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***Mottainai* as a Japanese Cultural Keyword**  
**- A Key Semantic Difference to the English Word *Waste* -**

SAKABA Hiromichi

## **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to unpack the meaning of the Japanese term *mottainai*, one of the culturally important concepts in Japan. *Mottainai* is an adjective commonly used in daily life and often used to encourage children not to leave a single grain of rice in their bowls. It has also attracted attention outside of Japan. Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmentalist who won the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, introduced the concept *mottainai* as a slogan to promote environmental protection at a session of the United Nations. This term, she believes, perfectly encapsulates the spirit of the 3Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle). It is noteworthy that she used the Japanese term *mottainai* without translating it into English.

Is there any English concept equivalent to the concept of *mottainai*? Referring to the Japanese-English dictionaries at hand, let us see how *mottainai* is commonly translated into English. In the following examples, “to let the water run like that” in (1) and “to drop the ice cream” in (2) are described as *mottainai*. Both of them are translated into English as *waste* in the Japanese-English dictionaries.

- (1) Mizu-wo sonnani nagashite-wa *mottainai*.

water-ACC like that let run-TOP waste

‘What a waste to let the water run like that!’

(Shogakukan PROGRESSIVE Japanese-English Dictionary)

- (2) “Katta bakari-no aisukuriimu-wo jimen-ni otoshichatta.” “Aa, *mottainai*.”

bought just-GEN ice cream-ACC ground on dropped oh waste

“The ice cream I had just bought fell on the ground.” “Oh, what a waste.”

(O-LEX Japanese-English Dictionary)

The original sentence and the English translation above appear to express similar meanings. However, if the meaning conveyed by the term *mottainai* is precisely the same as that of *waste*, there would be no need to import the term *mottainai* as a global slogan for environmental protection.

This study aims to clarify the meaning of the Japanese concept *mottainai*, especially by comparing it with the meaning of the English word *waste*. It will be shown that the difference in meaning between them is the motivation behind the adoption of *mottainai* in environmental protection campaigns, as well as another extended use of *mottainai* that is not normally translated as *waste*.

## 2. Previous Studies

Section 2.1 reviews previous studies on the relationship between the concept *mottainai* and environmental protection. Introducing the concept of cultural keywords, 2.2 argues that *mottainai* can be regarded as one of the Japanese cultural keywords. 2.3 gives an overview of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach, which makes it possible to define the meaning of such culture-specific concepts in a way that can be understood by cultural outsiders.

### 2.1. *Mottainai* as a Global Slogan for Environmental Protection

As briefly mentioned, Wangari Maathai was attempting to spread the Japanese term *mottainai* as a slogan for environmental protection without deliberately translating it into English.

- (3) On a visit to Japan, Dr. Maathai was deeply impressed by the expression *mottainai*, and became determined to publicize it to the world. At the United Nations session, Dr. Maathai, brandishing a t-shirt emblazoned with the term MOTTAINAI, explained that the meaning of the term *mottainai* encompasses the four Rs of reduce, reuse, recycle and repair.

(Sasaki 2006: 125)

Some previous studies have examined the role of the concept of *mottainai* in Japanese culture concerning food waste. Based on the analysis of the daily life of Japanese consumers, Sirola et al., (2019: 8) make the observation that the concept of *mottainai* “seemed to guide the participants’ behavior in various everyday situations and facilitated precision in consuming ingredients fully” and “also guided the participants to buy only necessary food products, consume all the leftovers, and plan so that nothing goes to waste”. This is represented by the comment made by one of the subjects “[t]he expression and idea of *mottainai* is infiltrated to Japanese people and I, as well, keep that always in mind” (Sirola et al., 2019: 8).

Thus, *mottainai* has received a considerable amount of attention from the perspective of environmental protection and can act as one of the principles of behaviour in Japanese culture. The next section will show that *mottainai* can be regarded as a cultural keyword, a concept that plays an important role in Japanese culture.

### 2.2. *Mottainai* as a Japanese Cultural Keyword

The concept of a cultural keyword was popularized by Wierzbicka (1997), who claims that every language has a set of key terms that reflect the core values of its culture. An analysis of the concepts that have a significant role in culture provides valuable insights into the culture. Currently, terms such as *enryo*, *on* or *omoiyari* have been studied as cultural keywords in Japanese.

