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A Sociolinguistic View of Cultural Influences in Conversations about Religion

Rachael Merrill

Abstract

Much research has been done to examine how miscommunications occur across cultures, and how understanding cultural contexts can help us be more successful in linguistic endeavors. This paper addresses intercultural communication issues in religious conversations among American English speakers and Japanese speakers by examining how the different sociocultural meanings attached to individual lexical items associated with religious topics (e.g., god and prayer) differ between English and Japanese. This is a qualitative study using data from publicly available corpora of Japanese and English as well as sociolinguistic interviews. I will not present the analysis of the interviews here: however, I consulted the interviews to confirm the data from the corpora and will briefly mention those. The data includes which collocations these two words appear within certain grammatical structures in both English and Japanese as well as what social contexts they appear in. There are some similarities across these two different linguistic and cultural contexts, however, noting the differences can help us know what cultural assumptions may underlie discussions about religion and how these impact the development of religious understandings. This matters because religious topics are highly sensitive to context—that is, to speakers' pre-existing assumptions about religion, their worldviews, and the beliefs they were raised up in. From there, we can better learn how to adapt in order to communicate and interact with others with more cultural awareness. I will address the potential miscommunications that might occur due to different understandings of ostensibly similar lexical meanings in the social context of volunteer missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints aiming to communicate with and seek Japanese converts. While some limitations to this study include limited interview participants and analysis of only two lexical items in the corpus study, this research still serves as a valuable starting point for further studies.

Introduction

What would happen if you took a single word and asked someone to describe it? What would they say about it? What other words are used in relation to it? What personal experiences are attached to it? What worldviews are associated with it? Imagine asking a different person the same question with the same word. Of course there would be overlap in the responses, but inevitably certain aspects of their interpretations, experiences, and perspectives will differ. Even individual words, all by themselves, which appear on the surface to be unambiguous, can mean something completely different across different speakers. This illusion is also fed by how we translate the words between languages as if it is a one-to-one correspondence. This simple interview experiment depicts the significance of pragmatics, or the meanings of words in context, especially across languages and cultures. I expanded on this simple experiment in my research using typical religious words and compared the results between American English speakers and Japanese speakers. I hypothesized that the pragmatic differences across these particular languages and cultures would be especially salient.
The idea that understanding pragmatics in interactions is important even in conversations with the same language and cultural background was addressed by a linguist named Michael J. Reddy in a research paper in 1979 that has attracted commentary and citations from hundreds across several fields of study. In his research and explanation of what he calls ‘the conduit metaphor,’ he states that “the problems of society, government, and culture depend ultimately on something like the daily box score of successes and failures to communicate” (Reddy, 284). Therefore, he attempts to answer the question, “How do we improve our communication?” by presenting two frameworks. The first is the conduit metaphor, which is the idea that meaning is simply transferred through the objective packaging of words. When miscommunications arise, people often say things such as “try to get your thoughts across better” or “you still haven’t given me any idea of what you mean?” (Reddy, 286). In cases like this, we tend to blame the speaker for not packing the meaning of the words correctly. Reddy argues that this conduit metaphor is insufficient and actually harmful because it doesn’t take into account different pragmatic contexts that exist between any two people, regardless of their native language and cultural background.

He offers the toolmakers paradigm as a valuable alternative. To understand this framework, you can imagine a hypothetical situation where interlocutors exist in completely isolated compartments. They attempt to work together to build tools but are only able to communicate by drawing instructions on a central hub that gets sent to the others. After some trouble, the interlocutors soon discover that they each have different materials in their compartments (rocks, sticks, etc). Once they understand what each person is working with, they are able to communicate and work together. Reddy compares the two frameworks by saying, “In terms of the conduit metaphor, what requires explanation is failure to communicate. Success appears to be automatic. But if we think in terms of the toolmakers paradigm, our expectation is precisely the opposite. Partial miscommunication, or divergence of readings from a single text, are not aberrations. They are tendencies inherent in the system, which can only be counteracted by continuous effort and by large amounts of verbal interaction. In this view, things will naturally be scattered, unless we expend the energy to gather them” (Reddy, 295-296). In other words, Reddy argues that we need to work at understanding the materials, or pragmatic contexts, that others have to work with instead of simply assuming our packaging, or the words we use, are universally understood. It is my goal that through my research, I can prove the insufficiency of the ‘conduit metaphor’ in the specific setting of religious conversations between American Christian missionaries and customarily non-Christian Japanese people.

