

LEXICAL AND STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITY IN JAPANESE AND SOME COMPARISONS IN ENGLISH

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that ambiguity is evident in all natural languages of the world. Would it be correct, however, to say that one language or one culture is more ambiguous than any other? Which situations would we have to look at to prove that one language is more ambiguous than its neighbour? Non-native speakers of the language may well say that a certain language is difficult to learn because it is very ambiguous compared to their own language. This would not be enough to really prove that the language is in actual fact more ambiguous. Does the language seem ambiguous even for its native speakers? Is it difficult for their children to grasp the hidden meanings within the language? Or do these native speakers feel that they comfortably understand, or do not even notice, most ambiguous situations in their own language?

Lexical, structural or syntactic, and discourse are the standard categories used to distinguish different types of ambiguity in natural language. Lexical ambiguity constitutes ambiguity mostly on the word level. Structural or syntactic ambiguity looks at sentential sequences. Discourse ambiguity considers the overall linguistic situation, including context, topic of discussion, and speech acts. Most languages embrace all these forms of ambiguity in some sense.

In this paper the categories of lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity will be briefly discussed in relation to Japanese. Then the ways in which people understand ambiguity within their own language will be briefly reviewed. Finally, some problems in the translation of ambiguity between English and Japanese will be discussed.

2. LEXICAL AMBIGUITY

Parisi and Castelfranchi (1988: 134) have indicated that lexical ambiguity may be either mostly semantic, where the ambiguity occurs due to multiple readings in the semantic component of the words, or mostly syntactic, where the ambiguity is not due to any given word, but is due to the syntactic placement of the word. Homonymy and polysemy would constitute ambiguity at the semantic level. Categorical ambiguity would be mostly at the syntactic level of lexical ambiguity. The term mostly is used because there would be some overlap in the roles of the components between syntax and lexicon.

2.1. Homonymy

Homonymy is a very common source of lexical ambiguity. Words which sound alike are called homonyms, and words which are written alike are called homographs. Although the words sound or look identical, they have different meanings. English is rich in homonyms; just a few examples are: *spoke* as in 'wheel part' and 'talked'; *spring* as in 'jump' and 'season', *press* as in 'news' and 'push', *refrain* as in 'chorus' and 'stop'.

Japanese has an extensive number of homonyms as well. In some extreme cases such as the word *kanchou*, as many as twelve homonyms can be counted representing one phonological shape (Nishimitsu 1990). Therefore, in spoken discourse, there are many opportunities for ambiguous situations to arise due to homonymy. The following are examples¹ where homonyms play a role in lexical ambiguity.

- (1) a. Kono hon wa atsui desu.
this book TM thick/serious is
'This book is thick.'
????'This book is serious.' (Maybe used in literary sit.)
- b. Toufu-wo agete kudasai.
tofu OM fry/lift please
'Please fry the tofu.'
'Please raise/lift the tofu.'
- c. Kono yakimono-wa atsui desu.
this pottery TM thick/hot is
'This pottery is hot.'
'This pottery is thick.'

Homographs are words that look alike in their written form. Most homographs in English have identical phonological shapes. However, English has a few examples of homographs which do not match phonologically. Some examples are *bow* as in the sentences 'He gave a mocking bow to the ladies' and 'She had a bow in her hair', and *bass* as in 'He caught a bass on his fishing trip' and 'The bass on these speakers is not very good'.

Japanese ideographic kanji allow a few phonologically nonidentical homographs as does English. The lack of phonological correlation between the Japanese kanji and the phonological form of the words in question may even permit more of this type of homograph. The written form of the words *seibutsu* 'living things' and *namamono* 'raw food', *mokka* 'at present' and *meshita* 'inferior', *taisei* 'general situation' and *oozei* 'multitude' are three examples of homographs formed from kanji compounds (Nishimitsu 1990).

The multiple readings of individual kanji (non-compound) are extensive and could constitute a form of ambiguity in written discourse. However, a full discussion of the intricacies of kanji is beyond the scope of this paper.

