

“TRICK OR TREAT” : WORD ORDER IN SET EXPRESSIONS IN ENGLISH AND JAPANESE

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0. Introduction

In the rural areas of Japan, there used to be in old times a New Year's event called *Osaito* when children went about the neighborhood asking for pieces of *mochi*, pounded rice cakes. There is a similar event in the West called Halloween when children in disguise go around knocking at doors or windows entreating for candies. The phrase the children use on this occasion is “Trick or treat”. This expression is an abbreviation of either of the following sentences :

- i) *Treat* me to some candies or I'll give you a *trick*.
- ii) I'll give you a *trick* if you don't *treat* me to some candies.

Some may argue that ii) is the original of “Trick or treat” because the two main words are in that order, but others may say that i) is more plausible because it's a more moderate entreaty. But since the phrase is part of a children's prank against housewives and it was intended to surprise them, children might have said ‘trick’ first.

Since either ‘trick’ or ‘treat’ is a monosyllable, there is no immediately obvious reason for the precedence of one over the other. But the expression is stabilized as it is, and there must be some reason for it.

This paper deals with the word order in this kind of expression chiefly from the view of sound characteristics in them.

1. Mirror Images

One of the conspicuous differences in word order between English and Japanese is what is called “mirror images”, in which English has the word order of a verb followed by an object while Japanese has an object followed by a verb. This is also true with other elements of the two languages. Japanese has the word order of CX while English has XC of the following list.

X	Verb	Pre-(Post-)position	Noun	...
C	Object	Noun	Relative clause	...

But these mirror images can be observed only on the level of X^1 applying Jackendoff's theory¹⁾. And either on higher levels (X^2 , X^3) or on lower levels (X^0 , X^{-1}), the word orders of English and Japanese are identical. For example, suppose X^0 is a lexical level, there is a formula of $X^0 \rightarrow CX^{-1}$ and English ‘sunset’ (CX^{-1}) is identical to

1) Kageyama (1981) is wrong to include X^0 also in the mirror image.

Japanese *nichi-botsu* (日没) (CX⁻¹). Other examples are 'mail delivery'—*yubin-haitatsu* (郵便配達), 'mountaintop'—*san-cho* (山頂), etc.

The word order in coordinate words like 'John, Bill and Tom' is free, but in the cases of set expressions, there are several factors that determine the order of words. And the word order in these cases is the same both in English and in Japanese²⁾.

- (1) Positive elements precede the negative elements :
 yes or no — *too-hi* (当否)
 positive or negative — *ze-hi* (是非)
- (2) Cultural or social priority :
 boy and girl — *dan-jo* or *nan-nyo* (男女)
 father and son — *fu-shi* (父子)
- (3) Subjective view (the order varies)
 { Cambridge-Oxford game (preferred by Cambridge students)
 { Oxford-Cambridge game (preferred by Oxford students)
 { *Soo-kei-sen* (早慶戦) (preferred by Waseda students)
 { *Kei-soo-sen* (慶早戦) (preferred by Keio students)
- (4) Temporal priority :
 yesterday and today — *kino-kyo* (きのう今日)
 cause and effect — *in-ga* (因果)
- (5) Deixis :
 this and that — *are-kore* (あれこれ)
 here and there — *achi-kochi* (あちこち)

This group shows the mirror image.

What I want to argue in this paper is that there is an important factor of phonetics or sound characteristics determining the word order in these cases.

2. Sound characteristics

The Japanese version of English 'young and old' is *roo-nyaku* (老若) or *oi-mo-wakaki-mo* (おいも若きも). The Japanese expression may be following the criterion of (2) social priority of the previous section while English does not. This may give one an impression of mirror image, but there is another factor, that is, the number of syllables.

When we read Chinese characters 右(right) and 左(left) phonetically, we say *sa-yuu* (左右), while the Japanese rendering or reading of it becomes *migi-hidari* (右左).

In English, one says 'in and out' or 'inside out' or 'odds and ends' never 'out and in' nor 'ends and odds'.

2.1. Sound characteristics in Japanese

There are four cases in which sound characteristics play a role in the order of words. And the first three of the four cases have to do with the ways of reading Chinese characters.