Haru Yamada, author of several books that help readers navigate American and Japanese culture and communication, has a lot to say regarding miscommunications between these two cultures specifically. In Different Games, Different Rules: Why Americans and Japanese Misunderstand Each Other, she says, “Differences in communication have been overlooked, undervalued, and little understood mainly because, unlike a political event or the movement of market shares, communication is difficult to capture. But to ignore differences is to be lulled into the false assumption that we all communicate in the same way” (Yamada, 5). The problem isn’t “language barriers” that can be solved simply by a higher proficiency in a target language; rather the problem is in the way we communicate. She teaches sociocultural implications such as background, history, and tips for communicating successfully between America and Japan. She speaks to an audience of business executives, scientists, scholars, tourists, and
anyone who travels or communicates regularly with Japan. She does not specifically address religious contexts, but her research is still valuable in the context of my religious study because it sets forth solutions to overcoming intercultural miscommunication. My aim is specifically to help missionaries and others to engage in religious conversations with more success.

Because the motivation for my research project originated from personal experiences as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Japan and as a teacher at the Missionary Training Center, in this paper I will expound on the relevance and applications of this kind of research in those specific settings. However, it can also be applied to other settings where languages and cultures must be mutually understood in order to communicate successfully. Marianne Gullberg, a psycholinguist and academic scholar specializing in second language acquisition, said, “Using a poorly mastered second language in interaction with a native speaker is a challenging task. You must get words and grammar reasonably right to convey what you want. You must be pragmatically and culturally appropriate in doing so [emphasis added], and you must achieve all this under time pressure so the native speaker does not lose interest in you” (Gullberg, 137). Again, here is a clear indication that understanding pragmatics across cultures is vital in any setting or context with speakers of different language and cultural backgrounds. But it is particularly important within the framework of missionaries attempting to communicate in a second language with Japanese strangers about religious words and concepts that don’t perfectly align with Japanese religion, culture, and tradition.

Method

The methods I used for this qualitative study on the pragmatic and cultural differences between religious lexical items across American English and Japanese include sociolinguistic interviews and a corpus study. The sociolinguistic interviews were conducted in different cities in Japan and included 12 Japanese participants selected by convenience sampling. In the interviews, I presented a list of religious words in Japanese and asked open-ended questions about how they would describe those words or what particular experiences they associated with those words. These interviews provide a sample corpus for the list of words: it’s a collection of spoken discourse that can teach us about how those particular religious lexical items are used in context of a person’s language and culture.

The purpose of this paper is narrower and will focus on the written corpus study on two religious words in particular: God and prayer. I chose these words because they typically have clean “translations” across languages—as in many people can agree on what English and Japanese words to use if they encountered those specific words in translation. They also appear relatively regularly, or at least early, in spontaneous conversations about religious topics. But this study will prove how they aren’t as equivalent across cultures as people expect. These words cannot function wholly in the oversimplified framework of Reddy’s conduit metaphor, and we need to look at them through a more educated pragmatic lens.

The corpus that I used to accomplish this study was Sketch Engine because it includes comparable corpora in both Japanese and English. Sketch Engine gathers recent texts from the internet, such as from blogs, discussions, fiction, legal, news, reference/encyclopedia, etc. The English corpus
called English Web 2021 (enTenTen21) contains 52,268,286,493 words, while the Japanese corpus called Japanese Web 2011 (jaTenTen11) only contains 8,432,294,787 words. Because the Japanese corpus is significantly smaller, I used percentages for frequency of word use instead of raw numbers, which these percentages can be seen in the tables attached in the results section of this paper.

