

Two Modes of Visual Expressions: A Comparative Study of English and Japanese

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1. Introduction

Visual expressions in Japanese usually do not represent the observer explicitly, but the view, i.e., what is seen by the speaker, is verbalized by expressions using the verb *mieru* without a grammatical subject or by the special grammatical construction for visual expressions. On the other hand, to describe what is seen by the observer, the verbs expressing visual perception such as *see* and *find* are usually employed in English. Therefore, the English expression *I saw the moon* can be translated as *Tsuki-ga mieta* or simply *Tsuki-ga detei-ta* in Japanese. There are two modes of placing a vantage point in description. One is to place the observer inside the scene, which is then depicted by the speaker outside the scene described. The observer projected inside the situation is expressed as “I” as an objective self to observe the scene to be described by the speaker outside the scene. The other mode is that the speaker as the observer sees the scene described directly in which the self as the observer is identified with the speaker and is not expressed in an explicit manner (cf. Oosono 2006).

The difference in the mode of description is related to the objectivity of visual expressions. The speaker as the observer is involved with the scene to be described more in Japanese than in English. For example, to describe something having two halves or sides that are the same in size and shape, you can describe it as *sayuu taishoo* in Japanese, whereas you generally say it as *symmetrical* in English although *left-*

right symmetry might be used. The expression in Japanese presupposes the existence of the observer in the scene, as the observer inside the scene is required, who can say left side or right side. On the other hand, the English expression *symmetrical* requires the vantage point of the speaker outside the scene to be described. In this sense, it can be said that the Japanese mode of visual expression is subjective, whereas the English one is objective.

This essay explores the two modes of description in Japanese and English through the examination of selected Japanese and English texts with their corresponding translations. Several grammatical constructions which show different modes of description between Japanese and English will be indicated. These will reveal that the speaker as the observer tends to be inside the scene described in Japanese, but he/she tends to be outside the scene in English.

2. Visual expressions by the speaker

2-1. Three components of visual expressions

To describe a scene, the following three components must be made clear. The first component is a *vantage point*, the place from which the observer sees the scene. To give an example, when an ocean scene is depicted, the use of the verb *glisten* implies the presence of the speaker. As Talmy (2000: 443) states, to perceive the surface of a body of water *glistening*, the speaker's vantage point should be located above the ocean surface. The second component, called a *point of regard*, is the point where the vision is directed. The third component, called a *view*, is what is seen by the perceiver (cf. Matsuki 1992). In *If you look toward the tree carefully, you will see a small bird*, the point of regard is the tree, and the speaker's view is a small bird. As Gruber (1967) points out, even if you look at something, you may not see anything. In such a

case, the vision is directed to a point of regard, but you get no view.

In an actual description, either a point of regard or a vantage point is explicitly represented in the text as in the following sentence:

- (1) When a ferocious dust storm blew through a nearby refugee camp and lifted the flaps of the tents, I saw they were all empty.

(*TIME*, August 19–August 26, 2002, p.35)

As the phrase “lifted the flaps of the tents” implies, the new scene is unfolding in front of the speaker’s eyes; the point of regard is the place where the flaps of the tents are lifted, and the view is what the speaker is describing, i.e., an empty situation. However, a vantage point is not expressed in an ostensive way in this description.

2-2. Visual expression in the Japanese and English texts

In this section, visual expressions of description by the speaker will be contrasted. The Japanese expressions will be classified into the constructions with the verb *mieru* and without the verb *mieru*. In these expressions either a point of regard or a vantage point is usually mentioned explicitly in the actual texts although both of them can be expressed in an ostensive way.

2-2-1. The use of the verb *mieru* in Japanese

In this constructional pattern, the vision is directed to somewhere and then the view to the speaker is described by using the verb *mieru*. The following is a typical example of this type.

- (2) a. *Soko-ni tsui-tara chikatetsu-no deguchi-no tokoro-ni midori-iro-no seifuku-wo kita chikatetsu-no shokuin-ga shi-go-nin taorete-iru-no-ga miemasi-ta.* (Andaa-guraundo, p.68)¹⁾

- b. When we got there, I could see three or four subway workers in green uniforms collapsed on the ground by the exit.

