

Verb "giving" in Japanese (Review of natural semantic metalanguage)

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Abstract - The intricacies of Japanese verbs related to the concept of "giving" present a compelling area of study, reflecting the nuanced nature of language and cultural expression. Despite the significance of these verbs in everyday communication, there has been limited research that systematically maps their semantic distinctions. This study addresses this gap by exploring the meaning configuration of key Japanese verbs associated with the concept of giving. Building on previous linguistic analyses, this research employs the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) theory to provide a more detailed explication of the verbs *ageru*, *kureru*, *suru*, and *tsukeru*. The data, sourced from "Minna no Nihongo" Volumes I and II as well as internet sources, were collected through an observation method combined with note-taking. The analysis reveals subtle yet significant differences in how these verbs are used, particularly in relation to the types of entities involved and the context of their application. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Japanese verb semantics, offering valuable insights for both linguistic theory and practical language learning.

Keywords: Japanese verbs, giving, semantic configuration, Natural Semantic Metalanguage, linguistic analysis

1. Introduction

Language is the foundation of human communication, and within every language, verbs play a critical role in conveying actions, states, and experiences. In Japanese grammar, verbs are not merely a linguistic tool but are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of communication. The richness of the Japanese language is reflected in the unique characteristics of its verbs, which differ significantly from those in other languages. These differences are not only linguistic but also cultural, influencing how speakers of Japanese perceive and interact with the world around them.

Japanese verbs are classified into three main categories: **godan doushi** (五段動詞) or first-class verbs, **ichidan doushi** (一段動詞) or second-class verbs, and **henkaku doushi** (変格動詞) or irregular verbs. The first-class verbs, or **godan doushi**, are characterized by their diverse endings such as -bu, -gu, -ru, -ku, -tsu, -su, -mu, -nu, and -u. These verbs undergo a series of consonant changes when conjugated. The second-class verbs, or **ichidan doushi**, typically end in -eru and -iru, and their conjugation pattern is simpler, as they follow a regular vowel pattern. The third category, **henkaku doushi**, includes only two irregular verbs: **suru** (to do) and **kuru** (to come),

both of which deviate significantly from the regular conjugation patterns of the other verb classes (Sutedi, 2011).

One of the intriguing aspects of Japanese verbs is the presence of numerous verbs with similar meanings, which can often lead to confusion among learners of the language. Verbs such as **ageru** (あげる), **kureru** (くれる), **suru** (する), and **tsukeru** (つける) are all commonly translated into English as "to give." However, their usage in Japanese is far more nuanced and is deeply influenced by the cultural context in which they are used. The subtleties in the meanings and applications of these verbs pose significant challenges, particularly for learners of Japanese as a second language. Among these, the verbs **ageru** and **kureru** are notably difficult due to their reliance on the concepts of **uchi** (内) and **soto** (外), which represent the cultural dimensions of "inside" and "outside," respectively.

In Japanese, **uchi** and **soto** are more than just spatial terms; they embody a cultural dichotomy that influences social interactions and language use. **Uchi** refers to the inner circle, encompassing the self and those closely related, such as family members or co-workers within the same organization. **Soto**, on the other hand, refers to the outer circle, including those outside one's immediate social group. This cultural context profoundly affects how verbs like **ageru** and **kureru** are used. For example, **ageru** is used when the speaker gives something to someone outside their **uchi** group, while **kureru** is used when the speaker receives something from someone within their **uchi** group. The application of these verbs requires not only linguistic knowledge but also a deep understanding of Japanese social norms and relationships.

Understanding the nuances of verb usage in Japanese is not just an academic exercise; it is crucial for effective communication in both personal and professional contexts. For learners of Japanese, especially those who aim to achieve fluency, mastering the subtle differences between verbs like **ageru**, **kureru**, **suru**, and **tsukeru** is essential. Misunderstanding or misusing these verbs can lead to communication breakdowns and social misunderstandings, which can be particularly problematic in a culture that places a high value on politeness and social harmony.

Furthermore, the global spread of Japanese culture through media, technology, and business has led to an increasing number of non-native speakers engaging with the language. As Japanese continues to gain prominence as a global language, there is an urgent need for research that can provide learners with tools to understand and use Japanese verbs accurately. This study is therefore timely and necessary, as it seeks to address the gaps in understanding the meanings of Japanese verbs through a linguistic and cultural lens.

