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# Describing lexical meanings for language learners: some culinary cases from Japanese

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## Abstract

This article is concerned with the description and presentation of lexical meanings in bilingual dictionaries. Using everyday Japanese terms from the domain of food as examples, it considers various types and formats of semantic information required by English-speaking learners. Points emphasized include the importance of information on intralingual semantic relations, and the use of a variety of methods, both verbal and pictorial, in describing denotation. The article points out the shortcomings of L1 glosses, including their inherent inability to capture intralingual aspects of meaning and their frequent failure to reflect cultural content. It also demonstrates the fact that pictorial illustrations used in dictionaries may incorporate a particular cultural perspective.

**Keywords** : semantics ; lexicology ; bilingual lexicography ; cultural connotations.

## 1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the description and presentation of word meanings from the viewpoint of foreign learners. It considers questions of semantic description raised by some basic Japanese words from a familiar area of everyday experience, and explores ways to present key associated information effectively to English-speaking learners.

The acquisition of competence in a second language includes the acquisition of semantic competence, which in turn takes in mastery of the meanings of

lexical items as a major component: an important aim of language teaching is to enable students to gain an accurate appreciation of the meaning of large numbers of L2 words. The most widely used tools in this enterprise are (i) L1 glosses, as widely employed in language textbooks and in bilingual dictionaries, and (ii) L2 definitions, as found in monolingual dictionaries. Both have well-known shortcomings. Since it is comparatively rare for the meanings of words in different languages to coincide exactly, in many cases L1 glosses give only a rough indication of L2 meanings. Monolingual dictionaries give fuller definitions, but they are designed either as dictionaries for native speakers of L2 or as general-purpose learners' dictionaries and may take for granted aspects of meaning which are not controlled by learners with a particular L1.

Our focus will be on description and presentation in Japanese-English bilingual dictionaries. The general point to be emphasized is that materials for learners with a given L1 need to focus above all on significant semantic differences between similar items in the two languages treated, and to make use of a variety of methods in order to present this information most effectively.

These requirements can only be met on the basis of careful semantic analysis of both languages, with full attention being given to all facets of meaning. Lexical meaning has two aspects: word-to-word relations, and word-to-world denotation (cf Lyons 1968, 1977). Word-to-word (intralingual) relations involve semantic facts such as that, in Japanese, *yaku* and *ageru* are related by exclusion, *shiitake* is a hyponym of *kinoko*, *gussuri* syntagmatically implies the verb *nemuru* or *neru*, etc. These relations are reflected in the fact that, for example:

*Kore wa yaku n desu ka*

–*Iie, ageru n desu*

is a semantically coherent exchange in Japanese whereas

*Kore wa yaku n desu ka*

–*Hai, ageru n desu*

is not. Semantic relations of this kind are sometimes hinted at in definitions, and some dictionaries employ intralingual conventions (such as the use of  $\longleftrightarrow$  in Japanese works to indicate opposites), but in general this aspect of meaning is widely neglected in lexicography. Word-to-world (extralingual) meaning involves the common-sense notion of 'what' a word means, i. e. what aspect of the world of our experience a word denotes. Thus the verb *yaku* describes the cooking of food by the application of direct heat, etc. Extralingual meaning in dictionaries is most commonly described verbally, through definitions or indicated by bilingual glosses; in suitable cases these may be supplemented by other means, such as pictures or diagrams.

The two aspects of meaning are complementary. Extralingually, the Japanese verb *haku* denotes the action of putting on articles of clothing, including footwear, on the lower body; *haku* is thus semantically compatible with the nouns *kutsu* and *zubon*, but not normally with *burauusu* or *uwagi*. Intralingually, this is reflected in the fact that, in the semantic organization of the Japanese vocabulary, *haku* is related by exclusion to the verb *kiru* (which denotes putting on clothes which involve the upper body) and, like *kiru*, by opposition to *nugu* (which denotes taking clothes off the body). (Cf Backhouse 1981.) Both aspects of meaning are controlled by native speakers, in the sense that they are reflected in the semantic properties of their utterances and in the inferences which they draw from the utterances of others. They will be further illustrated in the examples taken up below.

## 2. Some illustrations

### 2.1 *Jamu* and *maamareedo*

As a first example we take a pair of loanwords from English, *jamu* and *maamareedo*. While such loanwords in Japanese appear to be readily semantically accessible to English-speaking learners, it is well known that, for a variety of reasons, they commonly show subtle differences of meaning from their source words.