2.2. Polysemy

Another source of ambiguity is when a single word has numerous meanings which are related to one another. This is called polysemy. In English one example of polysemy would be the word *open*, which can mean 'to expand', 'to reveal', 'to begin' and more (Kess, Uda, Copeland-Kess 1990).

Polysemy is extremely common in Japanese. One word may have many semantically related meanings. For example, the word *hayai* can mean both 'quick' and 'early', and the verb *akeru* can mean 'to open', 'to dawn', and 'to empty'. The difference may come not only in the full meaning of a word, but also in the non-explicit nuances contained in the meaning which may change the scope of the word's usage. For example, the word *hakaru* means 'to measure' with the nuances of 'to weigh', 'to measure height', 'to gauge' and the like.

2.3. Categorical Ambiguity

Categorical ambiguity includes words varying with respect to speech class; that is, whether they be a verb, a preposition/postposition, an adjective, a noun or a determiner. Words which differ categorically may have related meanings, or conversely they may be semantically unrelated. In some cases it is debatable whether categorical ambiguity should be treated as lexical ambiguity or as structural ambiguity. Categorical ambiguity occurs frequently in both English and Japanese.

The following sentences compare the postpositional conjunction *kara* meaning 'from' (2a), 'because' (2b) or 'after' (2c), the noun *kara* meaning shell (2d), and finally the adjective *kara* meaning 'empty' (2e). The first three examples are neither semantically related to one another nor are they related to the last two examples. Examples (2d) and (2e) are related to one another, but are not identical.

- (2)
- a. Paatii-wa hachiji kara hajimarimasu.
party TM 8 hour at/from start
'The party starts at (from) eight o'clock.'

 - b. Bangohan-wo tabete kara eiga ni itta.
supper OM eat after movie to went
'After eating supper, I went to a movie.'

 - c. Kyou- wa isogashii desu kara ashita kite kudasai.
today TM busy am because tomorrow come please
'Please come tomorrow because I'm busy today.'

 - d. Kono tamago-no kara- wo sutete kudasai.
this egg PM shell OM throw out please
'Please throw this egg shell out.'

- e. Kono hako-wa kara desu.
 this box TM empty is
 'This box is empty.'

Categorical ambiguity is the type of ambiguity leading most often to the "garden path" phenomenon in English. Consider the following sentences from Kawamoto (1988: 198). The words old and rash may be read adjectivally and as nouns. The word dog may be read as a noun and as a verb. Kawamoto believes the adjectival reading of the words old and rash will cause interference with the reading of the verb dog:

- (3) a. The old dog the footsteps of the young.
 b. The rash dogs the animals of the forest.

The word *aru* in Japanese could cause the equivalent of a garden path sentence. This word can be used as a verb in a relative clause meaning 'to exist', and as a form of determiner meaning 'a certain ...'. In the following sentence, there are two possible readings depending on the meaning of the word *aru* (Azuma and Tsukuma 1990). However, the ambiguity in this case can also be described as surface structure ambiguity. This will be further discussed under surface structure ambiguity.

- (4) Hanako wa toshokan ni aru hon wo mottekita.
 Hanako TM library in was book OM brought
 Hanako TM library in a certain book OM brought

- a. 'Hanako brought over the book which was (existed) in the library.'

In this case aru is used as a verb in a relative clause.

- b. 'In the library, Hanako brought over a certain book.'

In this case aru is used as a determiner for hon 'book'.

3. STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITY

When there is more than one interpretation for any given sentence, structural ambiguity is usually the cause. There are two forms of structural ambiguity: deep structure ambiguity and surface structure ambiguity. The interpretations that come from deep structure ambiguity are from different logical interpretations which underlie the same surface structure of a given sentence. The ambiguity within the deep structure of a sentence can usually be best explained using

two short, simple sentences. Surface structure ambiguity involves an analysis of the constituents within one sentence. The constituents within the sentence can be broken into smaller parts with different relationships. Both types of structural ambiguity occur in Japanese and in English.

