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The Subject Ambiguity Phenomenon in Existential and Possessive Sentences—Take Chinese and Japanese for Examples

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Abstract

This paper takes the Subject ambiguity phenomenonin existential and possessive sentences as the research object. Firstly, it describes the different distribution of the subject ambiguity phenomenon in Chinese and Japanese existential and possessive sentences. Then, in view of the shortcomings of explanations in previous studies, from three aspects: the conceptual level, the constructional level and the concept-construction interface level, a new explanation is proposed based on the theoretical framework of cognitive grammar. Finally, Using this new explanation, this paper successfully explains the reasons for the difference in the distribution of subject ambiguity between Chinese and Japanese existential sentences and possessive sentences.

Keywords

Existential sentence, possessive sentence, subject ambiguity

1. Subject Ambiguity Phenomenon

In Japanese and Chinese, it is difficult to identify the subject in some sentences. Take (1) for example, the subject of the sentence is the table or a book, the academic circles have different opinions. Since English existential sentences also have similar phenomenon, some scholars believe that this is the commonality of existential sentences. However, this phenomenon does not exist in Japanese existential sentences. On the contrary, Japanese possessive sentences show the same phenomenon, as shown in (2). Why is the subject ambiguity phenomenon distributed differently in Japanese and Chinese? This paper takes this as a starting point and proposes a new interpretation from the perspective of interaction between conceptual level and constructional level.

(1) *Zhuozi shang you yiben shu.*
table on have a book
There is a book on the table.

(2) *Tarou ni mago ga iru.*
Tarou locative grandchild nominative exist
Tarou has a grandchild.

2. concept-construction interface

The construction of the same concept may be different in different languages. Take Chinese and Japanese existential sentences as examples, as follows:

(3) *wode zhuozi shang you yifen gang qianlezi de wenjian.*
My desk on have a just signed of document
There is a newly signed document on my desk.
(4) *Watasino tsukue no ue ni issatsu no houkokusyo ga aru.*
My desk genitive on locativea genitive report nominative exist
There is a report on my desk.

The underlined parts in (3) and (4) almost express the same semantics: existence. That is, the specific position relationship between the location 'desk' and the object 'document/report'. However, the constructions are quite different. Chinese uses the structure 'noun + *you* + noun' (Hereinafter referred to as the *you* construction). This construction essentially express the meaning of possession, which is a transitive structure with low transitivity. However, Japanese uses the structure 'noun +*ni*+ noun +*ga*+*aru/iru*' (hereinafter referred to as *aru/iru* construction). This construction is an intransitive structure that expresses the meaning of existence. Here is the problem, Can the above similarities and differences between Chinese and Japanese existential sentences be clearly demonstrated by the existing theories?

At present, the research methods of semantic description can be roughly classified into two types: formal semantics and cognitive semantics. Formal semantics examines the semantics of expressions at the conceptual level. For example, the conceptual meaning of existence belongs to the category of STATE, which can be expressed as follows:

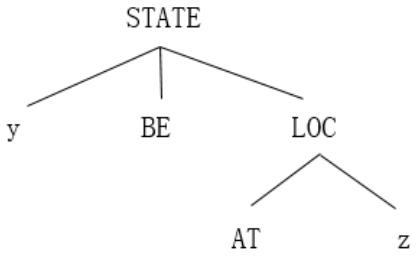

Fig. 1. The conceptual semantic structure of existence (kageyama, 1996).

Or expressed in the following propositional form:

(5) [STATE [Thing y] BE [LOC AT [Place z]]] (kageyama, 1996)

This kind of semantic analysis has certain advantages in the research of language universals. However, it is insufficient to research the differences between different languages. Taking (3) and (4) for example, both X *shang you* Y (There is a Y on X in Chinese) and X *no ue ni* Y *ga aru* (There is a Y on X in Japanese) can be analyzed by using propositions such as Figure 1 or (5). However, the difference between the two constructions cannot be reflected.

Unlike formal semantics, cognitive semantics holds that the meaning of language lies in the activities of human conceptualization, rather than the concept itself. Specifically, The meaning of a language contains the conceptual content and a particular way of construe. That is, when describing the same situation, different construal ways can produce different semantic content. In this semantic sense, (3) and (4), although the situation here to be described is the same, both is the position relationship between X and Y. However, because of the different ways of construing, the meaning of X *shang you* Y is not exactly the same as X *no ue ni* Y *ga aru*.

Currently, when describing the semantics of expressions, cognitive semantics analyzes conceptual content and construal ways as a whole. Which may sometimes lead to overly subjective situations, for example:

(6)=(3) *wode zhuozi shang you yifen gang qianlezi de wenjian.*
My desk on have a just signed of document
There is a newly signed document on my desk.
(7) *sono yu-jin ni kodomo ga iru.*
that friend locative child nominative exist
The friend has a child.