The present examples are a good illustration. In (British) English *jam* and *marmalade* are contrast terms, related by exclusion, as reflected in everyday English utterances like *Would you like jam, or marmalade?* (cf *Would you like coffee, or tea?*). Similarly, in English one cannot use *jam* (*Could you pass the jam, etc*) to refer correctly to marmalade. In Japanese, by contrast, *Jamu ga ii desu ka, maamareedo ga ii desu ka* is not a coherent utterance, and marmalade may be referred to by the word *jamu*. The intralingual relations are different in the two languages :

English		Japanese	
<i>jam</i>	<i>marmalade</i>	<i>jamu</i>	
<i>strawberry jam</i> etc		<i>ichigojamu</i>	<i>maamareedo</i>

Unlike in English, where *jam* and *marmalade* ‘count as’ distinct parallel categories, in Japanese *maamareedo* is categorized as one sub-type of *jamu* (cf Miyajima 1983: 33). It follows that the extralingual range of *jamu* in Japanese (‘made from fruit’) is wider than that of English *jam* (‘made from non-citrus fruit’).<sup>1</sup>

Is there any reason why English, unlike Japanese, should draw a clear category distinction between these substances? Not all semantic facts can be related in an obvious way to cultural factors, but in this case it seems that there is such a correlation. These are substances that are made to eat, and in Britain jam and marmalade are traditionally eaten in different circumstances. Marmalade is typically eaten at breakfast, spread on toast (*toast and marmalade* is a common collocation), whereas jam is associated with meals or snacks taken later in the day, such as afternoon tea (which might include *jam and scones*), or is used as an ingredient in cakes or pastry items (*jam tarts, jam doughnuts*). In Japan, by contrast, both jam and marmalade are eaten on bread or toast at breakfast or lunch; they are also added as sweeteners to items such as plain yoghurt.

These differences in intralingual meaning and in typical eating habits are

the key semantic facts about these words which learners need to know, but existing dictionaries vary both in the range and accuracy of their semantic descriptions. Bilingual dictionary glosses equate *jam* and *jamu*, and *marmalade* and *maamareedo*. In English monolingual dictionaries, LDOCE (*jam*: ‘a very thick sweet substance made from boiled fruit and sugar and eaten especially on bread’; *marmalade*: ‘a jam (*sic*) made from fruit such as oranges, lemons or grapefruit, usually eaten at breakfast’) indicates their place in the diet but incorrectly represents the intralingual relation between the two terms in everyday language. In Japanese, Shinmeikai’s definitions (*jamu*: ‘Kajitsu no niku ni satoo o kuwaete nitsumeta shokuhin’; *maamareedo*: ‘Orenji, natsumikan nado no kawa o mazete tsukutta jamu’) capture the intralingual relations but omit any indication of how they are typically eaten in the culture.

Suggested bilingual entries incorporating essential semantic information for these items are given below. They combine L1 glosses, extralingual information, and a specification of intralingual relations.

*JAMU*:

*jam, marmalade*

Eaten on bread or toast, added to yoghurt etc

*MAAMAREEDO*:

Is a kind of *JAMU*

*marmalade*

## 2.2 An

Consideration of jam and marmalade leads us to the Japanese word *an*, which raises quite different semantic problems. *An* is in many respects the traditional Japanese cultural equivalent of British English *jam*. The main problem it raises is that it refers to a substance which does not exist in British culture.

*An* is a sweet substance with the consistency of paste, made chiefly from

*azuki* beans cooked with sugar, when it is purplish-brown in colour. Its main use is as a filler in Japanese-style cakes and confectioneries (*wagashi*), traditionally served with Japanese tea but nowadays often eaten as snacks. These come in various different types (such as *taiyaki*, *dorayaki*, *daifukumochi*, *manjuu*), all well-known to Japanese children. Popular non-traditional forms in which it is used are *anpan* and, more recently, *andoonatsu*.

*An* is thus a familiar everyday substance, universally known and encountered in Japan. In colloquial Japanese it is generally referred to by the synonymous term *anko*. A primary issue in presenting the meaning of culture-bound words of this kind concerns how best to render them in L1. Unless the term has been adopted as a loanword, this involves 'translating' it into the learners' language, which in turn requires the selection of a label which ideally conveys close cultural equivalence. Most bilingual dictionaries gloss *an* as *bean paste* and/or *bean jam*. Of these alternatives, *bean paste* captures the consistency of the substance, but does not suggest its taste (sweet) or its use (as a filler, rather than as a spread). *Bean jam* appears to be open to the objection that it is not really jam, since jam is made from fruit, not vegetables. However, our everyday vocabulary contains many familiar instances of this kind: a pineapple is not really an apple; the point is that it is like an apple in significant respects. In the same way *bean jam* captures the most important, functional similarities between the two, which relate to their place in the diet.