3.1. Surface Structure Ambiguity

One form of surface structure ambiguity occurs when phrases incorporating coordinating conjunctions are modified by adjectives or numbers. Consider the following ambiguous Japanese sentences (Nagata 1989 and Nishimitsu 1990):

- (5) a. San'in dewa utsukushii umi to hitobito ni kangeki shita.
San'in in beautiful sea and people by impressed did

'I was impressed by the [beautiful [sea and people]] in the San'in district.'

'I was impressed by the [[beautiful sea] and people]] in the San'in district.'
- b. Kare no hare no ensetsu ni san-nin no musuko to musume
he PM speech to 3 people PM son and daughter
to tomo ni kikihaitte ita.
with listen did

'She listened to his speech with their three sons and one daughter.'

'She listened to his speech with their three sons and three daughters.'

Using Immediate Constituent analysis, an ambiguous sentence can be broken into constituent parts. Categorical ambiguity and surface structure ambiguity can overlap in their analyses here. The following examples in English and Japanese use square brackets to indicate the constituents to be placed together in each reading (Kess 1990 and Nagata 1989):

- (6) a. Hanako wa [[toshokan ni aru] hon] wo mottekita.
Hanako TM library in was book OM brought over
'Hanako brought over the book which was (existed) in the library.'

[toshokan ni aru] is part of a relative clause.

- b. Hanako wa toshokan ni [aru hon] wo mottekita.
 Hanako TM library in a certain book OM brought over
 'In the library, Hanako brought over a certain book.'

[aru hon] is a determiner plus a noun.

- c. They [were entertaining] guests.

Here, entertaining is part of the paraphrastic past progressive verb tense.

- d. They were [entertaining guests].

Here, entertaining is used as a predicate adjective.

In the following sentences only an analysis under structural ambiguity and not lexical ambiguity could be used to explain the different meanings involved (Nagata 1989):

- (7) a. [Kawaii [kodomo no youfuku]] ni botan ga mittsu tsuite ita.
 cute child PM clothes to button SM 3 piece attach did
 There were three buttons attached to the [cute
 [child's clothes]].
- b. [[Kawaii kodomo] no youfuku] ni botan ga mittsu tsuite ita.
 cute child PM clothes to button SM 3 piece attach did
 There were three buttons attached to the
 [[cute child's] clothes].
- c. Shinnin kyoushi wa [[shizuka ni kiite iru] seito] ni rekishi
 new person teacher TM [[quietly listen do] student] to history
 wo kattata.
 OM spoke
 'A new teacher spoke about history to his [pupils [who were
 listening quietly]] to him.'
- d. Shinnin kyoushi wa [[shizuka ni] [kiite iru seito ni rekishi
 new person teacher TM [[quietly] [listen do student to history
 wo] kattata].
 OM] spoke
 'A new teacher [[spoke [softly]] to his pupils about
 history].'

3.2. Deep Structure Ambiguity

Deep structure ambiguity can be explained by showing how two different logical interpretations in the one sentence came from shorter, simpler sentences originally (Kess 1990: 12). Consider the following Japanese sentences (Kess, Uda, Copeland-Kess 1990 and Nagata 1989):

- (8) a. Syotyou wa keikan-tati ni insyu-kinsi wo meijita.
Chief TM police men to drinking-ban OM ordered
The chief ordered the policemen to stop drinking.

Comes from the sentences i, and ii or iii:

i. Syotyou wa keikan-tati ni meijita.
Chief TM police men to ordered
'The chief ordered the policemen.'

ii. Keikan-tati wa insyu-kinsi wo shimashita.
police men TM drinking-ban OM did
'The policemen stopped drinking.'

iii. Keikan-tati wa dareka ni insyu-kinsi wo sasemashita.
police men TM someone to drinking-ban OM caused to do
'Someone stopped the policemen from drinking.'

- b. America no ijuumin wa atarashii shuukan wo mananda.
america PM immig. TM new customs OM learned
'American immigrants learned new customs.'