(6) is a Chinese existential sentence, and (7) is a Japanese possessive sentence. These two sentences have one thing in common: the conceptual meaning to be expressed is not consistent with the meaning of the basic construction used. The conceptual meaning of (6) is existence, and the *you* construction is essentially the meaning of possession. While the concept meaning of (7) is possession, but the *iru* construction is essentially the meaning of existence.

Langacker believes that the Chinese existential sentence evokes a possessive feature schema, only the reference point is served by the entire domain of the locative phrase. The trajector in the composited structure is still the reference point (locative phrase) and the landmark is the target. The meaning of the sentence obtained by this analysis method is still possessive. This analysis is obviously biased towards the meaning of its construction. On the contrary. While analyzing the Japanese sentence *watashi niwa mago ga iru* (I have a grandchild), Langacker pointed out on the basis of Kumashiro that, the construction would be reanalyzed as a HAVE possessive, with iru then meaning 'have' (Langacker, 2009). This analysis is obviously biased towards its conceptual meaning.

Then, Why is the conceptual meaning not biased when analyzing Chinese existential sentences? And in the analysis of Japanese sentences, there is no bias towards the construction meaning? Langacker doesn't explain anything about this in his book. In fact, this is the result of analyzing the expression as a whole, rather than at different levels, the conceptual level and the constructional level. In view of the above deficiencies in previous studies, in order to solve the problem of subject ambiguity distribution difference proposed at the beginning of this paper, This paper proposes to analyze the above problems at concept-construction interface under the theoretical framework of cognitive grammar.

3. Existence and Possessive at the Conceptual Level

3.1 The conceptual meaning of possessive

Langacker uses the reference point ability to describe the characteristics of the conceptual meaning of possessive, which has the following characteristics: The relationship between the possessor and the possessee is asymmetric and irreversible. In terms of the organization of the trajector/landmark, the reference point (the possessor) acts as the trajetor and the target (the possessee) acts as the landmark.

This description is actually the semantic content of the possessive expression after the addition of subjectively construed instead of the conceptual meaning proposed in this paper. Conceptual meaning is the objectively construed part of human conceptualization. Therefore, on the basis of the above semantic features, the part that removes the subjectively construed part is the conceptual meaning of the concept.

3.2 The conceptual meaning of existence

The analysis of the meaning characteristics of the concept of existence in previous studies can be generally summarized as 'the physical spatial relationship between X and Y' or 'X is in the position of Y' (see kageyama, 2011; Jackendoff, 1990; kishimoto, 2005). Langacker 2009 believes that the semantic features of existence can also be described by the reference point ability. In the same way, the part with the subjectively construed part removed is the conceptual meaning of existence.

4. Existential and Possessive Sentences at the Level of Construction

The conceptual meaning of existence and possessive are very similar to each other. Therefore, when we conceptualize, we can use the same cognitive ability, namely the reference point ability, to recognize these two relationships. This semantic commonality makes it possible to use the same form to express the concept of possession and existence in some languages. For example, you construction in Chinese and aru/iru construction in Japanese, which can represent either the concept of existence or the concept of possession.

4.1 Related constructions in Chinese

There are various constructions to express the concepts of existence and possession in Chinese. Due to the limitation of space, this paper only discusses the most basic constructions: *you* construction and *zai* construction. The structure of the you construction can be simply expressed as "X *you* Y". The verb you here means have, X stands for the possessor, and a typical possessor is an animated object. Y stands for the possessee. The basic meaning of you construction is possessive relationship. The reference point(X) acts as the trajector, and the target acts as the

landmark (Y). Which means the subject of this construcion is the reference point (X).

The structure of the *zai*construction can be simply expressed as "Y *zai* X". The verb *zai* here means location. Y stands for a entity, X stands for a specific location. At present, the image schema method has not been used to describe *zai* construction in previous studies. This paper holds that *zai* construction is different from you construction. The attention of the conceptualizer is directed first to the existing entity, not to the location. The reference point (Y) acts as the trajector, and the target (X) acts as the landmark. Which means the subject of this construcion is the reference point (Y).

4.2 Related constructions in Japanese

Due to space limitation, this paper only discusses *aru/iru* construction in Japanese. This paper adopts the criteria in Kinsui, that is, *aru/iru* constructions are divided into two categories according to whether the verb needs to be consistent with the *ga* case noun, namely, *aru/iru* construction with consistent relation and *aru* construction without consistent relation. The basic semantics of *aru/iru* construction with consistent relation is existence. There are two sub constructions: *ni-ga* construction and *ga-ni* construction, *ni-ga* construction means existence, *ga-ni* construction means locative; *aru* construction with no consistent relation include *ni-ga* construction and *ga* construction, the former means possession, the latter means existence. Limited to space, this paper only discusses *ga* construction.

