

Unique languages, universal patterns: Linguist reveals how modern English resembles Old Japanese

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Shigeru Miyagawa, professor and head of the Foreign Languages and Literatures Section. Photo: Melanie Gonick

You don't have to be a language maven to find the direct object in a basic English-language sentence. Just look next to the verb. Take a simple sentence: "I gave a book to Mary." In this case the verb, "gave," is quickly followed by "book," the direct object. The sentence's indirect object, "Mary," lies farther away from the verb.

Things look quite different in Japanese, however, where direct objects pop up all over the place, and are signified by the presence of a [language](#) particle, -o. For example: The Japanese sentence, "Taroo-wa hon-o kinoo katta," means "Taro bought a book yesterday." But as written in

Japanese, the word order is “Taro a book yesterday bought.” The word “hon-o,” or book, is the direct object with the particle, but it is not adjacent to “katta,” which is the verb “bought.”

To the chagrin of anyone who knows one of these languages but not the other, then, English and Japanese appear to be frustratingly different tongues governed by drastically different rules. And yet, under the surface, English and Japanese have deep similarities, as MIT linguist Shigeru Miyagawa argues in his new book, *Case, Argument Structure, and Word Order*, published this month in Routledge’s “Leading Linguists” series.

In turn, the similarities between English and Japanese underscore a larger point about human language, in Miyagawa’s view: All its varieties exist within a relatively structured framework. Languages are different, but not radically different. Dating to the 1950s, in fact, much of MIT’s linguistics program has aimed to identify the similar pathways that apparently unrelated languages take.

“There is this very interesting tension in language between diversity and uniformity,” says Miyagawa, the Kochi Prefecture-John Manjiro Professor of Japanese Language and Culture at MIT. “Human languages are diverse in stunning ways. Each one has some unique property that distinguishes it from 6,500 or maybe 7,000 other languages. But when you look as a linguist, you begin to notice that there are uniform properties shared by languages.”

English and Japanese may be different, but, as Miyagawa shows in his book, when it comes to denoting a direct object, they have performed a kind of grand historical flip-flop: Each has adopted rules that the other language has abandoned. In Old Japanese, in the eighth and ninth centuries, direct objects existed without the particle –o attached to them. In the sentence “Ware-wa imo omou,” or, “I think of my wife,” the word

“imo,” or “wife,” lacks a particle. Instead, particles were used to mark points of emphasis: In Old Japanese, “kono tosi goro-o” means “during this year.”

By contrast, Old English, dating to the same time, used case markings (the equivalent of the *–o* particle) to specify that all direct objects take the accusative case, a rule derived from the structure of Latin. And unlike today, Old English word order was more flexible: Direct objects could appear in many sentence locations.

In this grammatical regard, at least, “Old Japanese is modern English,” Miyagawa says. “And Old English and Latin are modern Japanese. It is really quite remarkable.”

Compound interest

Indeed, English and Japanese effectively swapped rules during a time when they could not have influenced each other directly. But the nature of language is such that those changes “cannot just be anything,” as Miyagawa says. And the nature of linguistics is such that these parallels are not always obvious; many patterns emerge only after years of scholarly analysis.

Miyagawa’s book summarizes work he has done over three decades of research. He analyzes recent findings by other scholars in the area, engages with recent critiques of his work — “You have to be ready for that,” he says — and assesses the current state of knowledge in his own area of the field.

Recent work by linguist Yuko Yanagida at Tsukuba University in Japan seems to have strengthened Miyagawa’s suggestion that there are parallels between Old Japanese and modern English, and Old English and modern Japanese. Yanagida has shown that Old Japanese had an

alternative way of denoting direct objects, which also surfaces in modern English. This is “compounding,” the joining of verbs and direct objects into new words.

Thus the Old Japanese sentence, “Sirokane-no su-wo hitobito tuki-sirohu,” has a compound verb at the end: “tuki-sirohu” literally means “poke each other.” (The sentence as a whole, literally “silver cover people poke each other,” is probably best rendered as, “People laugh amongst themselves at the silver cover.”)

This type of word formation occurs occasionally in English today. We join a verb and a direct object in words such as “bird-watching.” And linguists find the same habit elsewhere. In the Chukchee language of Russia, the sentence transliterated as “ytlygyn qaa-tym-ge” means “father deer-killed,” or “father killed a deer.”

Scholars who work on the evolution of language have welcomed the arrival of Miyagawa’s book. “There aren’t many languages in the world where we have historical records, only a handful where one can work on change [in language], and most of those languages are Indo-European,” says David Lightfoot, a linguist at Georgetown University, who has read the manuscript. “So it’s enormously valuable to have a very well-analyzed treatment of change in Japanese.”

Curiosity, but no gloriosity

Case, Argument Structure, and Word Order analyzes several other ways in which English and Japanese, despite superficial appearances to the contrary, actually converge. Japanese is regarded as having extensive word formation rules whereas English, at a glance, does not. On closer inspection, however, English does have a system governing word formation. We can turn “curious” into “curiosity,” for instance, but we don’t change “glorious” into “gloriosity.” Why not? Because English

already has a relevant noun, “glory,” in place. That exact same rule — a “blocking effect,” as linguists say — holds in Japanese, too, as Miyagawa first asserted.

“In Japanese, we see this blocking effect in a very extensive manner,” he says. “But no one had ever really perceived this comparison before.”

John Whitman, a linguist at Cornell University who has read the book, thinks its impact “will really be lasting,” and increasingly so in Japan. “Linguists within one national tradition tend to think their language has always existed within the same basic ground plan. But Shigeru Miyagawa’s work shows that, no, Japanese 1,000 years ago was a very different thing.” As Whitman sees it, the “next step” for researchers “is to look in more detail at specific periods. He has a broad sweep over hundreds of years, and we would also like to look at 50-year slices.”

Beyond making the case for the similarities of Japanese and English, Miyagawa says, he hopes his work will reveal the excitement of discovery in linguistics — and the larger fascination in pondering language’s apparent universalism.

“It’s so exciting to see languages and know there is this diversity we should celebrate,” Miyagawa says. “And when we look closely we see they all work with the same mechanisms. That’s one thing that is so interesting about human language.”

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