

One Sentence, Two Meanings: The Basics of Japanese Linguistics

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1. Introduction

In my Japanese linguistics class, I use sentences with two meanings for word play and use them as clues to teach the basics of Japanese linguistics.¹ An example of a sentence with two meanings is “エレベーターで遊ばないでください,” which means:

- ① Don't play in the elevator. (Don't play cards in the elevator.)
- ② Don't play with the elevator. (Don't enjoy watching the elevator move by pressing its button.)

The morpheme that leads to the dual meaning is the case particle “で.” In the first example, “で” indicates that the preceding element is “place,” whereas it pertains to the preceding element as “tool.”

“エレベーター,” which is the preceding element of “で,” is a noun that can be considered a “place” and a “tool.” In other words, the two functions of the case particle “で” and the two properties of the noun “エレベーター” complement one another, which generates the two meanings in the abovementioned sentence.

We take another sentence as an example: “天ぷらをあげるね,” which also has two meanings as follows:

- ① I will deep-fry tempura.
- ② I will give you tempura.

The reason underlying the two meanings of this sentence is simple: the verb “あげる” pertains to “deep-fry” and “give.”

In my Japanese linguistics class, I frequently use sentences, such as “エレベーターで遊ばないでください,” for word play instead of sentences, such as “天ぷらをあげるね.” In this context, a “sentence with two meanings” displays the following properties:

- (a) The two meanings are distinct from each other. Therefore, students can clearly recognize whether they understand the two meanings.
- (b) Determining the two meanings is difficult. Therefore, students can be grouped into those who understand and those who do not to stimulate a competitive spirit among them.
- (c) Explaining the occurrence of two meanings is also difficult, which creates value for teachers in discussing the sentence.

Thus far, sentences with two meanings have been called “ambiguous sentence” (あいまい文), because they lead to misunderstanding in interpretation. However, I want to find a positive educational aspect in these sentences. Thus, I call them “sentences with two meanings” (二義文) instead of “ambiguous sentences” (あいまい文).

No clear difference can be observed between ambiguous sentences and sentence with two meanings. However, it can be assumed that sentences that satisfy properties (a) to (c) are prototypes of sentence with two meanings. Therefore, as much as possible, I find sentences that satisfy these properties and use them in my classes.

When a sentence has two meanings, a morpheme gives rise to the two meanings. In my class, I call it the *culprit*. For example, “で” is the culprit in “エレベーターで遊ばないでください.”

In the case of a second culprit, I call it an *accomplice*. In “エレベーターで遊ばないでください,” the accomplice is “エレベーター.” Moreover, “エレベーター” can be considered as a *place* or a *tool*, which corresponds to the two functions of the case particle “で.” This gives rise to the two meanings in “エレベーターで遊ばないでください.”

Two main reasons underlie a sentence with two meanings.

- (A) One function word has two meanings.
- (B) The effect of one word reaches two places.

“エレベーターで遊ばないでください” has two meanings because (A) the function word “で” has two meanings (functions), which leads to two meanings.

A sentence that has two meanings due to the reason (B) is, for example, “全部できなくても大丈夫.” The two meanings are as follows:

- ① You cannot solve even one question. That’s okay. (Zero points are okay.)
- ② You can solve all the questions. It doesn’t have to be. (Less than 100 points is okay.)

In this sentence, the culprit that gives rise to the two meanings is “全部.” If we consider that the effect of “全部” reaches “ない” of “できない,” then the meaning of the sentence becomes ①. Alternatively, if we consider that the effect of “全部” does not reach “ない” and stops at “でき(る),” then the meaning of the sentence becomes ②. This concept can be schematized as follows:

- ① (全部→できない) ても大丈夫。
- ② (全部→できる) なくても大丈夫。

The difference between the two meanings is whether the effect of “全部” reaches “できない” or “できる.” In other words, the fact that the effect of “全部” can reach two places leads to the two meanings of the entire sentence.

