KOI and USUI: Multiple meaning in English and Japanese

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Introduction

Multiple meaning among basic adjectives is familiar in many languages. In English, the spatial dimension terms LONG/SHORT are also applied to temporal duration (long/short hair, long/short meeting), and HIGH/LOW are extended from spatial position to position on quantitative scales (Taylor 1995) (high/low ceiling, high/low temperatures). In each of these cases, both members of the pair are extended, and the basic oppositeness relation is maintained in the extended use. In other cases, only one term is involved, being paired with a different opposite in the second use: in the case of the spatial dimension terms DEEP/SHALLOW, for example, DEEP is applied to the saturation of colours, but its opposite is PALE (deep/shallow lake vs deep/pale colours); with the biological age terms OLD/YOUNG, OLD is applied also to the temporal status of things, but the opposite is NEW (old/young man vs old/new car).

From a cross-linguistic perspective, it is noticeable that the first two cases given above are echoed in Japanese: the basic opposites NAGAI/MIJI-KAI and TAKAI/HIKUI are extended in a broadly similar way to their English counterparts. In the case of DEEP, FUKAI is also applied to shades of colours but, as in English, the spatial opposite (ASAI) is not. On the other hand, the pattern of polysemy of OLD is not matched in Japanese, which distinguishes TOSHI O TOTTE IRU etc and FURUI. Even from these few simple examples, it is clear that basic adjectives in both languages are prone to multiple uses, with both similarities and differences of detail. Which basic adjectives show multiple meanings? In which semantic areas? Are relations of oppositeness maintained in such cases, or not? The types of patterning and variation found across languages in this respect are clearly of ma-
For interest to the study of polysemy, lexical semantic relations, and their interaction.

**KOI/USUI vis-a-vis English**

*Preliminaries*

This paper examines multiple meaning in the basic Japanese opposites KOI/USUI, from a contrastive viewpoint with English. Two initial points may be made in the light of the above introductory comments. First we note that one of the terms, namely USUI, is also a member of the basic spatial dimension pair ATSUI/USUI ‘thick/thin (of two-dimensional objects)’; in both cases, it stands at the negative pole of the opposition. Secondly, from the viewpoint of English, KOI/USUI show a strikingly disparate range of application. According to Morita (1977), they range over the thickness of hair, the density of air, the consistency of soup, the strength of sweetness, and the saturation of colours; Maeda (2004) notes additions to this list, including more abstract notions of density of content. While Morita provides a general characterization of the meaning of KOI in terms of the high degree of concentration, and thereby conspicuousness, of the qualities concerned, the feeling of disparateness mentioned above relates to the fact that, as we shall see, English makes use of several different adjectives in these areas, with varying combinations of opposites: i. e. Japanese brings together under this single pair of opposites a range of qualities which English divides among a number of different items and oppositions.

The survey below focusses on the range of English terms used in the various areas of application of KOI/USUI, based on attested examples (taken from Cobuild (1995) unless otherwise noted).

**Areas of application**

Following Morita and Maeda above, we divide the range of application of KOI/USUI into the following areas:

(a) Density of gaseous substances
At high density, gaseous substances like smoke, cloud etc are difficult to see through (cf Cobuild).

(b) Physical density of hair-like mass
This involves large numbers of long objects which grow together in a mass. The greater the concentration of objects, the higher the physical density.

(c) Physical consistency of liquids
Liquids with low physical consistency are watery, and flow easily; as consistency increases, they become more like solids.

(d) Content concentration of liquids
This concerns the relative amount of a substance contained in a liquid: the higher the relative amount, the more concentrated the liquid.

(e) Intensity of tastes and smells
This is a matter of the degree to which a given taste or smell is present in a substance.

(f) Saturation of colours
This involves the degree to which colours are diluted with white. The lower the degree of dilution, the higher the saturation of the colour.

(g) Content concentration of abstract entities
This is comparable to (d), but involves abstract entities rather than liquids.

Below we take up each of these areas in turn.