The following suggested Japanese-English entry for *an* combines a gloss, intralingual information, and key extralingual information presented verbally and pictorially:

AN:

*bean jam*

= ANKO (colloquial)

Sweet substance of paste-like consistency made from beans

(most commonly *azuki*)

Used mainly as a filler in Japanese-style cakes and confectioneries (*wagashi*), also in *anpan* etc

[Colour illustrations of items containing *an*]

## 2.3 Sanma

As further illustrations we move from processed food substances to naturally occurring food items. First we consider the word *sanma*. *Sanma* denotes a species of marine fish which in Japan is generally eaten salted and grilled and is especially associated with autumn, when it is at its most plentiful. It is nutritious and cheap, and is a familiar staple of home cooking and of bistro-style food (as opposed to that served in high-class restaurants).

As with *an*, the first issue that arises concerns how to render the word into English. Unlike the case of *an*, the fish, as a biological species, has an 'official' English designation, namely *Pacific saury* (cf Hosking 1996: 123). However this term occupies a totally different position in the vocabulary of English from that of *sanma* in Japanese, reflecting the different roles played by the corresponding entities in the two cultures. *Sanma* is an everyday word, with everyday collocations (*sanma o yaku*, *sanma no shioyaki*, *sanma no hiraki*). By contrast, *Pacific saury*, or even *saury*, is unfamiliar to the majority of English speakers.

This is not a unique case. Reflecting the important place traditionally occupied by fish in the diet of its speakers, Japanese is often said to possess a large vocabulary in this area. This is not as simple a matter as it seems: as here, English designations for the various species exist, but in many cases they form part of specialist nomenclatures as opposed to the everyday vocabulary. Similar cases are commonplace across languages, reflecting the fact that the social distribution of knowledge of particular domains varies across cultures. In one culture things are commonly talked about, in another they are not, and this is reflected in the status of the

associated lexical items.

Despite differences of detail, the linguistic problem is thus similar to that presented by the case of *an*. What is needed in a dictionary entry for *sanma* is an indication of a closer cultural equivalent. As well as *saurry*, a common equivalent given in bilingual dictionaries is *mackerel pike*. This term does not seem to occur elsewhere and has perhaps been coined for this purpose; its appropriacy is in any case questionable given that a pike is a larger, freshwater fish, with cultural associations of ferocity and at best a marginal place in the diet. *Mackerel*, though technically incorrect (mackerel are bigger than *sanma*, and *saba* is the accurate Japanese equivalent), has the advantage of being a familiar term to English speakers for a roughly similar species of food fish.

The prominent place of fish in the Japanese diet has further semantic consequences. A salient everyday functional division of food fish in Japanese distinguishes *shiro mi no sakana* ('white-fleshed fish') and *aomi no sakana* ('dark-fleshed fish'); the latter tend to be more oily and stronger-flavoured, and are only eaten raw (as *sashimi*) if very fresh. *Tai* and *hirame* are prominent representatives of the former category; *sanma*, like *saba* and *aji*, is a typical example of the latter. This is an important semantic relation, and it needs to be reflected in an adequate dictionary entry.

Suggested Japanese-English entry for *sanma*:

*SANMA*:

Is a kind of *AOMI NO SAKANA*

Mackerel-like fish (technically, *Pacific saury*), long and thin in shape

Eaten salted and grilled (*sanma no shioyaki*), cheap, familiar in home and bistro cooking, most plentiful in autumn

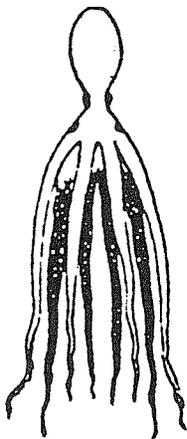
[Illustration of *sanma no shioyaki*]

## 2.4 Tako

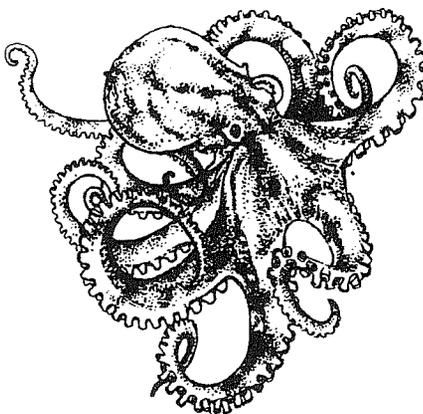
Unlike *sanma*, our final example denotes an entity whose English designation, *octopus*, belongs clearly within the everyday vocabulary. However, the creature concerned occupies totally different positions in the respective cultures. Once again, this relates primarily to function: in Japanese culture octopus is a familiar component of the diet, whereas in British culture it has not been traditionally regarded as a food item.