Comes from the sentences i, and ii or iii:

i. Kono ijuumin wa atarashii shuukan wo mananda.
this immig. TM new customs OM learned
'These immigrants learned new customs.'

ii. America ni ijuumin ga iru.
america in immig. SM are
'Immigrants are in America.'

iii. Kono America-jin wa ijuumin desu.
this american TM immig. are
'These Americans are immigrants.'

The passive formation and the honorific formation of verbs in Japanese involves the use of the suffix (*r*)are. This double use for verb suffixes causes deep structure ambiguity within the functional role of the nouns in a sentence. The following sentences from Kess, Uda, and Copeland-Kess exemplify the ambiguity involving honorific/passive sentences in Japanese.

- (9) a. Sensei ga nigaoe wo kak-areta.
teacher SM portrait OM draw-honorific
or teacher SM portrait OM draw-passive

The two meanings for this sentence are:

- i. 'The teacher drew a portrait of somebody.'
Honorific reading.
ii. 'The teacher had somebody draw his portrait.'
or 'The teacher had his (own) portrait drawn.'
Passive reading.

- b. Yamada-san wa Tanaka-san ni denwa sareta.
Yamada Mr. TM Tanaka Mr. to telephone did-honoific
or Yamada Mr. TM Tanaka Mr. by telephone did-passive

The two meanings for this sentence are:

- a. 'Mr. Yamada gave a call to Mr. Tanaka.'
Honorific reading.
b. 'Mr. Yamada was phoned by Mr. Tanaka.'
Passive reading.

4. PARSING AMBIGUITY

Sometimes ambiguity is used deliberately to form jokes or sarcasm. With most forms of ambiguity, however, if the context is relatively clear, we are not aware of more than one meaning being involved. When we are speaking to one another, or are reading text, what makes something clear when it should actually be ambiguous? A person will make use of many cues within the context of a situation to understand ambiguity. Some cues acting simultaneously to provide the information needed to decipher ambiguity in discourse are: word order, tone of voice, topic of conversation, body posture, dialog partner, and medium of communication.

Nishimitsu (1990) claims that there seem to be languages which are more context dependent than others. Context dependent languages would allow much more ambiguity within each word or sentence than would a context independent language. Nishimitsu claims that in a context dependent language there is a more indeterminate relationship between given and new information.

The amount of redundancy within context dependent languages would also be higher, allowing the same information to be conveyed at various levels.

In a context independent language, the meanings of words would be more restricted with respect to the distance between given and new information. The amount of redundancy within a text would also be much less. In this definition, Japanese would be considered a closer to a context dependent language and English more of a context independent language.

Although the role of context in resolving ambiguity is well noted, the ways in which this occurs has been widely debated (Kawamoto 1988: 196). Some argue that all meanings of any one word or sentence are activated as soon as it is seen or heard. The meaning appropriate to the context will be chosen from the activated list. Others argue that only the contextually appropriate meaning will be activated when a word or sentence is accessed. Carpenter and Daneman (1981) maintain that the frequency with which a word is used in the language - its relative dominance - may affect how quickly the meaning of a word is accessed. They also argue that context will play a role in the speed of comprehension of lexical ambiguity.

4.1. Pitch and Pause in Spoken Discourse

In Spoken discourse, Japanese distinguishes some of its homonyms using word accent or pitch, similar to the English use of stress to distinguish such words as desert and dessert. The word *hashi* in Japanese has three common meanings, 'chopsticks', 'bridge', and 'edge'. As single words, each has a different accent. The word *hashi* meaning 'chopsticks', has the accent on the first syllable; the one meaning 'bridge' on the second syllable; the one meaning 'edge' has no accent on either syllable.

Within the sentence, however, the individual words may shift from their original pitch, making it more difficult to differentiate lexical ambiguities (Nishimitsu 1990). Dialect differences in accent are also extremely diverse in Japan, making pitch a rather unreliable cue as a lexical differentiator.