(a) Density of gaseous substances
English THICK/THIN are basic spatial dimension terms applied to the thickness (i.e. the least salient dimension) of one- and two-dimensional objects, corresponding to Japanese FUTOI/HOSOI and ATSUI/USUI. With gaseous substances, THICK (also DENSE) is used of smoke, cloud, fog etc; THIN is the opposite, but it is unnatural with FOG:

1. The smoke was bluish-black and thick...
2. A dense column of smoke rose several miles into the air.
3. ... the tinkers were cooking their meal, and thin smoke rose in the air from their fires... (BNC Corpus)
4. ... I took-off from Duxford and ten seconds later I was in thick cloud. (BNC Corpus)
5. So a cold sunny start tomorrow morning with only very thin cloud about. (BNC Corpus)
(6) *It wasn't very thick fog.*
Note that in (2), a *thick column of smoke* in place of a *dense column of smoke* would be ambiguous, with the preferred interpretation referring rather to the spatial dimensions of the column.

(b) **Physical density of hair-like mass**

THICK/THIN are also used here. SPARSE is a more formal alternative for THIN, and DENSE occurs as an alternative to THICK with certain nouns. (Unlike KOI/USUI, THICK, DENSE and SPARSE are also applied to vegetation, and DENSE/SPARSE are further extended to population.)

(7) *She inherited our father's thick, wavy hair...*
(8) *She had pale thin yellow hair she pulled back into a bun.*
(9) *He was a tubby little man in his fifties, with sparse hair...*
(10) *The man, pictured in yesterday's Sunday Mirror wearing a thick black false beard...* (BNC Corpus)
(11) *Its fur is short, dense and silky...*
(12) *A man with dark hair and thick eyebrows...* (BNC Corpus)
(13) *The attacker is described as around thirty, with dark hair and a thick moustache.* (BNC Corpus)
(14) ... *a small man with a thin moustache...* (BNC Corpus)
In the final example (14), THIN is more naturally interpreted as referring to the spatial dimensions of the moustache (= HOSOI), rather than to its density. THICK in the previous two examples (12, 13), referring to eyebrows and a moustache, is in principle ambiguous in a similar way, although the density interpretations (or, perhaps, general interpretations covering both properties, i.e. *futokute koi* in Japanese) seem more natural in these cases. Clearly, widespread multiple meaning of basic adjectives has ambiguity as a possible consequence.

(c) **Physical consistency of liquids**

The basic English terms here are again THICK/THIN:
(15) *The sauce is thick and rich...*
(16) *The soup was thin and clear, yet mysteriously rich...*
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(d) Content concentration of liquids
While Japanese uses KOI/USUI here as well as in (c), English instead extends the basic opposites STRONG / WEAK. Typical liquids are drinks such as tea and coffee, and solutions of various kinds.

(17) Strong coffee or tea late at night may cause sleeplessness...
(18) Grace poured a cup of weak tea...
(19) In strong concentrations it can cause nausea and vomiting.
(20) … twenty-seven earthenware bowls soaking in a strong solution of bleach.
   (BNC Corpus)
(21) You can neutralize the smell by wiping the plaster with a very weak bleach solution.

(e) Intensity of tastes and smells
English again uses STRONG of tastes and smells. Contrast terms include MILD (of taste), FAINT or SLIGHT; WEAK is not generally used in this area.

(22) Queen olives are larger and tend to be a little darker in colour and stronger in flavour. (BNC Corpus)
(23) This cheese has a crumbly texture with a strong flavour...
(24) The wine goes with strong and mild cheese alike.
(25) Dutch Edam is well known and much loved in Britain for its mild flavour... (BNC Corpus)
(26) Ah yes, sugar beet leaves a slight taste, yes yes. (BNC Corpus)
(27) As she went past there was a gust of strong perfume...
(28) A faint smell of cabbage wafts from the flat next door. (BNC Corpus)

(f) Saturation of colours
English uses DEEP/PALE here:

(29) These Amish cushions in traditional deep colours...
(30) Still, I don’t very often wear pale colours. (BNC Corpus)
(31) The wine is deep red in colour... (BNC Corpus)
(32) These pretty pale yellow flowers grow in woods, hedges, fields and gardens. (BNC Corpus)
(33) … flowers could be had in white, purple, pale and deep yellow… (BNC Cor-
We note here that, although English uses a variety of different terms for areas (c)-(f), there are situations in which the areas are correlated, and which thus provide an experiential basis for the shared use of KOI/USUI in Japanese. In the case of a drink (such as coffee), for example, increasing the content concentration (i.e. adding more coffee) automatically leads to higher intensity of taste/smell, as well as to higher colour saturation; increasing the content concentration beyond a certain point will eventually also affect the physical concentration of the liquid (as with Turkish coffee): expressed in English terms, strong coffee (i.e. containing a large amount of coffee grounds (d)) has a stronger flavour ((e)) and a deeper colour ((f)), and in extreme cases may become thick ((c)).