No doubt related to this basic difference, the wider cultural connotations of the two terms are quite distinct. In Japan, the octopus is a familiar figure in, for example, children's books, where it is often anthropomorphized wearing a headband (*hachimaki*), signifying hard work, as perhaps suggested by its multiple limbs. It is also known for its amusing habit of squirting ink in order to escape from its enemies. By contrast with this somewhat comical persona, its image in British culture is that of a grotesque, even sinister, creature. These cultural attitudes towards the entity are clearly reflected in language. In Japanese, *tako* are said to possess eight *ashi* ('legs'). The term *legs* may also be loosely applied in English, but the language has an alternative term, *tentacles*, for the relevant parts of octopuses and a few other creatures. *Tentacle* is defined in LDOCE as 'a long snakelike boneless jointless limb on certain creatures...'; the inherently sinister aspect of the meaning of this word is clearly apparent in its common extended use to refer to malevolent controlling influences of organizations (*tentacles of the bureaucracy / Mafia*, etc).

Interestingly, these differences also appear to be reflected in lexicographical illustrations. The illustrations of *tako* and *octopus* on the following page are taken from Koojirin (1973) and McArthur (1981) respectively. Japanese informants typically find the English illustration here somewhat fearsome; the prominent suckers, and the active pose, contrast strikingly with the more innocuous Japanese representation. With regard to the role of illustrations in dictionaries (cf Stein 1991 for some general discussion of this topic), they raise the important point that what



(*tako*: Koojirin)



(*octopus*: McArthur)

purport to be physical illustrations of the same entity may present it in different guises, suggesting different cultural perspectives. They also suggest that a less grotesque illustration should be used in a Japanese-English bilingual dictionary (assuming that a physical representation of the present kind is to be employed, as opposed, for example, to a more functional illustration of *tako* as a food item).

Suggested Japanese-English entry for *tako*:

*TAKO*:

*octopus*

Has eight *ashi*

Eaten, commonly raw or boiled

Thought of as endearing, comical

[Illustration (innocuous pose)]

### 3. Conclusions

This paper has explored some basic Japanese lexical items from the domain of food from the perspective of bilingual lexicography. Despite wide awareness that the meanings of vocabulary items in different languages

seldom match, entries in bilingual dictionaries still place great store on word-for-word glosses. In rare cases of one-to-one semantic matching, glosses may be sufficient for extralingual purposes, but as seen in the examples given here they generally require supplementation and in some cases even roughly equivalent glosses may not exist. Furthermore, glosses are inherently incapable of showing intralingual relations. The paper has emphasized the need for a range of both intralingual and extralingual information beyond the gloss, including illustrations. Satisfactory entries must be based on careful contrastive semantic analysis of L1 and L2, with presentation which focusses on significant differences between items in the two languages.

A recurring theme has been the prevalence of cultural considerations; in the present domain at least, language is placed very clearly in the matrix of culture. Cultural interest in the type of entities considered here focusses on their function as food items. The change in meaning seen in *jamu* and *maamareedo* reflects the fact that these substances are eaten in different ways in Japan from in Britain. Bilingual explications of *an* and *sanma* are in large measure explications of the place in the food culture of entities which have no exact equivalent in mainstream English-language cultures. In the case of *tako*, the entity is familiar but again its cultural place is different: what is the same physical item is not the same cultural item, and once again this requires explication.

In focussing on these semantic points, the paper has omitted considerations of other information which needs to be incorporated in such entries, including notably the need for examples, where we have done no more than mention certain common collocations. As argued convincingly in Fox (1987), there is a strong case for using attested examples in dictionaries. For this we need extended corpora. Needless to say, we also need them for semantic analysis.

## Notes

- 1 It appears that many other languages fail to echo the exclusion relationship found in English; in German, for example, the word *Marmelade* reportedly ranges over both substances (M Baumgartner, pc).

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## 語彙の意味の記述

—日本語の学習者の観点から—

A・E・バックハウス

学習者が第二言語の語彙の意味を習得する上で、辞書などでの記述に頼るところが極めて大きいことは言うまでもない。この小論では、特に二か国語辞典における語義記述に焦点を当て、いくつかの日常的な日本語の単語を取り上げながら、それらの和英辞典での望ましい取り扱い方を検討する。

語彙の意味にはその言語の単語間の意味関係 (intralingual meaning) と言語外の指示的意味 (extralingual meaning) の二つの側面がある。辞典での記述にはその両方を考慮すべきである。二か国語辞典では、第一言語による訳 (gloss) が中心になるのが一般であるが、第一言語の訳は、当然第二言語の単語間の意味関係を示すことはできない。また、言語外の指示的意味の説明には文化的な情報を必要とするケースが多々あるが、特定する単語が第二言語の文化独特の事物や現象を表す場合には、第一言語の訳が存在しないケースがあるし、訳が一応存在したとしてもその文化的背景が異なるケースが多い。本論では日本の食文化に関する単語をいくつか例に挙げて、辞書における記述をめぐるこれらの問題への対応を考える。訳ばかりでなく、単語間の意味関係の指摘、指示的意味の第一言語による定義・説明、およびイラストや写真の使用の重要性を強調する。また、イラストが文化的な要素を反映している点にも言及する。