

Suicide: An Instance of the Right to Die

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Suicide is defined as “the act of killing yourself deliberately” (Hornby, 2005). By examining the contemporary discussion on suicide both in English and Japanese in both public and private discourse, the social and cultural attitudes toward suicide will be elucidated through the underlying conceptualization patterns. The availability of the discourse data is affected by the fact that suicide is a taboo subject. This research does not aim to discuss the pros and cons of suicide but only to clarify the current attitudes found in the contemporary discourse in Japanese and English.

Key Terms

The etymological definition of the English term, “suicide,” is from the Latin pronoun *sui* “oneself” + Latin *cidium* “killing” or Latin *cida* “killer” (Maris, Berman, & Silverman, 2000). Similarly in Japanese, *jisatsu* is also a compound of *ji* “self,” and *satsu* “killing.” According to Shimizu (2005), as some Japanese people feel that this term is associated with the bias showing contempt toward the suicide victims and survivors, there is a movement to use a new word, *jishi*, self-death, which sounds more neutral in Japanese.

Confusing Suicide Terms

There is some confusion in the use of terms on suicide comparing English and Japanese. Who are the “suicide victims” and “suicide survivors?” While it depends on the context, for the Japanese the abandoned families are the victims of suicide. For the Japanese speaker, survivors of suicide sounds like those who failed to commit suicide, but in English, suicide survivors are those who lost the loved one by suicide. Those who lost the loved one are called *izoku*, “the left family,” in Japanese. Victims and survivors caused by suicide are viewed differently according to the two cultures.

What is a suicidal person? In Japan, “suicidal people” are taken to be those who committed suicide. In fact, we call those who committed suicide *jisatsu-sha*, “suicide person” in Japanese. But suicidal people in English are those who only attempt to commit suicide. “Suicidal” in English means threatening to commit suicide or behaving in such a manner.

What does trying to commit suicide but failing to do so mean? It is called a “suicide attempt” in English while it is *jisatsu-misui*, “incomplete/abortive suicide” in Japanese. They refer to the same phenomenon, but have culturally different focuses.

It can be said that these notional differences are caused by cultural differences behind the two languages.

Hara-kiri and Suicide

A traditional form of suicide in Japan is called *hara-kiri*. This is a compound of *hara* “belly,” and *kiri* “to cut.” It is defined as “an act of killing yourself by cutting open your stomach with a sword, performed especially by the samurai in Japan in the past, to avoid

losing honour” (Hornby, 2005). *Hara-kiri* is often mentioned as an example of honorable and heroic suicide in Japanese traditional culture, though in Japan today, the *hara-kiri* culture is no longer valued and is quite rare. When we focus on the socially accepted aspects of *hara-kiri* in times past, it may be thought strange that modern suicide survivors look at suicide negatively. According to Hirayama (2004), suicide survivors today in Japan often do not want to officially reveal a suicide in the family because they consider suicide to be shameful. Suicide is no longer considered to be honorable today. When focusing on the sense of responsibility, however, *hara-kiri* in times past and suicide at present are not that different. Traditionally, samurai warriors did *hara-kiri* in order to complete their social responsibility (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2005). Today, the survivors get angry because the loved ones are thought to have given up their responsibility toward the family. Japanese still highly value the social importance of responsibility, but what one is responsible for has changed as time has gone by.

Methodology

The public and private discourses dealing with suicide in both English and Japanese are compared. In this research, only the expressions which appeared in the actual discourse data, not the hypothetical lists of expressions, are dealt with. Expressions of death which are related to suicide are also discussed.

One paper in the United Nations’ WHO homepage and five online newspaper reports are analyzed for the English public discourse, and one government reportage and five online newspaper articles are analyzed for the Japanese public discourse. Postings written by suicide survivors on Internet message boards are analyzed for the private discourse in both languages.

The expressions which are related to suicide are collated from the data. Each expression is then categorized into the Underlying Conceptual Patterns which are based on Lakoffian studies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Turner, 1989) as shown in Table 1. The number of tokens in each pattern is calculated, and the ratio of public and private discourse is examined.