2) Cf. Kageyama (1981).

2.1.1. Reversed order (Phonetic reading of Chinese characters vs. Japanese rendering (or reading) of them)

In this case, words with fewer syllables come first. (The number of syllables are shown in numerals and an English version is given for comparison.)

- { 左右 (*sa-yu·u*) 1 — 2 left and right
- { 右左 (*mi-gi-hi·da·ri*) 2 — 3 right and left
- { 東西 (*to·o-za·i*) 2 — 2 east and west
- { 西も東も (*ni·shi mo hi-ga·shi mo*) 2 — 3 *west and east
- { 南北 (*na·n-bo·ku*) 2 — 2 south and north
- { 北と南 (*ki·ta to mi·na·mi*) 2 — 3 north and south
- { 表裏 (*hyo·o-ri*) 2 — 1 (in and out, inside out, both sides)
- { 裏表 (*u·ra-o·mo·te*) 2 — 3
- { 凹凸 (*o·o-to·tsu*) 2 — 2 concavo-convex
- { 凸凹 (*de·ko-bo·ko*) 2 — 2 convexo-concave

In the last example, one may argue that there is no definite reason for reversing the order in Japanese rendering, the number of syllables being the same, but the fact that /e/ is a front vowel and /ɔ/ is a back vowel might make it easier to pronounce.

2.1.2. The preserved order

In this case, the number of syllables are the same so that there is no need of reversing the order in the Japanese rendering of the Chinese characters.

- { 高低 (*ko·u-te·i*) 2 — 2 high or low
- { 高い低い (*ta·ka·i hi·ku·i*) 3 — 3
- { 大小 (*da·i-sho·u*) 2 — 2 large or small
- { 大きい小さい (*o·o·ki·i chi·i·sa·i*) 4 — 4
- { 長短 (*cho·o-ta·n*) 2 — 2 long or short
- { 長い短い (*na·ga·i mi·ji·ka·i*) 3 — 4

The order in these cases has also to do with the criterion of (1) of section 1, that is, a positive-negative relation.

2.1.3. Other reversed order

In this case both Chinese and Japanese readings render the same number of syllables but the order is reversed.

- { 早晚 (*so·o-ba·n*) 2 — 2 sooner or later
- { 遅かれ早かれ (*o·so·ka·re ha·ya·ka·re*) 4 — 4 *later or sooner

2.1.4. Voiced vs. voiceless

In some cases, voice has an effect on the word order.

Japanese equivalent for English 'long and narrow' is *hoso-nagai* (細長い), but some people may say that we could also say *naga-hosoi* (長細い) and some large-scale Japanese dictionaries have both entries. But from the view of this paper *hoso-nagai* has the advantage because *nagai* has a voiced sound of /g/ and this makes it more natural to put it after the voiceless sound. If the *naga-hosoi* (長細い) order is preferred,

the second element *hosoi* (細い) becomes *posoi*, making it *nagapposoi*. That is, the sound /ho/ becomes 'semivoiced' sound /po/ to make the ending heavier. (/h/ and /p/ are allophones in some environments in Japanese.)

2.2. Sound characteristics in English

What has been said above about the effect of sounds on the order of Japanese set expressions also applies to English. That is, words with fewer syllables or shorter vowels come first.

2.2.1. Number of syllables

Words with fewer syllables precede the words with more syllables.

a horse and carriage	(1 - 2)
thorns and thistles	(1 - 2)
health and beauty	(1 - 2)
friends and acquaintances	(1 - 5)
transitive and intransitive	(3 - 4)

In the cases of *bread and butter* (1 - 2) and *a cup and saucer* (1 - 2), not only the number of syllables but also the importance of the first word decides the order.

The basic necessities of life are called "food, clothing and shelter" (1 - 2 - 2). Here, there cannot be any priority in the importance but the number of syllables makes the order fixed. This is also true with the Japanese equivalent *i-sho·ku·ju·u* (衣食住) (1-2-2) (clothing, food, shelter).

