

SPLITTING, CUTTING, and BREAKING talk in Japanese

Seiko Fujii¹, Paula Radetzky², & Eve Sweetser²

¹University of Tokyo & ²University of California, Berkeley

Studies of lexical items from various semantic fields suggest that metaphoric extensions often depend very closely on details of literal senses (Sullivan 2006, Croft 2009, Bouveret & Sweetser 2009). We examine three Japanese verbs of SEPARATION: *oru* and *waru* are often translated as ‘break’, and *kiru* as ‘cut’. Previous work on separation verbs has focused on concrete senses (Majid et al. 2007, Fujii, Radetzky, & Sweetser [in press]). But these three verbs extend metaphorically to “separation” of conversations, in very different ways. “*Kiru* the conversation” means to end it abruptly, as in (1). But in (2), “*oru* the hip of a conversation” means ‘(temporarily) derail, change the conversational direction’ and “*wari-komu* (‘break-enter’) the conversation” means ‘interrupt to make your voice heard’—but, crucially, not to change the subject.

- (1) *mada hanasi no totyuu na noni kikite ga hanasi o kitte-simatta baai*
 still talk GEN middle COP although listener NOM talk ACC kitte-simatta case
KIRU-ADVERS.PAST
 ‘In the case where the listener unfortunately ends the conversation (lit.: CUTS the talk) even though you are still only partway through [your turn].’

Context: A heading on a handout distributed to participants in a workshop on how to improve parent-child communication.

<http://kyouiku.higo.ed.jp/shougai/001/oyanomanabi/> & http://kyouiku.higo.ed.jp/page/pub/default.phtml?p_id=d3923:3:8:5773&f=s5773_1_21.pdf

- (2) *aite ga mosi anata no itte-iru koto ga wakaranai toki,*
 partner NOM hypothetically you GEN say-PROG thing NOM understand.NEG when
aite wa anata no hanasi no kosi o otte demo,
 partner TOP you GEN talk GEN hip ACC otte ORU even
kakunin no tame ni wari-konde kuru koto ga kangaerareru no desu
 clarification GEN purpose DAT waru-konde come thing NOM think.POT NMLZ COP
WARU-enter

‘When perhaps your interlocutor doesn’t understand what you’re saying, one can imagine that your interlocutor, even at the risk of ORU THE HIP OF the conversation, might WARU-ENTER [it] in order to clarify [what it is you’re saying].’

Context: From a blog, “A Course on English Communication.” The author explains that Westerners consider it fine to ask for clarification about what the interlocutor meant, even in the middle of a conversation. http://yamakuseyoji.com/2012/01/29/communication_skills_lesson7/

These contrasting metaphoric senses arise from the physical meanings of the verbs, we claim. *Kiru*, often translated ‘cut’, typically profiles *an intentional agent creating a clean separation* with a blade-like instrument. In (1), a *willful agent creates abrupt temporal discontinuity* by ending the conversation (ACTIVITIES ARE CONTINUOUS ROPES/SUBSTANCES THROUGH TIME). Its intransitive counterpart *kireru* never involves a deliberate agent or a blade; *kireru* refers to events like unintentional breakage of 1-D themes (shoelaces) or tearing of 2-D ones (towels). Thus, *Hanasi ga kireta* ‘conversation KIRERU.PAST’ can refer to a conversational lull—no agent is assumed to create the lull, just as no agent deliberately causes accidental shoelace-snapping. But English **The conversation cut* is impossible; *cut* profiles agentive use of an instrument, and correlates with precise separation (vs. imprecisely torn towel-edges, or gradual development of a conversational lull).

Oru literally means ‘fold, bend [a pliable theme] over on itself’ or ‘break [something rigid] (by bending)’. *Oru* is used to refer to both breakage of bones and bending of bodily joints like hips. Metaphorically in Japanese, CONVERSATIONAL TOPIC IS DIRECTION; TOPIC-CONTINUITY IS MAINTAINING DIRECTION. In (2), ‘*oru* the hip of a conversation’ means the conversation gets *bent* (shifted to a new topic), but not irrevocably *broken* (stopped); after the topic-shift, it is expected to continue. Finally, *waru* refers to breakage into largeish pieces (breaking dishes). However, it also means ‘split—either irrevocable (karate-chop an apple), or reparable (split a crowd by threading one’s way through it). This “reparable splitting” frame is what maps onto conversation in (2)—after the person interjects him/herself, talk will continue on the same topic.

Precise examination of the physical frames of separation verbs thus exposes systematic motivations for their metaphoric uses. English *cut*, being almost exclusively transitive, does not extend to spontaneous cessation of conversation—but *kiru* has a common intransitive *kireru*, referring to non-agentive events and thus extendable to unintentional lulls. We cannot predict the extension to conversation of *waru*’s ‘reparable mass-splitting’ sense rather than the ‘break into pieces’ sense, nor the extension to conversation of *oru*’s ‘bend’ rather than ‘break’ physical sense. But English separation verbs, not being ambiguous between bending and breaking, predictably lack metaphoric senses equivalent to those of *oru*.