

Preference between Subjective and Objective Construal

---- A Topic on the Basics of ‘Cognitive Grammar’

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‘Construal’ is a crucial notion in cognitive linguistics. The speaker of language is assumed to have the ability of construing one and the same situation in a number of alternate ways and of making different senses of it (Langacker 1991 [1989]: 61). It is also plausible that being faced with one and the same situation, the speaker of one language may prefer to construe it in one way, while the speaker of a different language tends to construe it in another way --- resulting in what Whorf (1956 [1939]: 158, 159) called ‘fashions of speaking’. The present paper addresses this question specifically in regard to the contrast between subjective and objective construal (Langacker 1985, etc.). With the focus being laid on the speaker’s cognitive stance (rather than on the resulting linguistic features), the two types of construal can be characterized as follows (Ikegami 2003-4, etc.), slightly modifying Langacker 1985, etc.):

The maximally subjectively oriented speaker will prefer to conceptualize the situation to be encoded as if s/he were on the scene and were experiencing it her-/himself, irrespective of whether s/he is actually involved in the situation or not. The resulting state is here a subject-object merger. The maximally objectively oriented speaker, by contrast, will prefer to take a detached outlook on the situation to be encoded, irrespective of whether s/he is actually involved in the situation or not. The resulting state is here a subject-object contract.

I suggest as a native speaker of Japanese specializing in English that Japanese speakers tend to indulge in subjective construal with significantly more readiness than English speakers (and for that matter, probably than speakers of Indo-European languages in general). I am going to illustrate the point by referring to pairs of Japanese and English text pieces in interlingual translation, which supposedly describe one and the same scene but which apparently diverge from each other considerably (because their underlying construals are different – one in terms of subjective construal and the other in objective construal). This is supplemented further by citing a number of idiomatic expressions in the two languages which are used in equivalent situations but which literally mean different things because their underlying construals of the situations diverge from each other. Thus by shifting the focus onto the characteristic stances of the speakers as cognizing agents (as in cognitive linguistics) rather than solely being concerned with the structural features and mechanisms of language, with the speakers either simply shelved and eliminated from the scene (as in structural linguistics) or idealized, made invisible and eventually replaced by rules (as in transformational grammar), we will be introduced to a new perspective of linguistic research which is more promising, insightful and attractive.