In this sentence, the culprit that gives rise to the two meanings is “全部,” whereas the accomplice is “ない.” The cooperation between “全部” and “ない” leads to the two meanings. Therefore, “全部できたら大丈夫” does not have two meanings because it lacks “ない” as an accomplice.

Thus, this study aims to clarify the mechanism for the phenomenon of a sentence with two meanings.

野田 (2002) has elucidated the mechanism by which ambiguous sentences generate two meanings. Moreover, a sentence with two meanings is a part of an ambiguous sentence. In ambiguous sentences, those that satisfy conditions (a) to (c) are called sentences with two meanings. Therefore, this study intends to provide a detailed description of the mechanism by which two meanings occur in *grammatically ambiguous sentences* (文法論的なあいまい文), as described in 野田 (2002).

In Section 2, I will discuss the types of sentence with two meanings in which one

function word generates two meanings. In this paper, I call this sentence a *two-meaning type*. In Section 3, I will present another type of sentence with two meanings in which the effect of one word reaches two places. I call this sentence a *two-place type*. Finally, Section 4 provides a conclusion.

2. Two-meaning type

This type of sentence is one in which one function word has two meanings. In this section, I will examine the reason behind a sentence under this type that generates two meanings.

The following example sentences present two meanings, namely, ① and ②.

(1) 結婚できないと誰もが心配する。

① Everyone worries, thinking “I can’t get married.”

② If I can’t get married, everyone will worry about me.

“結婚できない” in the first meaning is the content of the utterance or thought, and the subsequent “と” is the particle of the quotation. In other words, everyone is worried that they can’t get married and mutters (or thinks) “I can’t get married …, I can’t get married ….”

Conversely, “と” in the second meaning is a conjunctive particle that expresses “condition,” such that “結婚できないと” becomes a conditional clause. Therefore, if “もし” is added to (1), then “結婚できないと” becomes a conditional clause, and the meaning of (1) becomes the second one.

Consequently, the culprit that generates the two meanings is “と.” If “と” is considered a quoting particle, then the meaning of the sentence becomes the first one. If it is considered a conjunctive particle that expresses a condition, then the meaning of the sentence becomes the second one.

We can easily find that “あげる” has two meanings in “天ぶらをあげるね” because many people are aware of the difference in the meaning of content words in daily communication. Conversely, differences in the meanings (functions) of function words, such as “と,” are generally difficult to recognize. Therefore, identifying the two meanings of (1) and explaining the generation of the two meanings are difficult.

(2) 恋人を探そう。

- ① I want a lover, so let's find a lover.
- ② Let's find the missing lover.

The meaning of ① arises in the case of a person without a lover, whereas that of ② emerges in the case of a person who currently has a lover.

The culprit that generates the two meanings is “恋人,” which is a noun that can be written as “恋人().” In addition, a specific name can be entered in (). For example, if a lover is named Tatsuya, then “恋人()” will become “恋人(Tatsuya).” For those without a lover, it is only “恋人”().

Considering the noun “恋人” in this manner, the two meanings can be written as follows:

- ① 「恋人()」を探そう。(Let's find someone who can enter().)
- ② 「恋人(Tatsuya)」を探そう。(Let's find Tatsuya.)

“奥さん,” “先生,” “社長,” and “監督,” among others, are nouns similar to “恋人.” Therefore, the following sentences have two meanings.

- ・奥さんを探している。
- ・先生を探している。
- ・社長を探している。
- ・監督を探している。

In the abovementioned sentences, a possible meaning is that someone is looking for “奥さん(Mieko),” “先生(Sato),” “社長(Yamamoto),” and “監督(Hara).” Another possibility is that someone is looking for someone to enter in the () because a name is not yet specified.

However, in the case of “祖母,” “いとこ”, one meaning typically emerges because assuming that the person in () will change is extremely difficult.