(*Underground*, p.27)

In (2a), the vantage point is the place where the speaker reached, and the point of regard is the exit of the subway station. The verb *mieru* is used to express the view to the speaker. As (2b) shows, the situation can be described in English using the verb *see* to show the speaker's view. The difference between Japanese and English versions is that the verb *mieru* does not require the perceiver, in this case the first person speaker, to be verbalized; whereas, in English the observer is expressed at all times, as a grammatical subject of the verb *see* is always required in English.

The speaker does something and the verb *see* is used to describe the view of the speaker. In (3a), the vantage point is where the narrator entered the train car, and from that position he described the scene by using the verb *mieru*.

- (3) a. *Ichiban ushiro-no doa-kara boku-ga naka-ni hairu-to rokujyuu-go-sai kuraino otoko-no hito-ga yuka-ni gorotto taorete-iru-no-ga mie-masita.*
(*Andaa-guraundo*, p.183)

- b. I entered the third car from the front through the farthest back of the three doors and saw a sixty-five-year-old man sprawled on the floor.
(*Underground*, p.79)

In each case, the vantage point of the speaker is explicitly mentioned, and then the speaker proceeds to describe the situation, which is the view of the speaker as the observer. However, a point of regard is not verbalized.

2-2-2. Discoverer subject construction

The second pattern is the grammatical construction without the verb *mieru*. This construction is basically employed to represent a conditional meaning, in which *to* is used to mark the end of a conditional clause. *To* conditional sentence expresses the idea that the second clause is a natural consequence of the first clause. It can often be translated into English as *if* or *when* and is used in statements about general principles or recurring events and situations.

- (4) a. *Fuyu-ni naru-to, yuki-ga takusan furi-masu.*
b. When winter comes, it snows a lot. (Tohsaku 2004: 35)

This construction is used to show the speaker's perceptive description, which is exemplified by the following example sentence:

- (5) *Ano kado-wo migi-ni magaru-to, ginkoo-ga ari-masu.*
(Literally) Turn right at the corner, and there will be a bank.
(Tohsaku 2004: 35)

Your turning right at the corner is not a condition for the existence of the bank, because the bank exists regardless of your turning right. What exists in this construction is the fact that the action of turning right is a condition of the view of the speaker. This is why this construction is called *discoverer subject construction* in Uehara (1998). When the observer does some action in a dependent clause represented by *to*-clause, something is discovered in his/her sight. Tohsaku (2004: 36) states, "when used in a past-tense sentence, . . . the second clause is an event or situation outside the speaker's control. For this reason, it is often used to describe unexpected events." This implication is well illustrated in the following sentence, in which the speaker's surprise is

implicitly expressed by the use of this grammatical construction.

(6) a. *Ie-ni kaeru-to, Mimura-san-ga kite-ita.*

b. When I returned home, Mr. Mimura had already come.

(Tohsaku 2004: 35)

The English translation shows that there is no implication of surprise in the English construction per se; the English version conveys just a description of the speaker's experience objectively.

In English, to show the speaker's view, the visual verb such as *see* is mandatory. Now examine how discoverer subject constructions in a Japanese text are translated into English.

(7) a. *Densha-ni nori-komu-to, futari-no ekiin-san-ga boku-no me-no-mae-de yuka-wo fuiteimasi-ta.* (Andaa-guraundo, p.101)

b. . . . so I raced to get on, but the train just sat there. I saw two station attendants wiping the floor in front of me.

(Underground, p.46)

(8) a. *Chijyoo-ni agaru-to, dashinuke-ni hito-ga san-nin awa-wo fui-te menomae-ni taoreteiru wake-desu.* (Andaa-guraundo, p.589)

b. I was just heading up above ground, . . . when right before my eyes I saw three people fall down and foam at the mouth.