Another important aspect of suicide discourse is the survivor’s viewpoint. Because they talk about suicide actively, there are a considerable number of Internet bulletin boards available for this research. Such expressions used in the discourse specific to English and Japanese are also examined.

Examples of Expressions Specific to English

Based on Table 1, “Conceptual Patterns of Death,” examples of how to analyze English expressions related to death and suicide in actual data are shown. *Dead/death/die/dying* are neutral descriptive expressions of death reflecting a *logos* (Armstrong, 2005, p. 32) type of language use. *Till the end* or *life ends* is a JOURNEY metaphor. The *end* in *life ends* is an intransitive verb and has the nuance of natural death compared to *to end one’s life*. *Gone* and *to go* also reflect the JOURNEY metaphor. Those who commit suicide *go to another world*, which is a frequent comment.

Suicide is different than the other forms of death by accident or by illness because suicide is a death by design. However, the direct description of suicide as a fact or event is

Table 1: Conceptual Patterns of Death

	DEATH/DYING	FROM SURVIVOR'S PERSPECTIVE	LIFE RELATED CONCEPTS
A. ACTION	1 DYING IS AN ACTION/EVENT 1-a/b: IN A POINT IN TIME/AT A PLACE 2 DYING IS A PROCESS 2-a: CONDITIONS OF DYING 3 DEATH IS ANNIHILATION		
C. CONTAINER	1 DEATH IS A CONTAINER 2 DEATH IS DESTROYING A CONTAINER 3 DEATH IS LOSS OF CONTENTS 3-a/b/c/d/e: LIQUID/HEAT/FIRE/FLAME/BREATH		1 LIFE IS A CONTAINER 2 LIFE IS THE CONTENTS IN A CONTAINER 2-a/b/c/d/e: LIQUID/HEAT/FIRE/FLAME/BREATH
E. ENTITY	1 DEATH IS A PERSON 1-a/b: POSITIVE(FRIENDLY)/NEGATIVE(FEARFUL) 2 DEATH IS AN ENTITY 2-a/b/c: A MOVING ENTITY/A FEARFUL ENTITY/A HEAVY ENTITY 3 DEATH IS LOSING AN ENTITY 3-a: COMPENSATION FOR PRECIOUS ENTITY 3-b: LOSING A PRECIOUS POSSESSION 3-c: CUTTING OFF A LINE 3-d: DESTROYING AN ENTITY 3-e: STEALING AN ENTITY	2 DEATH IS AN ENTITY 2-b: AN ANNOYING ENTITY 3 DEATH IS LOSING AN ENTITY 3-d: DESTROYING AN ENTITY 3-e: STEALING AN ENTITY	3 LIFE IS AN ENTITY 3-a/b/c: PRECIOUS POSSESSION (A GIFT/A LINE)
J. JOURNEY	1 DEATH IS DEPARTURE (with NO RETURN) 2 DEATH IS THE END OF THE JOURNEY (FINAL DESTINATION) 2-a: RELIEF FROM BURDEN/STRUGGLE 3 DEATH IS GOING TO ANOTHER PLACE 3-a: WITH DESTINATIONS (HOME/NIRVANA/PARADISE/HEAVEN) 3-b: AN ESCAPE ROUTE 4 DYING IS A JOURNEY		1 LIFE IS ARRIVAL 2 LIFE IS A JOURNEY 2-a: WITH BURDEN/STRUGGLE 2-b: A PATH
S. STATUS	1 DEATH IS DOWN 2 DEATH IS LACK OF MOVEMENT 2-a/b: SLEEP OR REST/SILENCE 3 DEATH IS DISAPPEARANCE 4 DEATH IS FREEDOM 5 DEATH IS TRANSFORMATION 6 DEATH IS BONDAGE	3 DEATH IS SEPARATION/LOSS	1 LIFE IS UP 2 LIFE IS CONSCIOUSNESS/AWARENESS 4 LIFE IS BONDAGE
T. TIME	1 DEATH IS A PHASE OF LIFE 1-a/b: WINTER/NIGHT		1 LIFE IS A CYCLE 1-a/b: A YEAR/A DAY

categorized under DYING IS AN ACTION/EVENT. Expressions such as *to shoot oneself*, *to hang oneself*, etc. are categorized into DYING IS A PROCESS, which emphasizes how to die or a manner of dying under the ACTION category.