In example (2), the culprit that generates the two meanings is “恋人,” which is a content word. However, the reason underlying the generation of the two meanings is dependent on the grammatical aspect of the content word “恋人.” Therefore, identifying the culprit that generates the two meanings is slightly difficult.

(3) これ、水着じゃない。

- ① This is not a swim suit.
- ② This is a swim suit, isn't it?

The culprit that generates the two meanings is “じゃない,” which has two functions. The first one indicates “negative,” whereas the second one indicates a “request to confirm.”

We can distinguish the difference between “negative” and “request to confirm” using the accent of “じゃない.” In other words, the meaning of “じゃない” is dependent on the pronunciation of “じゃない.”

The accent of the auxiliary verb “ない” is “high pitch + low pitch,” that is, the pitch of “な” is high, whereas that of “い” is low. If stress is placed on “ない” and makes the accent of “ない” stand out, then “じゃない” means “negative.”

Alternatively, if you read “じゃない” as “high pitch + low pitch + low pitch,” that is, if “な” and “い” are read at a low pitch, such that the accent of “ない” does not stand out, then “じゃない” means a “request to confirm.”

Notably, “じゃない” has two types of accents. Moreover, the accent generates two meanings. However, this aspect will vary individually in terms of whether they observe the two types of accents of “じゃない.” Furthermore, the first meaning is “negative,” whereas the second meaning does not denote “denial.” In other words, determining the meanings of (3) is slightly difficult because the two meanings are different, and this difference in meaning is closely related to the phonetic element.

(4) 優しくなければ生きてはいけない。

- ① If you are not gentle, you mustn't live.
- ② If you are not gentle, you cannot keep on living.

The culprit that generates the two meanings is “てはいけない.” In the first meaning, “てはいけない” is a set of phrase that expresses “prohibition.” Meanwhile, “てはならない” and “てはダメ” are similar expressions with the same meaning (function) as “てはいけない.”

Conversely, in the second meaning, “てはいけない” is structured as “て+は+い+け+ない,” which is easier to understand if considered as follows.

First, “ていく”, which means continuation, is connected to the verb “生きる.” Then,

it becomes “生きていく.” Next, it is transformed into a potential form and becomes “生きていける.” Moreover, it is transformed into a negative form and becomes “生きていけない.” Finally, the focus particle “は” is inserted and becomes “生きてはいけない.”

“てはいけない” in the first meaning is one set of phrase. Meanwhile, “てはいけない” in the second meaning is composed of five morphemes. Recognizing that “てはいけない” is one set of phrase is difficult. Moreover, correctly decomposing “てはいけない” into five morphemes is slightly difficult.

(5) 眼鏡をかけるときれいに見える。

- ① If you wear glasses, you can see (something) clearly.
- ② If you wear glasses, you will look beautiful.

The verb “見える” makes the following construction linked to the case particles “に” and “が.”

Construction: (agent) に (object) が (manner) に見える。

In example (5), the agent and object are omitted. This sentence can be compensated in two ways. If “あなた” and “文字” are placed in “agent” and “object,” respectively, then the sentence in question takes the first meaning. Moreover, if “人” and “あなた” are placed in “agent” and “object,” respectively, it takes the second meaning. If “あなた, 文字” and “人, あなた” are supplemented to agent and object, respectively, ① and ② can be obtained.

- ① (あなた) には (文字) がきれいに見える。
- ② (人) には (あなた) がきれいに見える。

Therefore, the culprit that generates the two meanings is that the two ways for compensating for the omitted agent and object.

The two types of compensation are possible because “きれい” has two meanings. Notably, the meaning of “きれい” is slightly different in notably different in ① and ②. Specifically, “きれい” in ① is “clear,” whereas “きれい” in ② is “beautiful.”

If the meaning of “きれい” is regarded as “clear,” then “あなた” and “文字” can be considered omitted as the agent and target, respectively. Furthermore, the meaning

of the sentence becomes ①. However, if the meaning of “きれい” is regarded as “beautiful,” then “人” and “あなた” can be considered omitted as the agent and the object, respectively. Thus, the meaning of the sentence becomes ②.