(Underground, p.166)

As the English translations show, the visual verb *see* is used to describe the scenes that the observer perceived. Consequently, the observer is mentioned in an ostensive way as a first person pronoun. English can code the discoverer as the subject to describe a situation, while the discoverer of the same situation is coded by a non-existent

perceiver in Japanese.

This construction can be used in a slightly modified way. The first part of the construction expresses a visual activity using the verb *miru* and then the speaker's view is described.

- (9) a. . . . *mawari-wo mite-miru-to takusan-no hito-ga sonohen-ni shagami-konde imasi-ta.* (Andaa-guraundo, p.426)

b. I looked around and saw that there were lots of people crouching on the ground, dozens of them. (*Underground*, p.212)

Like the pattern examined in the previous section, the point of regard is explicitly mentioned as the direct object of the verb *miru*, and then the speaker's view is described. The verb *mieru* is not employed; therefore, the expression conveys the speaker's view directly. The English translation uses the verbs *look* and *see*; therefore, the pattern is the same as the one discussed in the previous section.

This construction is so widespread in Japanese that its basis as a conditional relationship is not always clear as the following example indicates:

- (10) a. *Kao-wo miru-to Takahashi-san-wa kurusi-soo-de, totemo shabe-reru jyootai dewa arimasen desi-ta.* (Andaa-guraundo, pp.56-57)

b. Takahashi's face looked awful. He couldn't talk.

(*Underground*, p.21)

In this example, looking at Takahashi-san's face is not the conditional action for the view of the speaker. In other words, the action of looking at the face itself is the view of the speaker. The English translation does not use a conditional construction as the English translation shows. In other words, in Japanese the point of regard is represented as the direct object of the verb *miru*, and the discoverer subject con-

struction is used. On the other hand, this way of describing is not available in English. This shows that the visual expressions by use of the discoverer subject construction is deep-rooted in Japanese.

To recapitulate, in Japanese description (1) the verb *miernu* is used and the observer as the speaker is only implied or (2) the discoverer subject construction in which the observer as the speaker is totally effaced is used. In both cases, English tends to use the verb *see* to describe the scene; consequently, the grammatical subject as the observer is explicitly expressed in the description.

3. The observer in English and Japanese

3-1. The observer in visual expressions

Whether the observer appears in the text or not in Japanese and English has been discussed. Now its significance with reference to the visual description in Japanese and English will be examined. Uehara (1998) explores a comparison of the Japanese and English texts from "The Last Leaf" by O. Henry. Look at the passage he examines.

- (11) a. When Sue awoke from an hour's sleep the next morning, she found Johnsy with dull wide-open eyes staring at the drawn green shade.
- b. *Yokuasa Sue-ga ichiji-kan-hodo nemutte-kara me-wo samasu-to Johnsy-wa seiki-no-nai me-wo ookiku mihirai-te, orosareteiru midori-iro-no sheedo-wo jitto mitsumetei-ta.*

Note that the phrase "she found" is used in the English original version. On the other hand, in Japanese, the discoverer subject construction is employed to convey Sue's view directly. In English "she found" is necessary to show that the scene described is the view for Sue, but in

Japanese the phrase with a visual verb is not necessary if the subject discoverer construction is employed. If this passage is re-translated into English, the translation would be as follows:

- (12) Next morning, when Sue awoke from an hour's sleep, Johnsy was staring at the drawn green shade with dull wide-open eyes.

As Uehara (1998) says, this expression states just a chronological relation between Sue's and Johnsy's actions. In other words, the English expression without the observer just states the events and does not describe the view of the speaker as it is unfolding in front of the speaker.

Now the situation in which the scene is described by the first person observer will be examined. Suppose you are describing your experience in which you found a man sprawling on the floor when you entered the room. In English, the description of your experience would be as follows:

- (13) When I entered the room, I saw a man sprawling on the floor.

The situation is illustrated in Figure 1, where the speaker put him-/herself in the scene to be described, and the self as the observer sees a man sprawling on the floor. In other words, the speaker is outside the scene to be described. This is why the English mode of description is sometimes called objective.