- (4) [A] key word such as *enryo* (roughly ‘interpersonal restraint’), *on* (roughly ‘debt of gratitude’) and *omoiyari* (roughly ‘benefactive empathy’) in Japanese can lead us to the center of a whole complex of cultural values and attitudes, expressed, inter alia, in common conversational routines and revealing a whole network of culture-specific “cultural scripts”. (Wierzbicka 1997: 17)

Wierzbicka (1997) lists a number of criteria for cultural keywords. For instance, “the word in question is a common word” and “very frequently used in one particular semantic domain” such as “the domain of emotions” or “moral judgments” (Wierzbicka 1997: 16). *Mottainai* can also be regarded as a keyword in Japanese culture, as it is often used in everyday life and can act as a guide for behaviour concerning food waste.

It is not easy to explain the meaning of such a culture-specific concept to those who are unfamiliar with the given culture. If you use the English word *waste* to describe the meaning of *mottainai* to a native speaker of English, the detailed differences in meaning between them will be overlooked. To overcome this problem, this study employs Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014), an analytical framework that allows for the definition of culture-specific concepts in a way that can be understood by those who do not belong to that culture.

### 2.3. Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) is a metalanguage for describing the meaning of language. NSM assumes the existence of self-evident concepts named *semantic primes* and describes meaning by decomposing concepts into them. Based on an empirical investigation of over 30 languages, the following approximately 65 capitalised concepts are posed as semantic primes, which are presumed to be expressible in all languages.

Substantives:	I~ME, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY
Relational substantives:	KIND, PARTS
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW
Evaluators:	GOOD, BAD
Descriptors:	BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates:	KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON’T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech:	SAY, WORDS, TRUE
Actions, events, movement, contact:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH
Location, existence, specification:	BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE)’S, BE (SOMEONE / SOMETHING)
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE
Time:	WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
Space:	WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF

Intensifier, augmentor:	VERY, MORE
Similarity:	LIKE~WAY~AS

Table 1. Semantic primes (English exponents), grouped into related categories  
(Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014: 12)

The semantic primes have restrictions on how they can be combined. The following are some combinations allowed in FEEL.

- (5) someone FEELS like this  
 someone FEELS something (good / bad)  
 someone FEELS something (good / bad) toward someone else

Finally, this study makes use of the concept of semantic templates, which has been recently introduced into the NSM. The NSM explications for words with a similar meaning have a common structural pattern. Semantic templates allow for words with similar semantic structures to be described in a way that reflects their similarity. Goddard (2018) presents the following four templates for English adjectives related to evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

Groupings	Examples
A: “First-person thought-plus-feeling” words	<i>great, wonderful, terrific</i>
B1 & B2: “Experiential” evaluators	<i>exciting, entertaining, delightful</i>
C: “Lasting effect”	<i>powerful, memorable, inspiring</i>
D: Purely cognitive evaluators	<i>complex, excellent, brilliant</i>

Table 2. Groupings for English evaluational adjectives (positive words only)  
(Based on Goddard 2018: 102)

*Mottainai*, an adjective that evaluates a certain event as in (1) or (2), is considered to belong to group A. Goddard mentions two types of linguistic evidence to identify which group a word belong to. The first is the possibility of co-occurrence with the verb *feel*. Adjectives from group A can follow the verb *feel*, as in *I feel great/ wonderful/ terrific*. On the other hand, adjectives from the other groups are basically impossible as in *\*I feel exciting/ complex*.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, they can be used as a self-contained word with an exclamation mark, as in *Great!/ Wonderful!/ Terrific!*.

The term *mottainai* passes the two linguistic tests above. Regarding the first, FEEL, one of the English primes, is equivalent to KANJIRU in the Japanese primes (Asano-Cavanagh and Farese 2015).

<sup>1</sup> B1 and B2 are treated as the same group as there is little difference in their templates.

<sup>2</sup> The linguistic evidence given by Goddard should be considered as a rough guide, as some adjectives from other groups can follow *feel*, as in *I feel powerful/ excellent*.