The feature I used in Sketch Engine is called WordSketch, and its purpose is to find collocations organized by grammar relations. I organized the collocations by score, which is defined here: “The typicality score (LogDice) indicates how strong the collocation is. The higher the score, the stronger the collocation. A low score means that the words in the collocation also frequently combine with many other words… This list is more useful for language learning and more interesting for linguists” (Sketch Engine). The theoretical range of the typicality score is anywhere between 0 and 14. Using the top scoring collocations in different grammatical categories and comparing them across English and Japanese, we can see the similarities and differences between how my chosen lexical items, god and prayer, are being used in conversation. While I occasionally mention the significance of a high scoring collocate, it’s less the degree of the score that matters and more how the top scoring collocates are used in context that matters.

While the sociolinguistic interviews, which are analyzed using conversational analysis methods, and the corpus data approach entail the use of two different methods, they both work together to reveal how different religious words are used in context and can be compared across different languages and cultures. However, some limitations of the study include a relatively small sample size of 12 sociolinguistic interviews, written discourse analysis and no spoken discourse, and a lack of comparable interviews in American English to which the Japanese interviews can be compared. There’s also the question about where the Japanese materials on the corpus came from—how many of the sample texts are originally Japanese and not translations of English or other internet sources? It’s critical to take these limitations into account, but the patterns in this study’s results are still significant and meaningful; this project is an important beginning to more deeply understanding the linguistic and cultural differences that arise when people engage in religious conversations.

Results & Discussion

The tables below include the top ten collocations for god and prayer from the Sketch Engine corpora across different grammatical structures and in both focus languages. I organized the data by grammatical category and compared the Japanese (left) and the English (right). In each table, I included the grammatical relation or the function in the sentence, the collocation or the related word, the score which measures its strength, and the frequency percentage of how often the collocation appears with the word in question in relation to total words contained in the particular corpus.
Table 1: Pray for Noun

Table 1 shows the results for what people typically pray for. An important aspect that this particular grammatical structure reveals is simply what kinds of things are prayed for in Japanese and English. The Japanese collocations include words that fit into a category named by Arvind Sharma, a professor of comparative religion at McGill University, of “this-worldly” words, while English includes some words that are more “other-worldly.” Sharma explains that these two terms represent a dichotomy in religious contexts. While one deals with this earth/world, our temporal being, materialism, the here and now, and one’s own efforts (this-worldly), the other deals with the heavens/other worlds, eternities, spirituality, divinity, and grace. These Japanese words are examples of what might be written on絵馬 (ema), small wooden boards that people of Buddhist or Shinto religions write their “prayers” or wishes on. A wish is a common descriptor for these kinds of “this-worldly” prayers. On the other hand, the English collocations include additional “other-worldly” elements such as miracle, god, and souls. These patterns match with trends that categorize religions common in Japan, such as Buddhism and Shintoism, as “this-worldly” and common religions in America, such as Christianity, as “other-worldly.” In conclusion, these subtle differences in simple lexical items highlight larger and more significant divergences in conceptions about religion as a whole for each of the two cultures.

The top two results in Japanese have an asterisk because the words mean something differently by themselves from what they do in the expressional phrase “pray for ___. The first word 冥福 (meifuku) is translated as bliss, but becomes an expression of condolences for souls who have passed when in the context of祈る (inoru/prayer). The second word 健闘 (kentou) becomes a form of “good luck” in the context of祈る (inoru/prayer). Perhaps these fixed prayer expressions are more obvious in Japanese because the pragmatics of the words change when embedded in a phrase regarding prayer, but it’s
important to note that there are also fixed prayer expressions in English as well. Think of how often people say to each other, post on social media, or write in notes and cards, “pray for rain,” “pray for peace,” or even “I’m praying for you,” whether or not the speaker is actually religious. In cases like this, the pragmatics of these words represent one thing by themselves and another in context with its collocations. This idea also begs the question about whether prayer is more fixed and ritualistic or creative in each of the Japanese and English sociolinguistic contexts. The phrasal elements in this data set show that there are elements of both in each of the languages, so miscommunications can occur when the senses are mixed and misinterpreted.