On the other hand, one way of describing the situation in Japanese is by using the verb *mieru*. The expression would be as follows:

- (14) *Heya-ni hairu-to, otoko-ga yuka-ni nekoronde-iru-no-ga mie-ta.*

In this expression the observer is not explicitly expressed in the de-

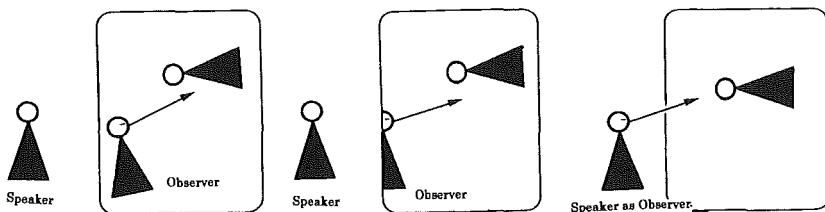


Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

scriptive expression; however, the use of the verb *mieru* implies the existence of the observer, because the hearer of this description is able to surmise through whom the situation is seen by the verb *mieru*. This situation is represented in figure 2, where the implied observer is implicitly depicted in the scene.

Figure 3 is the representation of the description by use of the discoverer subject construction, in which the speaker is merged with the observer, and the speaker as observer describes the scene directly.

(15) *Heya-ni hairu-to, otoko-ga yuka-ni nekorondei-ta.*

The speaker's view is represented as if it is unfolding in front of the speaker's eyes. The speaker as the observer expresses his/her own experience directly to convey his/her view.

Next, the situation in which the observer does not appear in the English description is examined:

(16) When I entered the room, a man was sprawling on the floor.

Like the situation of the third person speaker, the following figure presents the description where the observer is not involved.

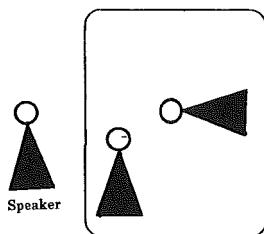


Figure 4

In this case, the arrow sign of visual activity to the sprawling person does not exist because the sentence just mentions a chronological relation of the two events represented in the dependent and main clauses, respectively.

3-2. The observer projected in the scene

So far two points have been looked at: a tendency in English to adopt the mode of description in which the observer is projected in the scene to be described and the speaker outside the scene describes the self as the observer who exercises the visual activity toward objects of vision within the sight. The description is objective in the sense that the self as the observer is projected as a separate entity in the description. On the other hand, Japanese tends to adopt the mode of description which effaces the observer; in other words, the speaker identifies him-/herself with the observer and presents the view as it is unfolding in front of the observer as the speaker. However, it is possible that Japanese employs the English mode of description and vice versa. The following excerpt may be useful to show this situation, in which the first person speaker is verbalized explicitly in the text of the original Japanese version as *watashi*. The following is the English translation corresponding to this part.

- (17) They videoed me too. I was seen on television, lying like that on the car floor. I was flat out for at least half an hour. Nice and spread out (*laughs*). Then the station attendants carried me away. You can see it in the videos. (*Underground*, p.123)

In this excerpt, the narrator describes the scene after watching the video in which the narrator himself was recorded. The narrator watched his own body on the car floor on the video TV screen, which he described later in the above passage. Of course in English the narrator is represented as a first person pronoun "I". Even in the original Japanese, the first person is expressed explicitly as a first person singular pronoun, *watashi*. Therefore, it can be said in this situation the first person is made objective and expressed in the English mode of description even in Japanese because the speaker watched his own body on the TV screen. As the self can be actually seen on the TV screen, the speaker should handle it as a tangible entity, which guarantees an explicit use of a first person pronoun even in Japanese.

Figure 1 in the previous section illustrates the situation in which the perceiver's visual activity is explicitly represented in the scene to be described. The observer is explicitly verbalized in the scene through the use of visual verb such as *see*. As Imani (2006) claims, the use of the verb *see* guarantees the situation in which the visual activity is exercised. Consequently, complements expressing states cannot be combined with visual verbs; the sentence *I saw John tall* is unacceptable since being tall expresses a state of John which cannot be seen. The use of the verb *see* indicates that the information comes not from hearsay or the speaker's conjecture, but from the visual information that the speaker gains from his/her sense of vision. The following is the personal story of the two American believers in aliens, who insisted they had been abducted by aliens.

