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Title: Semantic analysis of ‘dubious’ expressions in Japanese: *kana*, *daroo ka* and *janai ka*

Keywords: *kana*, *daroo ka*, *janai ka*, semantic primitives, the Natural Semantic Metalanguage

Abstract

This paper presents a semantic analysis of three Japanese words which represent the speaker’s uncertainty: *kana*, *daroo ka* and *janai ka*. These three words are often interpreted as *maybe*, *probably*, or *I wonder* in English, being used in similar situations. Although these words are semantically closely related, they are not always interchangeable, and the subtle differences are difficult to capture especially for language learners. It has been argued that *kana* expresses the speaker’s ‘weak’ certainty; however, the same explanation may also apply to *daroo ka* and *janai ka*, and thus terms such as ‘low’ or ‘weak’ level of certainty do not clarify the differences between these words.

This paper adopts the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach developed by Anna Wierzbicka and others (see especially Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 2002), and proposes new explications in terms of semantic primitives. The findings of the study indicate that the semantic differences are not concerned with the degree of one’s certainty such as ‘strong or weak’, or ‘high or low’. The unique meaning of each expression can be clearly illustrated by cognitive scenarios such as ‘I think that it is like this’, ‘I am thinking about it’, or ‘I don’t say: I know this’. The proposed semantic formulae serve as practical tools which indicate criteria to assist in choosing an appropriate word for a given situation.

References

Goddard, Cliff and Anna Wierzbicka (eds). 1994. *Semantic and Lexical Universals — Theory and Empirical Findings*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Goddard, Cliff and Anna Wierzbicka (eds). 2002. *Meaning and Universal Grammar — Theory and Empirical Findings*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