Previous researches on Japanese verbs has largely focused on their grammatical classification and conjugation patterns. Studies have explored the structural aspects of **godan doushi**, **ichidan doushi**, and **henkaku doushi**, providing detailed descriptions of their conjugation rules and exceptions (Sutedi, 2011). However, fewer studies have delved into the semantic and cultural dimensions of verb usage, particularly in relation to verbs with similar meanings.

Research by Wierzbicka (2002) and Goddard (1994) on the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) theory provides a framework for analysing the meanings of words across languages, including Japanese. The NSM theory posits that all languages share a set of universal semantic primes—basic concepts that are innate and culturally neutral. These primes can be combined in different ways to express complex meanings in any language. This theory has been applied to Japanese to some extent, but there is still much to be explored, especially in the context of verbs like **ageru**, **kureru**, **suru**, and **tsukeru**.

The few studies that have applied the NSM theory to Japanese verbs have primarily focused on individual verbs or small groups of verbs, without fully exploring the broader implications of cultural context on verb usage. For instance, while the verb **suru** has been analysed extensively due to its irregular conjugation and wide range of meanings, verbs like **ageru** and **kureru** have not received the same level of attention. The existing research often treats these verbs in isolation, without considering how they interact with cultural concepts like **uchi** and **soto**. This study seeks to fill this gap by using the NSM theory to analyse these verbs in a

culturally informed manner, providing a more holistic understanding of their meanings and usage.

The work by Wierzbicka (2002) offers an in-depth exploration of semantic theory, focusing on the concept of semantic primes and universals. It provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the basic elements of meaning that are universal across languages. The book is crucial for researchers interested in the fundamental components of meaning and how they can be applied to different linguistic contexts.

In this publication, Wierzbicka (1996) examines the relationship between culture, language, and speech acts. The work explores how different cultural contexts influence language use and the performance of various speech acts. It is a valuable resource for understanding cross-cultural communication and the role of cultural norms in shaping linguistic expressions. This article by Wierzbicka (1991) analyses key Japanese terms and their connection to core cultural values. It offers insights into how specific words reflect underlying cultural concepts and values in Japanese society. The study is significant for researchers interested in the intersection of language and cultural identity, providing a detailed examination of how language encapsulates cultural norms.

Gladkova et al (2016) in this experimental study investigates the semantics of interjections using natural semantic metalanguage (NSM). The authors examine how interjections convey meaning and their role in communication. The study is important for those researching the expressive functions of language and the application of NSM in understanding emotional and evaluative expressions. The anonymous (2001; Rizqi & Mantiri, 2024;) article discusses issues related to suppletion, lexical meaning, semantic primitives, and translation. It provides an analysis of how different linguistic phenomena intersect with theories of meaning and translation. The work is relevant for scholars interested in the nuances of lexical semantics and the challenges of translating meaning across languages.

The article by Wajdi et al (2024) examines the use of Indonesian terms of address like "bapak" or "ibu" and "kamu" in educational contexts in Indonesia. It explores how these terms function within various social and hierarchical interactions in schools, highlighting their implications for communication practices and power dynamics in educational settings.

The study by Wajdi et al (2020) analyses Indonesian verbs "berkata," "bersabda," and "berfirman." It investigates the nuances and contexts in which these verbs are used, focusing on their meanings, connotations, and usage in different communicative scenarios. The study aims to clarify the distinctions between these verbs and their implications for understanding language use in Indonesian.

The primary research problem that this study aims to address is the complexity of Japanese verbs that have similar meanings but different applications based on cultural context. Specifically, the study will focus on the following questions:

- (1) How do the verbs *ageru*, *kureru*, *suru*, and *tsukeru* differ in meaning and usage within Japanese?
- (2) How does the cultural context of *uchi* and *soto* influence the usage of these verbs?
- (3) Can the NSM theory provide a clear and accurate framework for understanding the meanings of these verbs?
- (4) What are the implications of these findings for learners of Japanese, particularly in terms of avoiding common errors and improving fluency?

These questions are not only linguistically significant but also have practical implications for language teaching and learning. By addressing these research problems, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Japanese verbs and to provide learners with more effective tools for mastering the language.

The objectives of this study are closely aligned with the research problems outlined above. The study seeks to achieve the following:

- (1) To analyse the meanings and usage of the verbs *ageru*, *kureru*, *suru*, and *tsukeru* in Japanese using the NSM theory. This analysis will involve a detailed examination of how these verbs are used in different contexts, particularly in relation to the cultural concepts of

uchi and **soto**. The study will aim to identify the subtle differences in meaning between these verbs and how these differences are reflected in their usage.