Pitch can be a reliable indicator when considered on the sentential level. Clearly, in written discourse pitch and pause do not play a role. However, in conversation pitch and pause play an important role in disambiguation. Consider the following sentence which was discussed previously:

- (10) a. Hanako wa [[toshokan ni aru] hon] wo mottekita.
Hanako TM library in was book OM brought over
'Hanako brought over the book which was (existed) in the
library.'

[toshokan ni aru] is part of a relative clause.

- b. Hanako wa toshokan ni [aru hon] wo mottekita.
 Hanako TM library in [a certain book] OM brought over
 'In the library, Hanako brought over a certain book.'

[aru hon] is a determiner and noun.

In spoken Japanese discourse, the ambiguity of the above sentence would be reduced. According to Azuma and Tsukuma (1990), in the phrase [aru hon] where *aru* is a determiner, a higher pitch is placed on the first syllable in the word *aru*, and a pause occurs before the word. In the case of the relative clause, the pitch in the first syllable of the word *aru* is much lower, and there is less of a pause before the word. English would also use pause to disambiguate such garden path sentences in spoken discourse.

4.2. Grammatical cues

In Japanese, the formation of nouns from adjectives usually requires the use of the suffixes *-sa* or *-mi* which would quickly indicate any change in category and therefore ward off some forms of categorical ambiguity. English also employs such suffixes as *-y* and *-ness* to indicate categorical change. Such suffixes are not mandatory in many English words, however, allowing such noun doublets as red and redness, weak and weakness. Japanese adjectives are almost always distinguished from their nominal counterparts.

- (11) a. Kare wa tsuyo-i hito desu.
 he TM strong person is
 'He is a strong person'.

Adjective is indicated by -i
 Kare no tsuyo-sa wa yuumei desu.
 he PM strength TM famous is
 'His strength is well known'.

Nominalization is indicated by -sa.

- b. Kore wa aka-i enpitsu desu.
 this TM red pencil is
 'This is a red pencil'.

Adjective is indicated by -i.

Aki- no aka-wa sugoku kirei desu.
 autumn PM red TM very beautiful is
 'The red of autumn is very beautiful'.

No marker is attached to aka

Word order would also deter the chances of a categorically ambiguous noun and adjective set from coming into contact with one another. Japanese is an SOV language, which indicates case using postpositional particles rather than word order. The postpositional particles such as *-wo*, *-wa*, and *-ni* indicate a noun's case thereby also indicating that a word is a noun and not an adjective. Some examples are shown below:

- (12) a. Toshiyori-wa hon- wo takusan yomimasu.
old per. TM book OM a lot read
'The old read books a lot'.
-wa is the topic marker
indicating that Toshiyori is a noun.
-wo is the direct object marker.

- b. Midori pen-wo agete kudasai.
green pen OM give please
'Please give me the green pen'.

There is no case marker after the adjective *midori*.
Therefore it would not be read as a noun.

- c. Yama- no midori-wo mite, kirei deshou.
mount. PM green OM look pretty isn't it
'Look at the greenery on the mountain, its pretty isn't it?'

The noun midori
is marked as direct object, using -wo.

4.3. Medium of Communication

Whether the communication is written or spoken may help to indicate the extent to which ambiguity is understood. Deep structure ambiguity occurs in the Japanese passive/honorific doublets. Knowing which medium is being used may help to communicate the correct sense of the ambiguous sentence faster.

Although passive and honorific sentences can be observed in both written and spoken speech, their relative frequency in each is different. Passive sentences are used much more often in written discourse than in spoken discourse. Conversely, honorific sentences are used more often in spoken discourse or perhaps letters than they are in reports or books.

4.4. Kanji

In written Japanese discourse, ambiguity becomes more complex with the added dimension of kanji. Kanji have little correlation between phonological form and graphic form. If a kanji has

not been seen before by the reader, there are few, if any, clues how to pronounce it. Therefore, rote memorization is required in the learning of most kanji. If one has accomplished the monumental task of memorizing enough characters to be considered literate, kanji can sometimes help with the disambiguation of text.