To take one's life can be analyzed as an ENTITY metaphor. Life is viewed as an ENTITY in the body when we are alive. The metaphor image is that suicide takes the life out of the body by one's own hands in the case of suicide.

To end one's life also shows a designed death. But this expression is related to the JOURNEY concept. People usually cannot see the end of a journey clearly. The terminally ill patient even cannot see the exact end of his/her life. However, during the life as journey, those who commit suicide put an end to their journey deliberately.

Suicide as one of the life choices can be argued from the underlying concept of JOURNEY. LIFE IS A PATH in the life journey category. During the journey, we often face a fork in the path implying a choice to be made. People who want to commit suicide sometimes choose the path which has an end most probably because they see “no end” in their “life paths.” But the point can be argued that all life paths have an end, in other words, death. Whichever path we choose, we face the end at some point. But suicide victims choose a path connected to death in order to end their lives deliberately. When they choose the path of suicide, they can clearly see the dead end of the path.

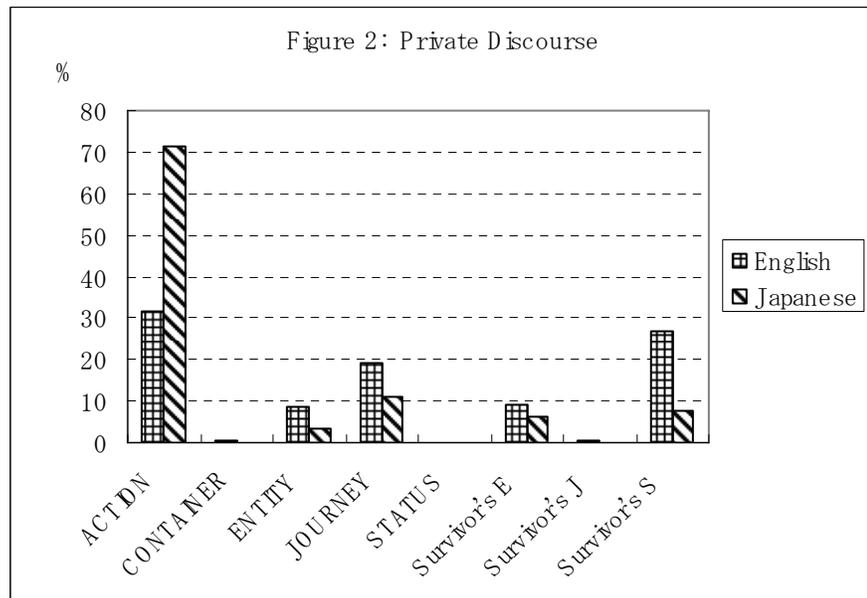
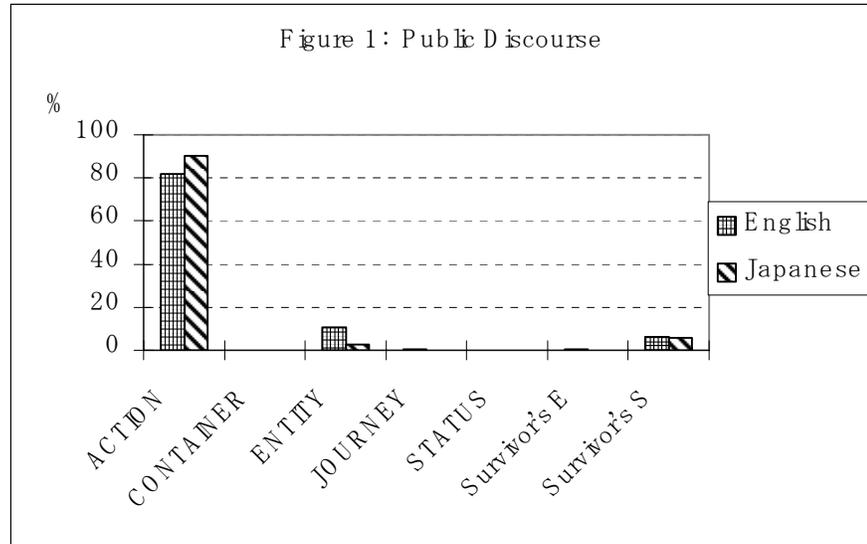
Examples of Expressions Specific to Japanese