(18) O'Reilly: Did you see — did you see the aliens?

D. Lee: Yes.

O'Reilly: What do they look like?

D. Lee: What I saw on that particular visit, they were tall, slender, blond. Looked human, but not human, not quite human.

(<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,181781,00.html>)

The use of the verb *see* in the underlined section shows that the speaker wants to indicate the information is gained through the sense of vision. The speaker wants to emphasize the fact that the responsibility of the visual perception resides in none other than the speaker because the abduction by the aliens is an unbelievable event to other people; the interviewee can make his visual activity explicit by using the verb *see*. The phrase "what I saw" asserts that the speaker performs some activities involving the visual perception.

Note that when this part is translated into Japanese, the verb *miru* would be used, rather than the verb *mieru*. Consequently, it can be said that the situation illustrated in Figure 1 in Japanese is the case where the verb *miru* is involved, rather than the verb *mieru*. This supposition is supported further by the following example, in which the verb *miru* rather than *mieru* is used. Note also there is a tendency for the Japanese language to make the subject apparent in this case. The following example illustrates the same situation, in which the speaker emphasizes that he saw something. Here what matters is whether he saw a square parcel or not; his visual activity should be a matter of interest in this context.

(19) *Minna-ga orite sharyoo-ga garanto natta-toki-ni, watashi-wa sore-wo mimashita. Shikakui tsutsumi desu. (Andaa-guraundo, p.344)*

The corresponding English translation is as follows:

- (20) I saw it when everyone left and the car was empty. A square
parcel. (Underground, p.140)

Here also the verb *see* is used in English and in Japanese the verb *miru* is used.

Recapitulating the discussion so far, the verb *see* covers the situation where (1) the speaker conveys the vision that he/she gains as the observer and (2) the speaker wants to emphasize the fact that he/she exercises the visual activity. On the other hand, in Japanese, the verbs *miru* and *mieru* are used for the distinctive usages.

4. Displacement of description

4-1. Displacement

Among the properties of linguistic communication is its ability to focus on *displaced* experience both in time and place. Description is not limited to the immediate experience of the observer. In other words, descriptions need not be restricted to the scenes that coincide with the time and place of the experience of the observer. The description of one's experience can be conveyed in displaced time and place. To verbalize the displaced experience, one source available to the speaker is remembering. The speaker can describe the scene which is displaced in time and place by remembering or recalling the past experiences (Chafe 1994: 32).

To describe the past situation is of particular interest in this context in that some facts that seemed true to the narrator at the time of experience may turn out to be false later when the narrator is describing them. As the speaker states what he/she experienced, what actually

happened is known to him/her at the time of speaking.

The two modes of description which are peculiar to Japanese and English have been discussed. English tends to describe the situation from the viewpoint of the speaker situated outside the scene to be described. On the other hand, Japanese tends to describe the situation by incorporating the narrator into the scene to be described. Therefore, it can be said that the vantage point of description is inside the situation to be described in the Japanese mode of description. In the next subsection, additional grammatical traits are explored to show the different tendency of description. From this distinction of the modes of description, it is anticipated that Japanese tends to place a vantage point inside the scene, i.e., the displaced scene, whereas English adopts the vantage point outside the scene described.

4-2. Displacement of place

The narrator may be describing the scene in front of him-/herself as immediate experience, but usually the narrator describes the scene which he/she experienced at some earlier time and in a different place. In the following example, the narrator was involved with the situation where some people were waiting for an ambulance at the accident site. The narrator asked them if they had already called for the ambulance. They replied they had. Then the narrator continues:

(21) a. *Tasika-ni kyuukyuusha-no sairen-no-oto-wa kikoete-kurun-desuga,*
sore-ga kocchi-made kimasen. (Andaa-guraundo, p.44)

b. But when I heard the ambulance siren, it didn't seem to be
coming our way. (Underground, p.15)

In the original Japanese version, the expression *kocchi-made kimasen* (literally, "not coming here") is employed. The expression is the

Japanese mode of expression, which is indicated by the use of the deictic expression, whose meaning is dependent on the position of the narrator in the scene described. However, the English translation uses the expression *our way*, which does not assume the actual position of the narrator in the scene.