In example (5), the two meanings of “きれい” should be firstly noted to explain the reason for the generation of the two meanings. Then, the construction made by the verb “見える” should be visualized, and the agent and the object as omissions should be noted. Therefore, explaining the generation of the two meanings seems relatively challenging.

3. Two-place type

This type of sentence is one in which the effect of one word reaches two places. In this section, I will examine why sentences with two meanings under the two-place type generate two meanings.

(6) 私だけ幸せになれない。

① Everyone can be happy, but I can't.

② I can't be happy alone because everyone is unhappy.

In this sentence, the culprit with two meanings is “私だけ.” If we assume that the effect of “私だけ” reaches “ない” in “幸せになれない,” then the meaning of (6) takes that of ①. Moreover, if we assume that the effect of “私だけ” does not reach “ない” and stops at “幸せになれ(る),” then the meaning of (6) takes that of ②. This notion can be schematized as follows:

① 私だけ→(幸せになれない)。

② (私だけ→幸せになる)できない。

In (6), the culprit that generates two meanings is “私だけ” with “ない” as the accomplice. The cooperation between “私だけ” and “ない” generates the two meanings in this sentence. Whether the effect of “私だけ” reaches “ない” is also difficult to detect.

(7) あまり食べないので心配になった。

- ① I was worried because the amount he ate was not very large.
- ② I was worried because the amount he ate was extremely small.

The culprit that generates the two meanings is “あまり.” In ① and ②, the effect of “あまり” reaches “食べない.”

However, in ①, the effect of “あまり” reaches “食べない” because “ない” exists in it. In other words, if no “ない” exists in ①, then the effect of “あまり” cannot reach its predicate. Therefore, “あまり食べるので心配になった” generates only one meaning.

In both meanings, the effect of “あまり” reaches “食べない.” However, “あまり” corresponds to “ない” in “食べない” (①). Therefore, strictly speaking, the place reached by the effect of “あまり” differs between ① and ②.

Furthermore, “あまり” has two meanings. The first “あまり” corresponds only to the negative predicate, whereas the second “あまり” corresponds to the negative and affirmative. The first “あまり” and second “あまり” display a high or low degree of emphasis, respectively.

Presenting the abovementioned structure that generates the two meanings of (7) is also difficult.

(8) 子供をわがままに育てた。

- ① The raised child is selfish.
- ② The way parents raise their child is selfish.

The culprit that generate the two meanings is “わがまま.” In ① and ②, the effect of “わがまま” reaches “育てた.” However, strictly speaking, the place where the effect of “わがまま” reaches is different.

In ①, the effect of “わがまま” reaches the “result” aspect of the verb “育てる.” In other words, the raised child is “わがまま.” Conversely, in ②, it reaches the “process” aspect of the verb “育てる.” Namely, the manner that parents raise their child is “わがまま.”

To explain the generation of two meanings for example (8), this study highlights that the verb “育てる” has two aspects, namely, “result” and “process.”

(50)

(9) 絶対にジャイアンツに勝ってほしい。

① I hope the Dragons will win against the Giants.

② I hope the Giants will win.

The culprit that generates the two meanings is the case particle “に.” In ①, the effect of “に” reaches the verb “勝つ,” whereas it reaches the predicative phrase “てほしい” in ②

Moreover, in ①, the verb “勝つ” makes the following construction in cooperation with the case particles “が” and “に.”

Construction: (agent) が (object) に勝つ。

In this construction, the agent and the object are the winner and loser, respectively. Therefore, “ジャイアンツに勝つ” denotes that “ジャイアンツ” is the loser.

In ②, the predicative phrase “てほしい” makes the following construction in cooperation with the case particle “に.”