2.2.2. Monophthongs vs. diphthongs

When the two words are monosyllabic, words with monophthongs come first.

in and out	i - aʊ (also inside out)
up and down	ʌ - aʊ
trick or treat	i - i:
back and forth	æ - ɔ:
black and white	æ - aɪ
young and old	ʌ - oʊ
far and wide	a: - aɪ
wax and wane	æ - eɪ

In the case of 'rich and poor', cultural priority may have an effect on the order. Or one may argue that 'rich' is more abundant in phonetic features than 'poor' and thus should come after the shorter 'poor'. But E. A. Poe insisted on counting the final 'r' of 'nevermore' in his famous poem "The Raven" as one sound³⁾. If we apply this idea to 'poor', the sound can be transcribed as [puər] thus it is longer than 'rich'.

3. Word order on a phrase level

The rule of stating shorter words first also applies on a phrase level. Compare the following from a brochure at an art exhibition.

…各所蔵家ならびに美術館等にお礼を…

...to thank *the museums* and *private collectors* for their...

Here the order is reversed because the second element in English is a phrase, and was placed afterwards in the English translation of the brochure.

In spoken Japanese we would usually say *ya·o·ya sa·ka·na·ya* (3—4) (八百屋 vegetable store and 魚屋 fish shop). But in his essay, writer Shintaro Okuno wrote 満都の若いものは鮓屋の出前から魚屋八百屋の小僧にいたるまで where he put *sa·ka·na·ya* (4) before *ya·o·ya* (3) which is apparently against the rule. But if we carefully look at the writing, we notice that to our eyes *sa·ka·na·ya* (fish shop) gives the impression of a shorter word with only *two* Chinese characters, while *ya·o·ya* (vegetable store) looks longer {with *three* Chinese characters. This is another interesting topic of the 'visuality' of the Japanese language.

Another interesting point in Okuno's quoted passage is the order of 鮓屋の出前 (workers at *sushi* shops) and 魚屋八百屋の小僧 (boys at fish shops and vegetable stores), for the shorter phrase is stated first, which gives the passage a stable form.

4. Drift

In Japanese, there are two ways of expressing the two Chinese characters 白 (white) and 黒 (black) in a set expression⁴⁾. A Japanese dictionary gives the following definitions for them⁵⁾.

shi·ro·ku·ro (白黒) (white and black)

- ① white (color) and black (color)
- ② two contrasting things, like approval or disapproval, true or false
- ③ (to make white and black) when one is surprised one turns one's eyes up and down
- ④ what is expressed in black and white, like pictures or movies
- ⑤ a type of abnormal sex show

ku·ro·shi·ro (黒白) (black and white)

- ① black (color) and white (color)
- ② good or bad, right or wrong
- ③ what is expressed in black and white, like pictures or movies

From these definitions, we notice many things.

First, as far as color is concerned, either *shi·ro·ku·ro* or *ku·ro·shi·ro* is accepted (either being composed of two syllables), but because of definition ⑤ of *shiro-kuro*, people would prefer *kuro-shiro* in their expression of color.

Secondly, the Japanese expression, translated literally as 'to turn one's eyes white and black', is an established expression which will never change word order

3) Cf. R. Jakobson (1976) p. 1.

4) As another example of the co-existence of expressions, Japanese has *kak·ki·ri* and *kik·ka·ri* (just, exactly, punctually). In Japanese characters the difference is the order of two *kana*-letters. But phonetically the difference is between /a/ and /i/.

Neither has priority so that both expressions will co-exist forever.

5) *Nippon Kokugo Dai Jiten* (Great Dictionary of Japanese).

because it is the white of the eye that gives the surprised impression.

Thirdly, definition ④ of *shiro-kuro* and ③ of *kuro-shiro* are identical, with the word order of black and white. This comes from our thought of depicting something black on a white ground. But if the time comes in the future when we draw a picture scratching, for instance, on a black ground to make white figures we would eventually have the definition of 'what is expressed in white and black' (the word *shiro* preceding *kuro*).

5. Conclusion

Starting from the argument of "Trick or treat", we have come to the argument of 'black and white' or 'white and black' in Japanese expression. The writer may be criticized for being too dogmatic or for having interpreted language too statically, but we have seen that sound or phonetic elements play a role in determining the word order. So that if the two words are of the same sound quality, there is an unstable state in the expression, and it will be susceptible to drift.

References

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