4-3. Displacement of time

When the speaker describes the situation, he/she will do so on the basis of the data experienced. However, what seemed to be true at the time of the experience sometimes turns to be false when the scene is described. In the following example, the narrator states, "It was dark"; however, it was not dark actually, it looked dark to the narrator because he inhaled sarin gas. In the original Japanese description, the narrator states, "It was dark." In other words, the narrator describes the scene from the vantage point of his personal experience. This is one aspect of the Japanese mode of description in which the speaker as the observer is inside the scene to be described.

- (22) *Jitsuwa Shintomicho-ni haitta koro-kara moo atari-ga usugurakattandesu. Demo sono-toki-wa kore-wa soto-ga yoku hareteite mabusikatta sei-daroo-to omotte-imasi-ta.* (Andaa-guraundo, p.427)

The original description of Japanese tends to describe the situation as the speaker saw it as it was. As Figure 3 in Section 3 represents, the speaker as the observer describes the scene as it is. The speaker tries to describe the situation as the scene is unfolding just in front of his eyes. However, the English translation runs as follows:

- (23) Actually, things had started to look dim the moment I'd entered the subway at Shintomicho, but at the time I thought it was be-

cause of the brightness of the sun outside. (*Underground*, p.212)

When the narrator described what he had experienced, he knew that it was not actually dark, but it looked dark to his eyes, because of the chemical effect of the sarin. The English translation *started to look dim* implies that the speaker narrates his own experience from outside the scene described. The speaker detaches himself chronologically from the scene to be described.

As Austin (1962) writes, nobody says "It looks like an apple" when they describe an apple; they simply say "it is an apple." If the speaker takes the trouble to use the verb *look*, he/she wants to emphasize how the scene looked to him/her, and to indicate that the actual state was the reverse. Therefore, the speaker indicates that the judgment is based on the visual information gathered by his own sense of vision. Note that in (23) when the speaker experienced the situation, he did not know whether it was actually dark or not. As already mentioned, the English mode of expression detaches the speaker from the observer who narrates the situation, and sees the first person as the entity independent of the speaker. On the other hand, in Japanese the speaker and the first person who participates in the scene are coincided, and consequently the speaker encourages the listener to be engaged in the story. Following this line of discussion, the expression which depicts the situation objectively using the verb *look* is one aspect of the English mode of description. On the other hand, the Japanese mode of description is the way that the speaker takes the situation as it was. In this case, the expression without the verb *look* is the reflection of the Japanese mode of description.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the two modes of description for visual expressions were discussed. In one mode of description, the speaker projects him-/herself as the observer into the scene and describes the situation objectively from the outside position. This mode predominantly appears in English description of visual expressions, which is characterized by the explicit appearance of a first person singular as the observer in the scene to be described. On the other hand, in the Japanese mode of description, the speaker as the observer presents the scene as it is unfolding in front of him/her. This mode is subjective in the sense that both the observer and the speaker are merged and the speaker as the observer describes the scene. It is sometimes said that the Japanese expression is subjective whereas the English expression is objective; this statement should be interpreted as the degree to which the observer of the scene is coded linguistically.

Note

- 1) *Andaa-guraundo* by Haruki Murakami (Kodansha, 1997) is a collection of interviews with survivors of the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo Metropolitan Subways System. The attack was perpetrated in subway trains on the Hibiya, Chiyoda, and Marunouchi Lines by members of the AUM cult on March 20, 1995. *Underground* is the English translation by Alfred Birnbaum and Philip Gabriel (Vintage International, 2001). The cited texts of the Japanese original and of the English translation are based on the paperback editions.

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