The adjective *mottainai* can be followed by the verb KANJIRU (FEEL) as in *mottainaku kanjiru*.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, it can be used as a self-contained word with an exclamation mark, as in *Mottainai!* This study makes use of the following semantic template for group A to define the meaning of *mottainai*.

(6) Template A: “*first-person thought + feeling*”

a. I think about this X like this: [first-person thought]

b. “ ——  
—— ” [thought content]

c. when I think like this, I feel something (very) good/ bad because of it [feeling]

(Based on Goddard 2018: 103)

The template (6) is composed of three components. The semantic component (6a) introduces what the speaker thinks about X. Component (6b) is the content of thought, and the group A adjectives differ mainly in this part. Finally, component (6c) describes the feeling that results from the thought.

Section 3 attempts to define the meaning of *mottainai*, which can be regarded as a Japanese cultural keyword, in a format based on the semantic template (6).

### 3. Semantic Analysis of *Mottainai*

This section discusses the meaning of *mottainai* based on its usage. 3.1 presents the NSM explication for *mottainai*, showing that it suggests that another very good event could have occurred if the event had not occurred. 3.2 points out that this is the key difference between *mottainai* and *waste*, which makes *mottainai* attractive as an environmental slogan and allows its extended usage not found in *waste*.

#### 3.1. The Semantic Explication for *Mottainai*

First of all, let us consider the examples of the use of *mottainai* once again. The first two sentences (7) and (8) are the repeated examples of *mottainai* in (1) and (2).

(7) Mizu-wo sonnani nagashite-wa *mottainai*.<sup>4</sup>

water-ACC like that let run-TOP *mottainai*

‘It is *mottainai* to let the water run like that.’

(= (1))

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that English adjectives follow the verb *feel*, whereas Japanese adjectives precede *kanjiru*.

<sup>4</sup> As seen in (1) and (2), the English-Japanese dictionaries offer an English translation for *mottainai* based on the use of *waste*. To focus attention on the semantic differences between *mottainai* and *waste*, *mottainai* remains untranslated in both the gloss and the translation provided in (7-9).

- (8) “Katta bakari-no aisukuriimu-wo jimen-ni otoshichatta.” “Aa, *mottainai*.”  
 bought just-GEN ice cream-ACC ground on dropped oh *mottainai*  
 “‘The ice cream I had just bought fell on the ground.’” “Oh, *mottainai*.” (= (2))
- (9) Sonnani kami-o nanmai-mo tsukatte-wa *mottainai*.  
 so many paper-ACC sheets use-TOP *mottainai*  
 ‘It is *mottainai* to use so many sheets of paper.’  
 (Kenkyusha’s New Japanese-English Dictionary)

What is common in (7-9) is that the speaker uses the term *mottainai* to describe each event (‘to run too much water’, ‘to drop the ice cream’ or ‘to use so many sheets of paper’). When these events happen, they perceive them as something bad. At the same time, it suggests that some very good things could have happened if such an event had not occurred (a lot of paper or water has many uses and eating ice cream makes many people happy). Thus, the occurrence of a bad event, which is described as *mottainai*, suggests that what has been lost is something of value. As a result of the loss of something valuable, the speaker has a bad feeling. This study proposes the following explication (10) for *mottainai* based on the semantic template (6).

- (10) *X is mottainai* (e.g. X = to run too much water, to use so many sheets of paper)
- a. I think like this when something like X happens:<sup>5</sup>
  - b. “something bad happened  
 if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen”
  - c. when I think like this, I feel something bad<sup>6</sup> because of it

The explication (10) is composed of three components. Component (a) introduces the thought at the time of the occurrence of an event like X. Component (b) indicates that the speaker thinks that ‘something bad happened’ and ‘if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen.’ Consequently, they feel something bad as suggested by component (c).

Regarding component (b), ‘something bad happened’ shows that the speaker sees the event described as *mottainai* as something bad, which implies the event like that should not occur. Next, the component ‘if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen’ predicts

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<sup>5</sup> The adjective *great*, which belongs to the same group A as *mottainai*, modifies things as in *a great movie*. *Mottainai*, on the other hand, basically modifies an event, so component (a) is proposed here as not ‘I think about this X like this’ in (6), but ‘I think like this when something like X happens’.