Table 2: Pray to Noun

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>% x 10 mil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>noun に</td>
<td>神 ~ God</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun に</td>
<td>一心 ~ one’s mind</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun に</td>
<td>神仏 ~ the gods</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun に</td>
<td>天 ~ heaven</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun に</td>
<td>晩 ~ dawn</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun に</td>
<td>星 ~ stars</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun に</td>
<td>神々 ~ the gods</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun に</td>
<td>仏 ~ Buddha</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun に</td>
<td>祈れ星 ~ shooting star</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun に</td>
<td>祈り ~ prayer</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Collocate</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>% x 10 mil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Pray”</td>
<td>god</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pray”</td>
<td>God</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>6.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pray”</td>
<td>Lord</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pray”</td>
<td>Allah</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pray”</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pray”</td>
<td>saint</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pray”</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pray”</td>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pray”</td>
<td>goddess</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pray”</td>
<td>deity</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The differences between English and Japanese in Table 2 are perhaps the most salient in the comparisons of religious lexical items. In the grammatical structure of “pray to noun” for Japanese, the list is composed of different religions’ divine beings, nature, and the cosmos. For English, the entirety of the words can be categorized as persons. This is an interesting contrast that demonstrates an important distinction in who/what people pray to and a potential area of miscommunication in religious conversations on this topic.

Let’s consider the scenario of an American Christian missionary teaching a typical Japanese person of non-Christian background about prayer. They may invite this person to try praying. From what seems like a fairly simple request, misunderstandings are likely to arise. In the missionary’s mind, they have asked this person to communicate with a being who listens to their supplication. In the Japanese friend’s mind, they are imagining the ritualistic prayers of bowing and clapping before a Shinto shrine, not necessarily to any being in particular as was described by many of those interviewed in Japan. From this simple scenario, it is apparent how necessary it is to understand the linguistic and cultural ties to the word prayer when trying to engage in these conversations.
Table 3 contains a consistent Japanese grammatical structure, but varied structures in the English form. This is because the “に (ni) verb” in Japanese doesn’t have a perfect English translation—which highlights even more the potential for miscommunications. に (ni), often translated as in or to in English, is included in Table 3. Because it was a combination of two English grammar patterns, I simply combined the results together and organized the top 10 results between the two by the score.

While prayer is shared between top Japanese and English collocations, it’s important to look closer and ask, “what kind of prayer?” and refer to the data explained in the previous tables. Even this point which initially appears to be a commonality across Japanese and English contexts contains important sociocultural differences such as the content, direction, methods, and rituals for the prayer.

Some more immediate variations between languages include the connotations of the lists. The Japanese collocations include negative words—meaning they may express elements of denial, disagreement, refusal, misfortune or incite negative emotion—such as curse, disobey, and oppose. For example, one of the concordance lines for disobey, a top collocate with god, in Japanese is: その罪は神に背いたことに端を発してゐる(sono tsumi wa kami ni somuita koto ni hashi o hasshite wiru), which is roughly translated as “that sin stems from disobedience to god.” In contrast, the English collocations include more positive words—meaning they may express elements of affirmation, goodness, or incite positive emotion—such as glory, praise, and obedience. An example of a line from the corpus that includes one of these positive English collocates is, “God is so great that all things give glory to God.” These variations between the two languages may reflect attitudes towards “god” in each of the cultures. Perhaps in the Japanese context, “god” is a force not to be reckoned with. This can be seen in the
proverb that the fourth collocation, *curse*, originates from: 触らぬ神に祟りなし (sawaranu kami ni tatari nashi), translated literally as “the god you do not approach will not curse you,” which is also related to the English proverb “let sleeping dogs lie.” On the other hand, in an English context, “god” is a personage worth **trusting, believing in, praising, obeying, and pleasing**. These are simply hypotheses based on very basic data and could be explored more deeply.