Based on Table 1, “Conceptual Patterns of Death,” examples of how to analyze Japanese expressions related to death and suicide in the actual data are shown. *Shi/shi-nu* “death/to die” and *nakunaru* “(euphemistic) die/disappear” are frequently seen as expressions of death. The Japanese language frequently uses compound expressions, such as death or *shi* plus alpha. *Shinde-iku* means “to die” *shinu* and “go” *iku* belongs to the JOURNEY metaphor. The expression *shinde-shimau* “a completed death” is commonly used in Japanese. The survivors can express regret toward the victim’s death by using this perfective tense form. *Otto ga shinde shimatta* literally means “My husband has died,” but the speaker adds the nuance of regret in this sentence through this compound form. *Nokoshite-shinu/jisatsu-suru*, to die with leaving the family behind, is spoken from the viewpoint of survivors. The survivors, mostly the wives, become upset because their husbands committed suicide and left behind the children for whom they are now responsible. In one Japanese message board, one wife said, *Inochi wa jibun dakeno mono janai*, “His life is not his own possession only (but all the family’s).” To die leaving the family means escape from the responsibility for the family in Japanese. Even the Japanese expressions categorized as DYING IS AN ACTION/EVENT (basically for literal descriptions under the ACTION category) can be accompanied by varieties of feelings. Even when the underlying conceptual patterns are simple, the surface expressions can be associated with various feelings in Japanese.

Japanese specific suicide expressions such as *jisatsu-suru/jishi-suru*, “to do self-killing/self-death” are basically the same as the English ones in terms of a death by design. However, the expression, *inochi wo tatsu*, “to cut off one’s life” is an expression specific to Japanese. “Life is a line” like a string or a rope, and cutting it off is used to express committing suicide. *Inochi wo somatsuni suru*, “to waste one’s life” is also categorized into DEATH IS LOSING AN ENTITY under the ENTITY category because life in this case is viewed as a “precious possession.”

Comparative Analysis

The results of the General Categories are shown in Figure 1 – reflecting the public discourse on suicide – and Figure 2 – showing the private discourse (see Figures 1 & 2).



The ACTION metaphors frequently occurred in both public and private discourse. The ACTION conceptualization patterns are basically descriptive expressions such as *die*, *death*, *dying*, etc. In the public discourse, ACTION metaphors constitute more than 80% in both English and Japanese, while in the private discourse the English ACTION metaphors are only 32%, and Japanese ACTION metaphors are 71%. The Japanese private discourse seems

much more descriptive than English in terms of conceptualization patterns. However the private Japanese ACTION metaphors contain various attitudinal meanings of the various accompanying feelings as explained above.

The CONTAINER metaphors and STATUS metaphors are rarely seen in any of the data. Metaphors of ENTITY are preferred in English more than in Japanese, both in public and private discourse though ENTITY expressions in general don't occur very often. Because it is not always easy to distinguish between ACTION metaphors and ENTITY metaphors, some of the ACTION expressions can be categorized into the ENTITY category. Expressions concerning JOURNEY are specific to private discourse. Both English and Japanese JOURNEY metaphors appeared in private discourse and constituted more than 10% of the data while there was almost none in the public discourse. Survivors' expressions are seen more in private discourse because the data of the private discourse is based on the survivors' personal experiences. ENTITY expressions used by survivors are preferred in private discourse. Among the expressions related to survivors, English prefers SEPARATION/LOSS patterns more than Japanese does.