Construction: (agent) に (action) てほしい。

In this case, the action is “ドラゴンズに勝つ.” The speaker of this sentence hopes that the Giants “win against the Dragons.” Therefore, “ジャイアンツ” is the winner.

Between ① and ② of example (9), the place where the effect of “に” reaches and the function of “に” are different. Explaining both of these well will not be so easy.

(10) 会長に推薦されたんだよ。

① I was recommended to be a chairman.

② I was recommended something by the chairman.

(10) is a passive sentence. For (10), the following two active sentences can be assumed.

① (誰か) が (私) を (会長) に推薦した。

② (会長) が (私) に (何か) を推薦した。

① and ② are constructions made by the verb “推薦する.” However, the types of construction differ between them. The verb “推薦する” makes two types of construction. First, if one considers that the active sentence of (10) is ①, then it takes the first meaning, whereas if the active sentence of (10) is considered to be ②, then it takes the second meaning.

In ①, the effect of “に” reaches the verb “推薦する.” In other words, “に” in ① is the case particle governed by the verb “推薦する.”

On the other hand, in ②, “に” was “が” in the active sentence. Namely, “に” was the subject of its active sentence. When the active sentence is changed to a passive sentence, “が” then changed to “に.” Specifically, “に” in ② appeared at the same time as the passive auxiliary verb “れる.” Therefore, the effect of “に” in ② is considered to reach “れる.”

In addition, the meaning of the noun “会長” differs between the first and second meanings. In ①, “会長” denotes “position” but pertains to a person in ②. Therefore, when “会長” is changed to “会長職,” the meaning of example (10) takes that of ①. Moreover, if “会長” is changed to “田中会長,” then the meaning of (10) takes that of ②.

To explain the two meanings generated by example (10), stating that the place where the effect of “に” reaches is different and that “に” has two functions is necessary. Moreover, the noun “会長” has two meanings, which should also be established. Thus, explaining the reason for the generation of two meanings for example (10) is difficult.

4. Conclusion

Through Sections 2 and 3, thus far, I have observed the mechanism by which two meanings are generated in sentences with two meanings. First, the following were examined under the two-meaning type.

- (1) 結婚できないと誰かが心配する。
- (2) 恋人を探そう。
- (3) これ、水着じゃない。
- (4) 優しくなければ生きてはいけない。
- (5) 眼鏡をかけるときれいに見える。

In these sentences, one word has two meanings, which generates two meanings throughout the sentence. In each sentence, the following points are difficult to explain.

- (1) A function word presents two meanings.
- (2) The focus is on the grammatical aspect of a content word.
- (3) The focus is on a phonetic feature.
- (4) The focus is on the existence of a set phrase.
- (5) Omissions of elements occur, and an accomplice is identified.

Next, the following sentences were examined under the two-place type.

- (6) 私だけ幸せになれない。
- (7) あまり食べないので心配になった。
- (8) 子供をわがままに育てた。
- (9) 絶対にジャイアンツに勝ってほしい。
- (10) 会長に推薦されたんだよ。

These sentences denote that the effect of one word reaches two places; thus, two meanings are generated in the entire sentence. In each sentence, the following points may cause the difficulty in explaining the generation of two meanings.

- (6) A negative morpheme exists as an accomplice.
- (7) One word corresponds to a part of another.
- (8) The focus is on different aspects of the same word.
- (9) The sentence is a two-meaning type as well as a two-place type.
- (10) An accomplice exists.

No clear difference exists between sentences with two meanings that I use in my Japanese linguistics classes and the so-called ambiguous sentences. However, the 10 sentences examined presented certain difficulties in explaining the generation of the two meanings. Therefore, I infer that the 10 sentences are typical sentences with two meanings. As such, I intend to continue to find difficult and interesting sentences with two meanings, such that students further enjoy Japanese linguistics classes.

Endnote

- ¹ Yamauchi (2020) described the details of teaching Japanese linguistics through word play.

References

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