Table 4: Verbs with the Object God

Table 4 shows what verbs are used when *god* is the object of the sentence, meaning what we do to *god*. Similar to Table 3, the Japanese collocations include more negatively connoted words again, such as *fear* and *curse*, while the English collocations do not as much. This strengthens the hypothesis that the image of god is more of a being that you can have positive interactions with in English sociolinguistic contexts than in Japanese contexts where god is a feared force or power. Again, let’s imagine a scenario where a missionary is trying to help a Japanese person build a relationship with “God” but that person seems reluctant, or perhaps they don’t understand the concept at all. The missionaries might better understand why there is hesitation when they discover what cultural contexts underlie both of their perceptions of who/what “god” is to each of them.
Table 5: Verbs with the Subject God

Table 5 shows what verbs god performs most commonly in each of the languages. I will focus on the collocation 宿る (yadoru/to dwell). This is a collocation that was very strong in Japanese but didn’t appear on the top 10 for English. In fact, it was ranked far below, only with a score of 4.9 in the English corpus. What’s more interesting is what other words were included near those collocations. In Japanese, it included “god” dwelling in heaven, a beautiful island, in details, in a stone, in all things, etc. This shows that the Japanese “god” seems to be ever-present, especially in nature. This is strengthened by the collocation of 祭られる (matsurareru/to be enshrined), which also includes cases of god being enshrined” in nature. In the English collocations of to dwell, “god” did so in church, heaven, among people, etc. to emphasize that the being of “god” is much more person-like in the English-speaking cultural context. This is a very different interpretation of to dwell than the Japanese collocation 宿る (yadoru), even though the verbs are theoretically equivalent translations of each other.

Another possible explanation for the usage difference of the word dwell or yadoru across languages could be the change in frequency of this particular word over time. For example, doing a quick search in the Corpus of Historical American English created by linguist Mark Davies, dwell was used approximately 42.11 times per million words in the 1820s but has steadily decreased over time to be used only 4.48 times per million words in the 2010 decade. Though without access to a Japanese historical corpus, it's impossible to know if there's a similar decline. This would also have an impact on the score of ‘yadoru’ in its collocation to the focus word god.
Conclusion

Through this qualitative study of two religious words, god and prayer, we can see evidence for different pragmatic meanings attached to the lexical items across cultural boundaries and language boundaries. These differences can teach us where people vary and can also teach us where to build communication bridges using pragmatics to avoid misunderstandings. This research only addresses the pragmatics of two lexical items, and yet it shows the potential of what we can discover about pragmatics across languages and cultures. It’s important to consider that if miscommunications happen with lexical items, they likely also occur with conversation strategies, politeness strategies, speech acts, etc. These discoveries can lead us to better answer how we can navigate conversations about religion with more cultural awareness and understanding, not just in content, but in our methods of communication as well.

This task is vital in the context of missionary work for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where the goal is to effectively and accurately communicate religious topics to people of different language and cultural backgrounds. In the manual for missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints called Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it says, “Culture and language are closely related. Understanding the culture of the people will help explain the way language is used. This understanding will also help you communicate the unique aspects of the message of the Restoration in a way that will be clear to people.” (Preach My Gospel, chapter 7). From this research and other studies like it, we see that it’s vital to learn about culture in tandem with learning a language; they are inextricably linked. Through the application of this kind of research in important settings such as second language acquisition and missionary training, we can help language learners, such as missionaries, embrace Japanese and other cultures in appropriate ways and navigate conversations about religion with more cultural awareness and understanding.
References