<sup>6</sup> Goddard (2018: 103) argues that group A adjectives in English involve extreme feelings (not just ‘good’, but ‘very good’). It is worth noting that the Japanese term *mottainai* does not follow this tendency.

that the acceptability of *mottainai* decreases in contexts where it is difficult to perceive that the occurrence of a bad event prevents the occurrence of another worthwhile event. In (11), a modified example of (2), the component ‘something bad happened’ is satisfied in that the ice cream is dropped and becomes inedible. The acceptability of *mottainai* depends on whether it is possible for the speaker to think that ‘if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen.’

- (11) “{Katta bakari-no/ ? Nokori hitokuchi-no / ?? Hotondo tabeowatta} aisukuriimu-wo  
 {bought just-GEN/ remaining a bite-GEN / almost finished eating} ice cream-ACC  
 jimen-ni otoshichatta.” “Aa, *mottainai*.  
 ground on dropped oh *mottainai*  
 “{The ice cream I had just bought / ? A bite of ice cream/ ?? Almost finished ice cream}  
 fell on the ground.” “Oh, *mottainai*.”

In (11), as the amount of ice cream dropped reduces, the acceptability of *mottainai* decreases. Firstly, the fact that the someone dropped the one that has just been bought implies that they could have eaten the whole thing. As it is easy for the speaker to think that ‘if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen’, the term *mottainai* can be felicitously used. Secondly, if the dropped object is a small bite of ice cream, it becomes less acceptable as it is more difficult to think in the same way. Lastly, if the item dropped is an ice cream that has almost been eaten, it becomes even less acceptable. As there is little to lose, it is highly unlikely to think that another very good event could have occurred.

Thus, *mottainai* suggests not only the occurrence of a bad event but also the possibility that a very good event could have occurred if that event had not occurred. The next section will argue that this is the key difference between *mottainai* and *waste*.

### 3.2. The Semantic Difference between *Mottainai* and the English word *Waste*

As discussed above, the Japanese word *mottainai* is basically translated into the English word *waste*. This section aims to clarify the differences in meaning between *mottainai* and *waste* through the observation of cases where *mottainai* cannot be translated into *waste* and the other way around. This study claims that the meaning represented by the component of the explication for *mottainai* ‘if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen’ proposed in 3.1 is the key difference between *mottainai* and *waste*, which often prevents the one from acting as a translation of the other.

Firstly, let us observe the cases where *waste* cannot be translated into *mottainai*. The term *waste* describes the time consumed meaninglessly to talk with someone in (12) or convince



someone in (13). The English-Japanese dictionaries provide a Japanese translation using the Japanese word *mudada* (roughly, ‘wasteful’) as the equivalent of *waste*.

(12) Your talking with him is a complete waste of time.

‘Kare to sodan suru no wa mattaku jikan {-no mudada/ ? -ga mottainai} yo.’

(O-LEX English-Japanese Dictionary)

(13) Trying to convince him that you are right is a waste of time. He is sure that you are wrong.

‘Anata ga tadashii to kare ni settoku suru koto wa jikan {-no mudada/ ? -ga mottainai}.

Kare wa anata ga machigatte iru to kakushin shite imasu.’

(Genius English-Japanese Dictionary)

In (12) and (13), it would be unnatural to translate *waste* as *mottainai*. The reason why *mudada* works as a better translation than *mottainai* in (12) and (13) is due to the semantic component of *mottainai* ‘if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen’. The speaker in (12) and (13) is certain that the event, which is described as *waste*, is meaningless as represented by the word ‘complete’ in (12) or the subsequent sentence ‘He is sure that you are wrong’ in (13). The emphasis is on the futility of the time spent on conversation or persuasion, not on the other things that could have been done with the time lost. These contexts do not encourage the speaker to think that ‘if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen’.

If the succeeding sentence sheds light on other, better possibilities as in (12)’ or (13)’, the acceptability of *mottainai* increases as follows.

(12)’ Your talking with him is a complete waste of time. You should talk to someone more trustworthy.

‘Kare to sodan suru no wa mattaku jikan {-no mudada/ -ga mottainai} yo. Motto shinraidekiru hito ni soudan subekida.’

