"

"The essence of life is not 'yes' or 'no' but 'yes' and 'no'. If you think in terms of 'yes' or 'no', you'll lose the most important thing."

"And what is the most important thing?"

"Hara."

"What is hara ... mind or heart?"

"They are both part of hara. When hara is given rational definition, it is no longer hara."

#### [IV]-2 Idiom lists of "hara-expressions"

The fact that a country does not have a word for hara does not prove that the people of that country do not have hara. Comparing the idioms of hara-related words in Japanese and English, I would like to discuss different points of view for both cultures.

As seen in Table 4, we can recognize a lot of different cultural contexts in English in the literal translation of Japanese idioms of hara-related words. I have analyzed (1988) which idioms are used the most in Japanese novel "Botchan" by Natsume Soseki. The most used idiom was "Hara ga tatsu (to get angry in English). As I mentioned in page 5, a lot of foreigners cannot understand this usage, because they have been taught that the feeling of anger shows in the head, face and eyes.

To my surprise, the idiom "hara ga tatsu" is translated into various kinds of expressions in English and Chinese, translations of "Botchan" according to the context.

##### Example 1.

(J) Anmari hara ga tatta kara, te ni atatta higuruma o miken e tataki tsukete yatta. (p.9)

(E) I was terribly upset and slapped him across the face, ...

(C) 我愠三丈，将手中握着的“飞车”冲着他的眉宇拨过去。

##### Example 2.

(J) Ore wa hara ga tattakara, "Ee, syukuchoku desu" to itta. (p.33)

(E) I was angry, so, as a parting shot, I said, "Yes, I am on night duty."

(C) 我满肚子不高兴，说：“嗯，是我值班”。

##### Example 3.

(J) Ore wa Noda no iu imi wa wakaranai keredomo, nandaka hijoni hara ga tattakara, fukuan mo dekinai uchini tachiagatte shimatta.

(E) I felt very angry, so I stood up before I'd really planned what to say.

(C) 我虽然不明白小丑说的意思，不过心中十分气愤，没等打好腹稿就霍然。

It seems from the above comparison, that English and Chinese expressions concerning to get "angry" are much more descriptive than the Japanese idiom, "hara ga tatsu."

Now I would like to discuss whether the concept of "Hara" belongs: to the East or the West?

#### [IV]-3 Where does the concept of "Hara" belong, in the East or in the West?

Is hara unique to Japan? Michihiro Matsumoto (1988: 34) obtained various



responses during his trip all over the world as follows.

To the Japanese, silence in conversation can often convey a far more profound meaning than eloquence. As shown above, there are a lot of proverbial expressions concerning the effectiveness and wisdom of nonverbal communication, such as "The eyes tell as much as the mouth," and haragei (literally, the belly art) which refer to the idioms of hara-related words in Japanese. The unspoken way refers, in one simple sense, to a visceral communication among Japanese that defies Western logic.

With the idioms of "hara no ookii hito", "hara no chiisai hito", "hara no nai hito" and "hara no aru hito", we have to pay attention to the size of "hara". In the following section, I would like to discuss this.

#### **[IV]-4 The size of "hara"**

"Hara" means big-heartedness, including caring, understanding, and tolerance for different views gained through experience, as in Table 4, the idiom lists of "hara-expressions".

A man of hara, or harano aru hito, as we say in Japan, is one who usually listens and seldom argues. A man of hara accepts things, people or arguments included, as they come and seldom makes value judgements or gets personally or emotionally involved.

There are some judgement expressions using the word of "hara".

1. "He has atama (head) but not hara. — Because anyone who lacks hara is not in full control of himself."
2. "He had a big head, a big heart, but a small hara."
3. "He has not got what it takes to become a man of hara."

Feeling out each other's "unproven potential" (hara) is the name of the game in the haragei country of Japan, because it is common knowledge that one's hara must not be analyzed but subtly felt. This is why the Japanese favor a "round-about" approach like mondo or "undialectic" dialogue compared with Western people, who generally prefer to state their opinions as explicitly, logically, and objectively as possible by following a "step-by-step" approach.

Different logic reveals different cultures. English speaking countries are a why-because culture. Japan is a non-why non-because culture. The Japanese terms for why is naze or wake. Wake, roughly, means two things in the Japanese lexicon:

- a) reason and b) situation (or circumstance).

Actually the Japanese culture takes precedence over reason. What Japanese call "reason beyond reason" is a haragei practitioner's stock in trade. The very

nature of this principle-free principle leads foreign observers to suspect that the Japanese have no principles.

Finally, I would like to discuss how the Japanese develop the concept of the culture.