(2) To explore the cultural dimensions of Japanese verb usage, particularly the influence of **uchi** and **soto** on the selection and application of verbs. This objective will involve an examination of how cultural norms and social relationships impact language use in Japanese. The study will seek to provide a culturally informed interpretation of verb usage, highlighting the importance of understanding social context in mastering the language.

(3) To evaluate the effectiveness of the NSM theory in providing a framework for understanding the meanings of Japanese verbs. This objective will involve a critical assessment of how well the NSM theory can account for the nuances of verb meaning in Japanese. The study will aim to determine whether the theory is a useful tool for learners and researchers alike in deciphering the complexities of Japanese verbs.

(4) To develop practical recommendations for learners of Japanese to improve their understanding and usage of verbs like **ageru**, **kureru**, **suru**, and **tsukeru**. Based on the findings of the study, the research will offer concrete suggestions for language learners on how to avoid common errors and use these verbs accurately. These recommendations will be aimed at both beginners and advanced learners, with a focus on helping them navigate the cultural and linguistic challenges of learning Japanese.

This study seeks to bridge the gap between linguistic theory and practical language learning by analysing the meanings and usage of Japanese verbs through the lens of the NSM theory. By exploring the cultural dimensions of verb usage, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how language and culture are intertwined in Japanese. The findings of this study will not only contribute to the field of linguistics but also offer valuable insights for learners of Japanese, helping them to achieve greater fluency and cultural competence in the language.

2. Method

2.1 Data Collection

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyse Japanese sentences, specifically focusing on verb usage in *Minna no Nihongo I* and *Minna no Nihongo II*, textbooks authored by Kogawa (1998), along with additional sources from the internet. These textbooks are selected due to their extensive coverage of Japanese verbs, which makes them ideal for linguistic analysis. The study aims to explore how these verbs are used in various contexts and how their meanings are shaped by cultural and syntactic factors.

The data collection process is based on the recall method combined with note-taking, as outlined by Sudaryanto (2015; Wajdi, 2018). This method involves systematically going through the selected corpus data, which includes sentences from the textbooks and online sources, and understanding each instance of verb usage in depth. The recall method allows the researcher to mentally retrieve and process relevant linguistic data, while note-taking ensures that the collected data is accurately documented for further analysis.

2.2 Analysis Technique

Once the data is collected, it undergoes a thorough qualitative analysis using the *agih* method, a technique detailed by Sudaryanto (2015). This method is particularly suited for addressing issues related to verbs, as it allows for a detailed examination of their usage within the context of Japanese grammar. The *agih* method involves breaking down the sentences into their constituent parts to identify patterns, variations, and anomalies in verb usage. This process helps in classifying the verbs according to their semantic properties and syntactic functions. The analysis is further enhanced by applying the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) theory, developed by Wierzbicka (1996; Sudipa, 2004/2005). NSM is a semantic theory designed to explore and classify meanings at various levels—lexical, illocutionary, and grammatical. In the context of this study, NSM is particularly useful for elucidating the meanings of Japanese verbs that are culturally and syntactically complex. The theory frames the meaning of these verbs within a metalanguage that is derived from natural language and is universally understandable by native speakers.

Key theoretical concepts from NSM, such as primal meaning, polysemy, and NSM

syntax, are used to guide the analysis. Primal meaning refers to the inherent, unchanging meaning of a word, which is believed to be a reflection of basic human cognition (Goddard, 1996). This concept is crucial for understanding the foundational meanings of Japanese verbs, which are consistent across different contexts and speakers.

Polysemy, on the other hand, addresses the phenomenon where a single lexical form can express multiple, distinct meanings. In this study, uncomposed polysemy is examined, where different meanings of a verb do not share a compositional relationship and may occur in different grammatical frames. This analysis helps in distinguishing between the various senses of a verb and understanding how context influences meaning.

Lastly, NSM syntax, an extension of the primal meaning system, is used to explore the complex structure of meaning in Japanese verbs. This concept suggests that meaning is not only composed of simple elements like "person," "want," or "know," but also includes complex combinations that adhere to universal syntactic rules. For example, the verb "want" in Japanese is analysed within a universal rule structure, providing insights into how desires and intentions are expressed in the language (Wierzbicka, 1996).