(13)’ Trying to convince him that you are right is a waste of time. You should spend your time in a more meaningful way.

‘Anata ga tadashii to kare ni settoku suru koto wa jikan {-no mudada/ -ga mottainai}. Motto yuigi ni jikan o tsukaubekida.’

Changing the following sentence to ‘You should talk to someone more trustworthy’ in (12)’ or ‘you should spend your time in a more meaningful way’ in (13)’ shifts the focus on the other things that could have been done with the time lost. It becomes easier to think ‘if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen’ and the acceptability of *mottainai* increases.

Next, let us look at cases where the use of English *waste* as a translation for Japanese *mottainai* sounds unnatural. *Mottainai* can be used to describe not only certain events but also people or things. It describes the addressee's wife in (14) and the compliment the speaker received in (15), in the form *X niwa mottainai* 'mottainai to X'. In this case, *too good* or *more than I deserve* is used instead of *waste* to convey a meaning close to that of the original sentence.

(14) Kimi niwa *mottainai* okusan-desune.

you to *mottainai* wife-COP

'Your wife is too good for you.'<sup>7</sup>

(O-LEX Japanese-English Dictionary)

(15) Watashi no youna mono niwa *mottainai* ohome-no kotoba-desu.

1SG like person to *mottainai* praise-GEN word-COP

'Your praise is more than I deserve.'

(Shogakukan PROGRESSIVE Japanese-English Dictionary)

The speaker in (14) evaluates that the addressee's wife is too good for the addressee, implying that it would be better for her to get married with someone else. In (15), the speaker thinks that someone else should receive the addressee's compliment. Such usage of *mottainai*, which describes people or things, needs another NSM explication as it cannot be covered by the explication that involves the occurrence of an event as represented by component (6a) 'something bad happened'.

Still, this extended usage of *mottainai* seems to share the component 'if something like this didn't happen, something very good could happen'. The use of *mottainai* in (14) or (15) highlights not so much the pointlessness of the addressee's wife's getting married with the addressee or the addressee's praising the speaker. It lays emphasis on the possibility that another better event could have occurred. The speaker in (14) thinks that if she had got married with someone else, she might have had a happier life. In (15), it might have been better if someone else had been praised. To highlight another better possibility like these, *too good* or *more than I deserve* is used as a translation for *mottainai* instead of *waste*.

Thus, the component 'if something like this didn't happen, something very good could happen' can motivate the extended uses of *mottainai* such as (14) or (15). It is also related to the fact that *mottainai* has attracted attention as an environmental slogan, as seen in Section 2. Indeed, as with *mottainai*, the term *waste* can be used to warn against behaviour that is not good for the environment, such as excessive use of water like (1). However, the use of *mottainai* also implies that there are

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, *waste* can also be used in a translation of *mottainai* in (14) as in "Your wife is wasted on you". This expression, however, focuses on what is lost by marrying the current partner, rather than on other better possibilities. It is therefore likely that the Japanese-English dictionary preferred to use the expression *too good* as a translation.

more effective ways to use something. In other words, *mottainai* not only discourages people from using something in a non-eco-friendly way, but also suggests that it is a valuable thing that could be used in a better way. In recognising the value of something, *mottainai* can work better to encourage people to appreciate things and be careful not to harm the environment. For this reason, *mottainai* is more suitable for a global slogan to guide our actions on environmental protection.

The key difference between *mottainai* and *waste* is represented by the component ‘if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen’. It can motivate an extended usage of *mottainai* not found in *waste*, and its adoption as an international environmental slogan.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

This study analyses the meaning of *mottainai*, which has attracted attention as a global slogan for environmental protection, from the perspective of cultural keywords in Japanese. Using NSM as an analytical framework to define the meaning based on the concepts that are assumed to exist in all languages, this study attempted to clarify its meaning in a way that is accessible to cultural outsiders. It was also pointed out that the meaning of *mottainai* represented by the component ‘if something like this didn’t happen, something very good could happen’ is the key difference in meaning from the English word *waste*, and that this can motivate an extended use of *mottainai* and its adoption as a slogan for environmental protection. The NSM explication for the English word *waste* and its further differences from the term *mottainai*, which could not be dealt with in this study for reasons of space, will be the subject of future work.

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