#### **[IV]-5 The development of "hara" concept**

Hara is difficult to develop through intellectual processes like reading books or hearing lectures, but relatively easy when given the infusion of experience. Hara, for most people, like wine, improves with age. In my personal experience, when I wanted to argue with someone, my mother told me in Japanese. "Hara o tatenaide, hara ni suenasai. Motto hara no ookii hito ni narinasai." (Do not get angry, and keep calm. You have to become a big-hearted person.) When I was a little girl, I could not understand the meaning. However, nowadays I can understand the real meaning through various kinds of experiences.

Michihiro Matsumoto (1988: 59-60) suggests three stages of hara development:

- (1) Child: hara-free stage. Children cannot control emotions, feelings, or compulsion. They "tell it like it is" compulsively. This shows that they lack hara. Children learn to play games - telling it like it isn't.
- (2) Adult: hara-developing stage. Situational ethics. People learn to practice emotional control - the first step in mastering haragei. They learn the art of gaman (it takes hara to be patient), and discipline themselves not to ask why. They play games, but cannot perform haragei yet.
- (3) Parent: hara-developed stage. They can be held accountable for what their hara leads them to do. The mind can be changed; but hara must be preserved, private and firm. For a man of hara, his hara is his bond.

#### **[V] Conclusion**

I discussed in this paper how the Japanese idioms show the individuality between language and culture compared to English and Chinese idioms, particularly focusing on the hara-oriented idioms. This paper supports the idea of "Linguistic relativism" by Whorf, that our view of the world, the way we can categorize our experience and conceptualize our environment, is effectively determined by our language.

Since I lived in Australia for three years, I'm used to the western of "black and white" and my Japanese is also influenced by Western logic. Nowadays I recognize myself how my own western influenced logic will be changed in the Japanese culture.

**Table 4:** Vocabulary list of "hara-expressions"

Hara language	Literal translation	Cultural translation
Hara	Belly, abdomen, stomach	Heart, courage, vital body center, real intention, true motives
Hara-no-ookii-hito	A man of big hara	A generous person, a big-hearted person usually a man with charisma
Hara-no-chiisai-hito	A man of small hara	A selfish person, an overly cautious and unforgiving person
Hara-no-dekita-hito	A man of developed hara	An ego-free (self-effacing) person, a tolerant (disciplined) person
Hara-no-suwatta-hito	A man of sedate hara	An irresolute man, a sedate man
Hara-no-kuroi-hito	A man of black hara	A scheming person
Hara-de-kangaeru	Think with hara	Hara-think (my coinage), think extra-logically, think uncalculatingly
Hara-no-naka-o-miseru	Not showing the inside of one's hara	Not revealing one's true motives or showing one's cards
Hara-no-saguri-ai	Feel each others's hara	Feel each other out, feel each other's pulse
Hara-ni-osameru	Keep something in one's hara	Keep something to oneself
Hara-ga-tatsu	Hara stands up	Get angry
Hara-mo-tatanai	Even hara does not stand up	It's beyond indignation
Hara-ni-kiku	Listen to one's hara	Follow one's conscience
Hara-o-neru	Train one's hara	Try to gain impermeability
Hara-no-nerete-inai-hito	A man with untrained hara	A shallow thinker without experience
Hara-o-kimeru	Make up one's hara	Make up one's mind
Hara-o-sueru	Set one's hara	Brace oneself, be prepared
Hara-o-waru	Slit open one's hara	Get things off one's chest
Hara-o-miseru	Show one's hara	Show sincerity
Hara-o-watte-hanasu	Open one's hara and talk	Let it all hang out, talk things over
Hara-o-yomu	Read one's hara	Read into one's mind
Itakumonai-hara-o-saguru	Having one's hara treated when it feels no pain	Be unjustly suspected
Hara-ni-ichimotsu-aru	Having something in one's	Have an axe to grind
Hara-o-kukuru	Fasten one's hara	Burn one's bridges
Hara-ni-suekaneru	Cannot put something in one's hara	Cannot put up with, cannot stomach

Hara-no-futoi	Having a fan hara	Forgiving or tolerant
Hara-no-mushi-ga-osamaranai	Stomach worms cannot be pacified	Cannot control one's feelings

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## 「異文化」における慣用句の比較

廣内裕子

言語と文化との関係は、ある言語が話せればその国の文化が理解できるような単純なものではない。

ウィットゲンシュタインは、言語と文化との関係を「言語を話す人の生活様式」であるとし、"To imagine one language is nothing but to image one living style." と定義づけている。言語と文化との関係は歴史的に "linguistic relativism" と "linguistic determinism" との二つの考え方の流れがあり、前者は「思考や経験の対象が同じであっても、言語表現によって異なる。」が、後者は「言語は私達の思考と経験を説明するのに用いる手段ではなく、私達の思考と経験の方法に影響する機能を備えている。」という立場をとっている。

本論では、前者の立場に立って、『日本語の慣用句』が言語と文化との関係でいかにユニークなものであるかを英語と中国語との慣用句を比較しながら考察する。