After the data is analysed, the results are presented using informal methods as described by Sudaryanto (2015). This involves explaining the findings through descriptive language – using words, phrases, and sentences organized into coherent paragraphs. This approach ensures that the final results are communicated effectively, making the complex analysis of Japanese verbs accessible to a broader audience (Listiyapinto & Endraswara, 2024).

The *Kamus Jepang-Indonesia* by Kenji Matsuura (2005) is a valuable resource for researchers working with Japanese language materials. This dictionary is instrumental in providing accurate translations and definitions of Japanese words, which aids in checking and verifying their meanings in various contexts. For this study, the dictionary was particularly useful in ensuring the precise understanding of Japanese verbs related to the concept of 'giving,' including *ageru*, *kureru*, *suru*, and *tsukeru*. By consulting this dictionary, the researcher was able to clarify the nuances and applications of these verbs, contributing to a more thorough and accurate analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

Expanding on the given analysis, the discussion on the Japanese verbs related to the concept of "giving" can be elaborated by exploring each verb's usage, nuances, and cultural context. This extended explanation aims to delve deeper into the semantics and pragmatic applications of the verbs *ageru*, *kureru*, *suru*, and *tsukeru* in the Japanese language.

3.1 Ageru (あげる) - "To Give" from Uchi to Soto

The verb *ageru* (あげる) is primarily used to express the act of giving something from the speaker or someone in the speaker's group (*uchi*) to someone outside their immediate circle (*soto*). The structure of sentences using *ageru* typically follows a straightforward format where the subject performs the act of giving something tangible or intangible to another party.

In the context of Japanese society, which places significant emphasis on social hierarchy and group dynamics, *ageru* carries the implication of offering something to someone of a higher or equal status. The act of giving with *ageru* is often associated with a sense of humility or obligation, reflecting the cultural norms of respect and deference.

Example Sentences:

1. *Teresa chan ni no-to wo agemasu.*
"I give a notebook to Teresa."
2. *Okaasan no tanjoubi ni hana wo agemashita.*
"I gave flowers for her mother's birthday."

Semantic Explication:

- At that time, the subject (X) performs an action on an object (Y).
- As a result, the object (Y) moves from the subject's domain (*uchi*) to the recipient's domain (*soto*).

- The action is intentional, and it typically brings happiness to the recipient.
- The subject performs this action out of a sense of desire or obligation.

In these examples, *ageru* emphasizes the act of giving from the speaker's perspective, where the item or gesture is transferred from their domain to someone else's. The psychological aspect of the verb also highlights the cultural importance of the act being intentional and usually appreciated by the recipient.

3.2 *Kureru* (くれる) - "To Give" from Soto to Uchi

In contrast to *ageru*, *kureru* (くれる) is used when the act of giving is directed towards the speaker or someone within the speaker's immediate circle. This verb is employed when something is received from someone who is outside the speaker's group, reflecting the flow of the gift from soto (outside) to uchi (inside).

Kureru is particularly important in the Japanese language as it emphasizes the perspective of the receiver. This verb underscores the gratitude and appreciation associated with receiving something, often highlighting the benevolence of the giver.

Example Sentences:

1. *Haha wa watashi ni se-ta- wo kuremashita.*
"My mother gave me a sweater."
2. *Isha wa haha ni kusuri wo kuremashita.*
"The doctor gave my mother medicine."

Semantic Explication:

- The subject (X) performs an action on an object (Y).
- As a result, the object (Y) moves from the giver's domain (soto) to the recipient's domain (uchi).
- The action is deliberate and typically brings joy to the recipient.
- The subject performs this action with intent, indicating care or affection.

The examples provided illustrate how *kureru* is used to express a more personal and inward-focused act of giving. The use of *kureru* often implies that the action is seen as a generous or thoughtful gesture, further reinforcing the cultural value placed on receiving gifts or favours.

3.3 *Suru* (する) - "To Do" or "To Give" as an Action

The verb *suru* (する) is one of the most versatile verbs in the Japanese language. While it is commonly translated as "to do," *suru* can also convey the idea of giving in the sense of performing an action that benefits someone else. This verb is frequently paired with nouns to form compound verbs, broadening its range of meanings.

In the context of giving, *suru* may not directly imply the transfer of a physical object but rather the provision of a service, action, or intangible benefit. This verb highlights the performative aspect of giving, where the action itself is the gift.