With respect to some homonyms, kanji may help to distinguish between each meaning. Although phonologically the homonyms would be identical, graphically they may have many different shapes. In English, we also have this phenomenon, although not to the same extent. For example, the words 'hair' and 'hare' are phonologically equivalent, yet their graphically written shapes and their meanings are different. In Japanese, the word *kagaku* has the separate meanings of 'chemistry' and 'science'; the word *atsui* can mean 'thick', 'hot', or 'serious'; the word *tatsu* has the four separate meanings of 'stand erect', 'cut', 'start' or 'elapse'. In these examples, the phonological forms of the words are essentially the same, but their written forms reveal the differences in meaning. Each graphic form quickly indicates which meaning is to be conveyed. Although the phonological forms are identical, no ambiguity should occur when reading the characters.

The use of kanji can, however, further complicate polysemy in Japanese. Words which are really only separated by nuance can be split more clearly in writing using kanji, creating a sense that there is more to the difference in nuance than there really is. The word *kawaru* uses four different kanji to represent the nuances 'change', 'take the place of', 'interchange', and 'change'. The word *hakaru* basically means 'to measure', but in writing three different kanji distinguish between the specific types of measurements taking place. The word *atsui* uses two kanji to represent the nuances of 'hot (weather)' and 'hot (to touch)'.

5. PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATION

Ambiguity may or may not be a concern within one's own language. When it comes to translation between two languages which use ambiguity differently, however, problems can arise. Both lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity create problems in translation. Not only words and sentences could create an obstacle, but a whole linguistic situation could be difficult to convey to a foreign party. If indeed the speakers of one language are more receptive to different types of ambiguity, or are more comfortable with ambiguous situations, clarifying ambiguous yet self-evident situations for these cultures may appear superfluous and perhaps rude. Conversely, those more comfortable with ambiguity may be perceived as being deceptive or calculating if the other party finds that too much information has been omitted from the discourse. If each group is aware of the other's linguistic style, the negative repercussions occurring otherwise can be reduced.

Polysemy is one case where translation between English and Japanese becomes very intricate. Unless the author of a text is directly available, one can only assume which nuances of a word within the discourse are correct, leading to a high degree of ambiguity. The Japanese themselves may be quite comfortable with this type of ambiguity. In fact, the use of such ambiguity tends to show that the speaker trusts the listener to understand his implied meaning, creating a feeling of comradeship. The need for further explanation could break the bonds between conversants. For many English speakers, the opposite is true. If one cannot be forthright with one's conversation partner, the two are most likely just acquaintances. When dealing with people from other nations, such different uses of ambiguity can create confusion.

Inoue (1987) suggests that polysemy caused just such confusion in the drafting of the Japanese constitution in 1945. Because the Japanese Constitution was drafted in two languages through many translations and much bilingual negotiation, misunderstanding developed in the form of ambiguity. The one phrase 'advice and consent', in Article III of the English version of the constitution can be used as an example of polysemy within Japanese which did not translate precisely enough into English.

Article III reads as follows: "The advice and consent of the Cabinet shall be required for all acts of the Emperor in matters of state, and the Cabinet shall be responsible therefore". The Japanese translated the phrase "advice and consent" with the term *hohitsu* meaning 'assistance/advice', with no mention of consent (Inoue 1987: 598). The Americans did not accept this translation, and insisted on a term with the meaning of 'consent'. The Americans decided upon *hohitsu-sandoo*, a term meaning 'assistance/advice - consent'. The Japanese did not accept this term and changed it again to *hosa-to dooi* meaning 'assistance - agreement'. This did not meet with the American's approval either. After a series of volleying terms back and forth, the phrase finally agreed upon was *jogen-to shoonin* meaning literally 'advice and consent'. The two meanings 'advice and consent' are implied in the one word *hohitsu*. Making the term more explicit would be superfluous for the Japanese way of thinking. It may even be considered rude with respect to the Emperor.