To compare the public discourse and private discourse, private discourse has more variety in the underlying conceptual patterns.

Other Aspects in the Public and Private Discourse

The varieties of underlying concepts in public discourse are more limited, and the variety of suicide terms is also very limited in public discourse. The same words such as *suicide* are repeated in English discourse and *jisatsu* is repeated in Japanese discourse. Words like *die/death* are not frequently seen in either English or Japanese public discourse. Figurative expressions in public discourse are less frequently found. This may reflect the attempt to maintain a neutral or unemotional attitude in a highly emotional situation.

The Japanese new term, *jishi* (self-death) made to avoid a negative bias regarding suicide, does not frequently occur even on official occasions. In the Japanese suicide prevention promotion home page run by the Japanese government,¹ not even one use of *jishi* (self-death) was found. Preference for this new term seems to depend on the writer. In one book of essays,² for example, the writer used the new term, *jishi*, from the beginning to the end.

The Survivor's Perspective

For suicide survivors, DEATH IS A SEPARATION/LOSS from the loved one. When the survivors lose their loved ones, they feel emptiness, guilt, anger, abandonment, etc. The loved one's death is a LOSS OF ENTITY.

The Japanese data from the suicide survivors' view point shows some differences from the English data. Suicide is the loss of the loved one. The marked expression, *nakusu*, is used for the lost person. This is said to be a euphemistic or honorific expression regarding the loss.

The next expression is also specific to Japanese. *Otto-ni shinareru* ("I am committed suicide [*sic.*] by my husband."), is in the grammatical form of the passive voice, which is possible in Japanese. By using the passive voice, it adds the nuance of receiving an

annoyance. So, it can be paraphrased as, “I am annoyed by my husband’s suicide.” This expression is repeatedly used by the surviving wives on the Japanese survivor’s message board. This is related to the next expression, *nokosareru/suterareru* (to be left behind/thrown away) = “I was thrown away by my husband.” The passive expressions and the abandoned / thrown away expressions express the Japanese survivors’ feelings. As explained above, the husband is regarded as an irresponsible person because he chose only his own relief. From these attitudes, we cannot help but wonder who the victim of suicide is. For the Japanese wives, the suicide victim is not those who committed suicide but the abandoned families.

Conclusions

1. Private discourse has more variety in the underlying conceptual patterns than public discourse. It is assumed that this is the case because the public discourse is more neutral descriptive than private discourse. The writings containing emotional attitudes have more variety in the conceptual patterns.
2. Expressions related to suicide reveal the nature of intentional death.
3. English prefers ENTITY and JOURNEY metaphors more than Japanese does, but Japanese ACTION metaphors are more emotionally marked. Japanese survivors seem to be less emotive toward suicide because of the high frequency of the ACTION metaphor, but they express the emotion not through the underlying concepts but through the emotionally marked grammatical forms.
4. Survivors prefer the expressions of LOSS in English while survivors prefer the expressions of ABANDONMENT as a victim in Japanese when they talk about the death of loved ones. LOSS expressions reflect the survivor’s feeling toward the NON-EXISTENCE of the loved one in English. The Japanese survivors focus on the feelings of BEING LEFT BEHIND by the loved one. Japanese speakers feel that they are victims of the suicide more than English speakers.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Jisatsu Yobo Sogo Taisaku Center [Suicide Prevention Comprehensive Measures Center]. (n.d.). Ikiru [Live]. Retrieved September 1, 2007, from <http://www.ncnp.go.jp/ikiru-hp/>
- ² Hirayama, M. (Ed.). (2004). *Mizukaraitta anata nokosareta watashi* [You are gone by yourself, and I am left behind]. Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun Company.

(Appendix follows)

Appendix

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