

Conceptual Contrasts

A Comparative Semantic Study of Dimensional Adjectives in Japanese and Swedish

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Abstract

Dimensional expressions describe the extension of entities that we commonly perceive in the three-dimensional space. Most languages have dimensional expressions such as dimensional adjectives (e.g. *high*, *long*) that are said to be universal. The present study explores concepts of dimensional adjectives in Japanese and Swedish in terms of the two knowledge bases, namely linguistic knowledge and extralinguistic knowledge. The focus is on examining whether there are any similarities and differences in the conceptualisation of dimensional adjectives between Japanese and Swedish. In order to see how concepts underlying dimensional adjectives are represented in a speaker's mind, data was collected mainly from two word-association tests that were conducted in different ways with regard to response time and format of the questions. Other sources are dictionaries and online corpora. The results show that concepts of dimensional adjectives are represented differently in these two languages. The most remarkable difference is that Japanese participants associate dimensional adjectives mostly with nouns that are generally highlighted by focusing on their prominent extensions (e.g. *long* is associated with *river*), whereas Swedish participants associate dimensional adjectives with both adjectives and nouns. Differences in association patterns between the two languages would qualify as evidence that conceptual representations of dimensional adjectives have a clear contrast.

Keywords

dimensional adjective, concept, association, Japanese, Swedish, lexical semantics

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