In order to translate the semantic relationships within a sentence correctly, a good knowledge of grammatical relationships is very important. If grammatical words such as prepositions and particles have many homonyms, it could be very difficult to precisely translate them into another language. Prepositions and particles are most often very idiomatic in any language. Context would not be of much help when trying to grasp the meaning of these idiomatic grammatical markers, and trying to render them in the other language correctly.

In Japanese, particles often have many different semantic derivations. One extreme example would be the various uses of the postpositional particle *ni*. The English prepositions and prepositional phrases 'to', 'in order to', 'on', 'from', 'at', and 'in' can all be translated using the one Japanese particle *ni*. This is a case of either polysemy, or homonymy depending on the semantic relationship between the meanings of the particle.

Makino and Tsutsui (1986: 303) indicate that the particle *ni* has a general meaning of 'contact'. The semantic derivations of the particle *ni* is divided into five categories: direct contact, direction, indirect object, source/agent, point of time. Examples of these would be:

(13) a. Direct Contact

kokuban ni e o kaita.
blackboard on pic. OM drew
'I drew a picture on the blackboard.'

b. Direction

Watashi wa Rondon ni itta.
I TM London to went
'I went to London.'

c. Indirect Object

Taroo wa Hanako ni hon wo kashita.
Taro Tm Hanako to book OM lent
'Taro lent a book to Hanako.'

d. Source/Agent

Bobu wa Meari ni kippu wo moratta.
Bob Tm Mary from tick. OM recieved
'Bob received a ticket from Mary'

e. Point of Time

Niji ni tomodachi ga kita.
2 hour at friend SM came
'A friend of mine came at 2 o'clock.'

The first two semantic categories, direct contact (13a) and direction (13b), are further derived into locational existence and purpose, respectively:

13. a) Direct Contact - Locational Existence

Koko ni denwa ga aru.
here in tele. SM is
'Here is a telephone.'

13. b) Direction - Purpose

Boku wa sakana wo kai ni itta.
I TM fish OM buy to went
I went to (in order to) buy fish.

As can be seen from these examples, particles and prepositions which have various meanings may result in translations that do not give the correct nuance in either or both languages. There

are a significant number of other situations that can cause discrepancies in translation as a direct result of ambiguity. A complete discussion of these is beyond the scope of this paper.

6. CONCLUSIONS

A great deal of ambiguity occurs in both Japanese and English, yet the ambiguities do not necessarily correspond: a category of ambiguity common in Japanese is not necessarily common or may not even exist in English, as was shown in the passive/honourific form of structural ambiguity within Japanese (-rareru). The same may be true for English categories of ambiguity that are not present in Japanese, such as sarcasm, which was not covered extensively in this paper.

Lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity have been described in relation to Japanese. As was shown, Japanese has a great deal of ambiguity at both the lexical and the structural levels. Homonyms are extensive in both Japanese and English. However, homographs were shown to have a different dimension in Japanese because of kanji. Japanese appears to be more ambiguous than English with respect to polysemy, and categorical ambiguities have less correlation between the two languages.

Structural ambiguity seems to have a number of parallels between Japanese and English, although the difference in word order creates fewer parallels than would be expected between other more closely related languages. Japanese uses case to distinguish between the words in a sentence, whereas English uses word order to do this.

Within any specific language, people learn how to detect and parse ambiguity. It has been shown that Japanese speakers use both pitch and pause to detect ambiguity in spoken discourse. In written discourse, however, kanji can be used to resolve ambiguity. Context is a deciding factor in the resolution of most ambiguity. Contextual factors such as the medium of communication, the conversation partner, body language, topic and the like help to disambiguate discourse.

Ambiguity can invoke difficulties in translation. To translate from one language to another calls for precision in deciphering meaning and nuance. When words or structure are ambiguous within one language, the choice of words for the translation can become an obstacle to communication.

NOTES

- 1 The following abbreviations are used in the examples: TM indicates 'topic marker'; OM indicates 'object marker'; SM indicates 'subject marker'; PM indicates 'possessive marker'.

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