(g) Content concentration of abstract entities

Whereas (d) involves the content of liquids, in this use KOI/USUI is extended to abstract entities, such as the information content (naiyoo) of a piece of communication. English uses THIN (but not THICK) in a broadly similar way:

(34) ... the work I found ultimately thin, and derivative. (BNC Corpus)
(35) ‘My story really is a bit thin.’ (BNC Corpus)
(36) However, the evidence is thin and, to some extent, ambiguous.
(37) Even if the optimists’ theory is true, it still seems a thin argument against reform.

(34) expresses an appraisal of a literary or artistic work as lacking in substance, valuable content, etc. In (35) my story refers to the speaker’s explanation for some particular state of affairs, and the remark implies that the explanation is unconvincing, lacking in detail, etc. Thin evidence and thin arguments (36, 37) likewise lack convincing substance.

Summary and conclusion

We began by pointing out that multiple meaning in adjectives appears to be commonplace in both Japanese and English, and that the two languages show both similarities and differences of detail in the way particular adjectives and pairs of adjective opposites are used in this respect. Be-
low we set out the adjectives treated here against the semantic areas (a)-(g) identified above, together with two areas of spatial dimension ((I) and (II), relating to saliently 1-dimensional and 2-dimensional objects, respectively) which are also involved in basic uses of these terms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
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<th>Japanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spatial dimension (I)</strong></td>
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<td>KOI/USUI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mass density (b)</strong></td>
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<td>KOI/USUI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liquid consistency (c)</strong></td>
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<td>KOI/USUI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liquid content (d)</strong></td>
<td>STRONG/WEAK</td>
<td>KOI/USUI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Taste/smell intensity (e)</strong></td>
<td>STRONG/MILD etc</td>
<td>KOI/USUI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Colour saturation (f)</strong></td>
<td>DEEP/PALE</td>
<td>KOI/USUI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstract content (g)</strong></td>
<td>THIN</td>
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Very broadly, we see a range of multiple meanings both for English THICK/THIN and for Japanese KOI/USUI, but with a different distribution across semantic areas. In English, THICK/THIN is focussed on the upper areas of the table, with a variety of different terms used in the remainder, whereas Japanese shows variation at the very top of the table, with consistent use of KOI/USUI below this. At the same time, both languages share the characteristic that spatial dimension terms (THICK/THIN in English, USUI alone in Japanese) are employed in the semantic areas examined in this study.

One problem concerns the placing of area (g) in the table. THIN is used here in English, but the arrangement above produces a gap in the distribution of this term. This suggests a need to re-consider the placement of this area in the table:

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<tr>
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Here we have split area (g) between the two languages, re-labelling it as 'abstract consistency' in the case of English, suggesting an extension from area (c) for this language rather than from (d). In support of this view one might note the extension of the physical consistency adjective SOLID as a contrast term with this use of THIN:

(38) *Some solid evidence was what was required...*

(39) *... cast around for some solid arguments...* (BNC Corpus)

(40) *We don't have good solid information on where the people are...*

The arguments here are far from clear-cut, however, and abstract uses in both languages merit further investigation, drawing on additional linguistic evidence.

A further point of interest that has emerged in relation to the English terms here concerns ambiguity. As indicated earlier, while multiple meaning in basic adjectives appears to be a common feature of languages, one of its obvious potential consequences is ambiguity. We noted several examples (2, 12, 13, 14) where interpretations of THICK and THIN for spatial dimension (l) and density were in conflict, a problem which does not arise in Japanese, with its distinct pairs FUTOI/HOSOI and KOI/USUI. In one example (2) in particular, conflict was resolved by the use of an alternative term (DENSE): while thick smoke refers to density, a thick column of smoke suggests rather the spatial dimensions of the column; DENSE has a narrower range of application, and in a dense column of smoke the intended reference is clear. Miller (1998: 48–52) has noted the tendency for English descriptive adjectives to occur in 'bipolar clusters', with basic opposites surrounded at each pole by a number of near-synonyms which are typically more specialized in application: clearly, one function of such near-
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synonyms is to permit greater semantic precision in cases where this is
not provided by the more general basic terms.

References

BNC Corpus: BNC (British National Corpus) World Simple Search.
http://thetis.bl.uk/lookup.html