4.3 Aru/iru construction with consistent relation

First, the structure of *ni-ga*c onstruction can be simply expressed as follows:

(8) Location *ni* N *ga iru/aru*. (There is N at Location)

When the *ga* case noun is an animate noun, the verb *iru* is used. When the*ga* case noun is an inanimate noun, use the verb *aru*; Take *tsukue no ue ni hon ga aru* (There is a book on the table) as an example. The reference point (the table) acts as the landmark, and the target (a book) acts as the trajector. Which means the subject of this construcion is the target (a book).

Secondly, *ga-in* construction represents the location of the entity, and its structure can be simply expressed as follows:

(9)N *ga* Location *ni aru/iru*. (Nisat Location)

When the *ga* case noun is a animate noun, the verb *iru* is used; When the ga case noun is a inanimate noun, use the verb *aru*. Using *tarou ga kouen ni iru* (Tarou is in the park) as an example. The reference point (the park) acts as the landmark, and the target (tarou) acts as the trajector. Which means the subject of this construcion is the target (a book).

4.4 Aru construction without consistent relation

The *ni-ga* construction represents possessive relation, and its structure can be simply expressed as follows:

(10) animete N *ni* animete N *ga aru*. (animate N has an animate N)

Using *tarou ni mago ga aru* (Tarou has a grandchild) as an example. The reference point (tarou) acts as the trajector, and the target (a grandchild) acts as the landmark. Which means the subject of this construcion is the reference point (tarou).

The above construction can be summarized as follows:

Tab 1. Basic constructions in Chinese and Japanese

Language	construction		conceptual meaning	trajector	landmark
Chinese	*you* construction		possession	possessor	possessee
	zai construction		existence	existing entity	location
Japanese	*aru/iru*construction with consistent relation	*ni-ga* construction	existence	location	existing entity
		ga-ni construction	existence	existing entity	location
	*aru*construction without consistent relation	*ni-ga* construction	possesion	possessor	possessee

5. Existential and Possessive Sentences in Concept-Construction Interface

In this paper, a construction whose meaning is possessive relationship is called a possessive construction, and a construction whose meaning is existential relationship is called an existential construction. The *you* construction discussed in the previous section, and the *ni-ga* construction in the *aru* construction without consistent relation, are all possessive constructions. While *zai* construction and *aru/iru* construction with consistent relation are all existential constructions. In many languages, two concepts are expressed by the same construction. The you construction in Chinese can express the concept of possession, as in *zhangsan you yitao fangzi* (Zhangsan has a house), or the concept of existence, as in *zhuozi shang you yiben shu* (There is a book on the table). This section analyzes the inconsistencies between concept meaning and constructional meaning in Chinese and Japanese, which eventually leads to the subject ambiguity phenomenon

5.1 Inconsistency in Chinese

The you existential sentence in Chinese uses the you construction to express the concept of existence. Such as *zhuozi shang you yiben shu* (There is a book on the table). The conceptual meaning is existence and the constructional meaning is possession. The characteristics of the Chinese *you* existential sentence can be described by the reference point ability, The conceptualizer identifies a domain through the reference points, and there a target in the domain. At the top are the semantic features after fusion. Since the trajector and the landmark in the concept level is opposite to that in the construction level, the interaction effect occurs in the fusion process, which is reflected as the fusion of the trajector and the landmark. After the fusion, the reference point and the target have the same degree of prominence, which is the ambiguity phenomenon of the subject on the surface of the sentence.

5.2 Inconsistency in Japanese

Contrary to Chinese, Japanese *iru* possessive sentences uses existential constructions to express the concept of possession, such as *tarou ni mago ga iru* (*Tarou* has a grandchild).The conceptual meaning is possession, while the constructional meaning is existence. The conceptual meaning means possession. The landmark is in the domain which is identified by the trajector. The trajector controls the landmark. The constructional meaning is existence. Also it can be described with reference point ability. The conceptualizer identifies a search domain through the reference point, and the target is located in this search domain. In the process of fusion of conceptual meaning and constructional meaning, the interaction between them is generated. As a result, the reference point in the *iru* possessive sentence formed by fusion has the same degree of prominence as the target, which is the ambiguity phenomenon of the subject on the surface of the sentence.

To sum up, in the theoretical framework of cognitive grammar, from the perspective of concept-construction interface, this paper analyzed the subject ambiguity phenomenon in existential and possessive sentences in Chinese and Japanese. The reasons for the distribution difference between Chinese and Japanese are as follows: in Chinese existential sentences, the trajector in the concept level is different from it in the construction level, which leads to the ambiguous identity of the trajector of the sentence. While in Japanese *iru* possessive sentences, the trajector in the concept level is different from it in the construction level, which leads to the ambiguous identity of the trajector of the sentence.

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