

Why would a newspaper write about this?
- And without title or byline
Deconstructing Japanese newspaper narrative

日本語新聞記事の「テキスト分析」

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要 約

この論文は、日本語の日刊新聞のコラム（囲み記事）を分析して、その話題の選択、形式、内容の判断基準を定める各新聞を比較することにより、その新聞の編集の姿勢を明らかにしようとするものである。

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes a daily column common in Japanese newspapers to determine what criteria lie behind the choice of topics, format and content, and what may be learned about specific newspapers through a close reading of the column as it appears in different newspapers. The column being analyzed is both without title and byline, it has been adopted by all newspapers in Japan, and its highly stylized format renders it an attractive candidate for analysis. Based on the analysis, a comparison of newspapers is made to attempt to determine what tendencies can be expected in the editorial content of the papers, and to evaluate the image that the papers wish to, or may be seen to project to their readers. Further, the approach that newspapers make to issues in and out of modern Japanese society and societal concerns are discussed based on their representation in this column.

INTRODUCTION

The paper here is a first attempt to deal with the matters indicated in the title, and at best presents a first approximation towards elucidating the matters indicated in the title. The material used is a regular, unsigned, and untitled column appearing in all Japanese newspapers. Columns from a cross section of Japanese newspapers was read and analyzed to determine the background for the placement of the column in newspapers, aspects of the treatment of what is discussed in the columns and how the non-Japanese world is viewed are discussed. The intended audience is discussed, as well as the motives of this writer are considered.

By way of explaining why this came about

The idea for this paper came during the winter of 1998 around the time when newspapers suddenly discovered that it was unfortunate that national government workers were up to their necks in selling favors to private industry and the newspapers started to provide extensive coverage of this. I had not been aware of newspapers being concerned about such matters except when actual arrests were made but I found it difficult to believe that the knowledge had not been there all along, so I wondered if there would be some way of finding out what newspapers were saying, 'between the lines' if you may. Or why they were skirting or ignoring very real social issues.

Of course such information could only appear accidentally through 'unnoticed' items, and considering the limited volume of editorial material and large number of journalists that most newspapers employ, it would seem difficult to find areas where a complete and thorough vetting of the copy that appears in papers had not taken place. Then I heard, and confirmed by inspection of our local paper, that there is one column (the longish row of text that all newspapers have at the bottom of the front page just over the book and magazine advertisements) which is a very structured affair where the placement of sentence dividers follows geometrical patterns, and apparently the content would then have to be tailored to fit the pattern.

There are five such dividers in a column (or would it be 'row' as it is nearly invariably horizontal) and these are arranged in W or M shaped patterns. These patterns were upheld in our local paper, with slight variations. Broad Vs or flat inverted Vs as well as the occasional straight line arrangement was also present. But there was always a clearly discernible pattern, and I thought that maybe this column with its stress on form rather than content could provide an entry point to look at what newspapers 'really' said, or tried to hide maybe.

I then collected such columns for all the national and some local newspapers for the last week of February and March and set out to closely read the material and evaluate it from a number of angles.

Why this? You may ask. Well, I am constantly amazed not just at the counter intuitive ways students approach English, but also at the very poorly developed world view that they display. Students have a hard time trying to connect text with real world situations. These same students profess an interest in the wider world but seem to know, or be ready to consciously draw upon very limited stores of knowledge. They also seem to know what they admit that they do know in a shallow one-dimensional way. This is exemplified by students expressing surprise when they have met citizens of Hong Kong who have spoken kindly of the British rule there. To the students a colony is apparently a colony and the people there must be under the yoke, as opposed to people of a country that is free to act without listen-

ing to others, like they seem to perceive China.

Through the paper I am presenting here, it is my aim to try to get a better insight into what is written and what this written material presents, and I hope then later to take this newly won knowledge and look at English textbooks and course materials to better understand why students who study these materials display the 'tendencies' they do.

The paper follows the outline suggested by Harley (1966), with some modifications.

The place and appearance of the column

This column invariably appears in newspapers in Japan. Most often it takes the form of the lowest row on page one, the front page, of the newspapers, it is boxed in by advertisements on three sides and there may be a further ad over it at the center. In one newspaper it was a two column affair set to the right on page one again just over the bottom ads.

It has no title and no name to identify the writer. It is the only part of the newspaper, except the actual news and editorials, that may be seen to appear in this manner.

Reading the columns in the various newspapers the impression is conveyed that the writer is a male of some stature (age?) at the paper, there seems to be a system of rotation whereby the columnist changes, but one person appears to write the column every day while assigned to this duty. The writer is anonymous however.

The carefully structured characteristics described above do not hold for all newspapers. Each newspaper seems to follow its own format, and some papers place sentence markers without apparent concern for a regularized geometrical order.

The column in the paper that first attracted my attention had a change of writer while I was following it. Prior to the handover to the new person the Ws and Ms were very clear and without deviation. Then after the handover the column appeared to display much more freedom in the placement of these sentence markers. About four months into the assignment of the new person (June, 1998) the column showed a much higher degree of orderliness and I would expect that in some more months it will be back to the orderliness displayed during the tenure of the former writer.

The length of columns (the number of characters/spaces used) is very similar from day to day in any of the papers investigated. An additional line was found in two cases of one paper, but the others narrowly kept to the 'set' length.

The column has a name, but no title indicating the actual content of the day.

The contents of the column

The contents of columns cover a wide range of subjects. One newspaper presented five, at best superficially, related items in the columns, maybe to accommodate readers easily distracted by TV, family, fellow travelers when commuting, or similar.