Example Sentences:

1. *Sensei ni aisatsu shimashita.*
"I greeted the teacher."

Semantic Explication:

- The subject (X) performs an action on a target (Y).
- The action results in the movement or change of the target.
- The action is intentional and reflects the subject's desire or intention.
- The performative nature of *suru* underscores the importance of the action itself rather than the object.

Here, *suru* functions as a marker of intentionality and performativity, illustrating how Japanese speakers use this verb to express actions that are socially or interpersonally significant.

3.4 *Tsukeru* (つける) - "To Attach" or "To Provide"

The verb *tsukeru* (つける) is often translated as "to attach" or "to provide," but in the context of giving, it can also mean providing something that is not physical, such as a title, a role, or encouragement. Unlike *ageru* or *kureru*, which often deal with tangible objects, *tsukeru* is more abstract and can refer to the allocation of attributes, roles, or intangible benefits.

Tsukeru is used when the speaker is providing something that will enhance or modify the recipient in some way, whether it is a title, a name, or an intangible quality. This verb underscores the aspect of giving that involves bestowing something less concrete but equally valuable.

Example Sentences:

1. *Kono repo-to ni dai wo tsukeru.*
"Give the title to this report."
2. *Kare ni genki wo tsukemashita.*
"I encouraged him."

Semantic Explication:

- The subject (X) performs an action on a target (Y).
- The action results in the target acquiring a new attribute or quality.
- The action is intentional and aimed at improving or enhancing the target.
- The abstract nature of *tsukeru* highlights the idea of giving something that is not physically tangible but still significant.

In these examples, *tsukeru* represents a more abstract form of giving, focusing on the idea of providing something that adds value or meaning to the recipient.

The verbs *ageru*, *kureru*, *suru*, and *tsukeru* exemplify the nuanced ways in which Japanese speakers express the concept of giving. These verbs not only convey the act of transferring objects but also reflect deeper cultural values related to hierarchy, group dynamics, and interpersonal relationships.

The distinction between *uchi* and *soto* in the use of *ageru* and *kureru* is particularly telling of the importance of social boundaries in Japanese society. The verbs illustrate how language is used to navigate and reinforce social relationships, with the direction of giving often implying a broader context of social roles and expectations.

Additionally, the performative aspect of *suru* and the abstract nature of *tsukeru* highlight the diversity of the concept of giving in Japanese. These verbs show that giving is not limited to physical objects but can also include actions, services, and intangible qualities that enhance or benefit the recipient.

The analysis of these Japanese verbs reveals the complexity and cultural significance of the act of giving in the Japanese language. The NSM framework provides a useful tool for understanding these nuances, offering insights into how language and culture intersect to shape meaning. Through the exploration of these verbs, we gain a deeper appreciation of the linguistic and cultural richness of Japanese, as well as the ways in which language reflects and reinforces social norms and values.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of Japanese verbs related to the concept of 'giving' reveals distinct categorizations based on the role of the perpetrator and the nature of the entities involved. Specifically, the study identifies four primary verbs that illustrate these distinctions: *ageru*, *kureru*, *suru*, and *tsukeru*. These verbs are differentiated by their association with objects and non-objects.

The verbs *ageru* and *kureru* are used when the entities involved are objects. *Ageru* is typically employed when the giver is in a position of giving something to another party, often indicating a sense of favour or generosity. On the other hand, *kureru* is used when the recipient is the focus, highlighting that the action is directed towards someone who benefits from the act of giving.

In contrast, *suru* and *tsukeru* are used in contexts where the entities are not objects in the conventional sense. *Suru* often conveys the action of doing or making something for another person, and its application is broader, extending beyond tangible items to include actions or services. *Tsukeru* similarly involves attaching or adding something, but it is also utilized in contexts where the recipient or the action itself does not necessarily involve a physical object.

While this study has provided valuable insights into the usage and meaning of these Japanese verbs of giving, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations imposed by time constraints and scope. The current research does not encompass all possible verbs related to

giving in Japanese, nor does it cover every nuance of their usage and meanings. As such, there is a significant opportunity for further research to explore a more comprehensive range of verbs and their applications. Future studies could expand on this foundation by examining additional verbs, their contextual variations, and their implications in different communicative scenarios. Such research would contribute to a more thorough understanding of the complex interplay between language, meaning, and cultural practices in the Japanese context.

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