The period in question was around the Nagano Olympics and this event was frequently

featured, but there were numerous other topics taken up. Some of these matters were otherwise not currently in the news.

One aspect that was present with surprising regularity was sayings of French intellectuals, or Japanese French literature scholars. Such sayings appeared in all columns. The only other sayings of non-contemporary personages were by Yanagida Kunio, a pre-war ethnographer.

A further recurring feature was the great care taken to detail the educational background of people mentioned, and where schooling was under the pre-war Japanese system this was carefully detailed. Non-Japanese were not given a similar detailed and careful back-grounding.

Othering

Matters related to parts of the world outside Japan made regular appearances.

One such case related to the assumption of power of new Chinese and South Korean leaders. These were treated as equal and the daunting challenges that government restructuring posed for them both was noted. There was no mention of the very different ways these two countries elect their leaders.

A story about a steam locomotive sent abroad to build the Thai-Burma railway (WW II) vaxed nostalgic at seeing such machines, and how some were still working in Thailand. The war or the building of said railway were not commented on.

These two examples are quite representative and could be seen to show that the newspaper columnists here are not very well aware of the very varied circumstances around the world, or pay no attention to the wide variety of situations and backgrounds around the world.

Features of the representation of matters

There seemed to be little reasoned depth in the descriptions offered. The wonderfulness of the facial expressions of Olympic athletes were taken to show beauty incarnate, and the utterances of the same athletes always struck just the right note. Their crying brought out lamentations for the low incidence of public crying, different from how it used to be.

The general impression is that occurrences are depicted to conform to preconceived ideas of earnestness and engagement, and little effort is made to show why this is so and why that is such a good thing. The overall impression is that of an insistent stress on how all and sundry feel good and are bravely going forward and that we should learn from and applaud their fine examples.

Quality of explanations

As may be imagined from the above, depth was generally absent and no effort was

made to introduce unusual or unexpected matters.

Politicians were invariably lazy and uncommitted, the government was not highly evaluated but at the same time the total absence of alternatives is also stressed. That corruption is endemic is taken for granted and appear as a given.

The appointment of a female commissioner for baseball, was taken up in one column, and this was described as a public relations ploy and no mention of feminism issues or further comments made.

Stereotyping

As above, all people taken up in the columns behaved to the satisfaction of the column writer. One person who had lost an arm and single-handed sailed a yacht from Europe to Japan was held up as an example to us all.

Drug companies were taken to task for the demise of several patients who swallowed their medicine with the wrapping. These companies were told to redouble their efforts to make ingestion of drugs safer, when at the same time it was noted that attention to safety in this area had declined in recent years.

Audience

Following the comments above it may now be the turn to evaluate who the newspapers aim the columns discussed here at.

The placement on the front page of the newspaper seems to indicate that it is considered important to get this particular information to the readers.

While the columns provide a wide variety of information there is very little pertinent background detail which would allow readers to place the column in perspective and make it possible to incorporate it into the already known. The columns do not offer intellectual challenges, and all material presented has an upbeat 'they all smile and are warm at heart at all costs' slant. Overall it seems that no particular educational or informative function is intended.

The columns strike poses (without justifying or substantiating these and they pretend that the poses (attitudes?) are universally valid and good) and they refer to a universe (French literature and culture) that is little known (if known at all) among general newspaper readers. With so little to challenge the mind of the reader it is doubtful that much of the information is retained. The 'name dropping' implied with the much obscure French material would indicate that there is no great wish to relate the content to anything that readers identify with.

Adding this up one may ask if this is all an elaborate joke, or maybe if there are messages hidden in the columns that have been overlooked.

The audience that this may be aimed at would seem to be much patronized by the

writers (newspapers?), and not trusted to be able to contribute towards the topics raised. No intellectual demands are made and there is a consistent glossing over of details that could provide depth to the information provided.

One may here wonder if the level of *engagement* of Japanese English students in the reading and other activities they do in English has been conditioned by this kind of writing. Both the columns and learner attitudes to the foreign language may be described as superficially related to our everyday but in a form and with references that allow/encourage/enforce the reader to remain outside the discourse, and so be intellectually unengaged.

It would also be possible to speculate on what social practices the texts reflect and support but such a discussion will not be made here.

The questioner and the newspaper discourse

As above a main reason for inquiring into the qualities of the newspaper columns taken up here was to get a better understanding of why my students display the attitudes they do towards the foreign language English.

This may seem of little moment, the foreign language instructor is there to help students improve their language abilities, irrespective of what the particular 'hidden agendas' may be and it may even be discouraging to have too strongly formed opinions of the 'worth' of the English skills (in this case) that students bring to the encounter.

However in selecting materials and approaches, I have often been surprised at the reactions of students. When doing listening exercises only very well learned patterns are dealt with in confidence. When reading 'unusual' text students are often utterly insecure in their interpretations of even very simple sentences. When anything that is not 'cut and dried' is presented there are anguished exclamations of how difficult it all is, and there are other similar problems.

With the texts here it is to a large extent possible to relax when reading them. Nothing unexpected is dealt with. When a topic is set the aspects of the topic are those that do not stretch the mind and so it is possible to relaxedly let the eyes pass across the contents. Without too much concentration the content, commonsensical and uneventful, seep in and is forgotten. When later the topics dealt with in the column are taken up no great effort is needed to think of what the column said as it was all stereotypical and as could be hoped for with positive and 'serious' people.

Reference:

Harley, J. B. (1996). Deconstructing the map. *Cartographica* 26, 1-20.

This paper is an expanded version of a paper of the same title read at the 1998 conference of the Communication Association of Japan held in Tokyo, June 20 - 21.