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# WHY CAN A JAPANESE UNAGI-SENTENCE BE USED IN A REQUEST?

**Abstract**
The objective of this paper is to reveal why the so-called *Unagi-sentence* in Japanese can be widely used in the context of *request* within the framework of cognitive linguistics and cognitive pragmatics. The Unagi-sentence, which is known as a representative sentence of the Japanese language, has been analyzed for years in various manners from various viewpoints. For instance, the sentence "Boku-wa Unagi-da" when literally translated into English reads *I am an eel*. One of the most influential reasons for this sentence being regarded as characteristic to Japanese seems to be the clear difference in the sense in that the literally translated version in English means the identification between *I* and *an eel*, whereas the Unagi-sentence in Japanese indicates who orders the eel dish or sometimes requests the waiter to put a proper dish in a proper place. This thesis discusses the schematic meaning of the "X-wa Y-da" pattern in Japanese; further, it discusses the tendency for the Japanese language, unlike English, to depend more heavily on contextual information when the construed mental images are encoded. Through the discussion, I will reveal that the study of the Unagi-sentence from the viewpoint of cognitive linguistics sheds a new light on the contrastive studies in the field of pragmatics.

**Keywords**
speech act, pragmatics, , Japanese, Unagi-sentence, high context culture

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# 1. Introduction

Waiter: May I have your order, please?
Customer: *I am a fish*.
Waiter: No, you're not a fish. You're a human being.
(Kojima 1988: 179-180)

Kojima (1988) refers to this humorous episode in the context of a contrastive study of English and Japanese. In the Japanese language, it is acceptable to say "Boku-wa Sakana-da," which literally translates into English as *I am a fish*. However, the English equivalent of this Japanese expression is *I will have a fish*. Many Japanese textbooks on both linguistics and language education indicate that this type of sentence is unique to the Japanese language. Drawing on this observation, this paper critically examines the utility of the Japanese *Unagi-sentence* within the cognitive linguistic context of a request.

The discussion of this type of sentence began after Okutsu (1978) innovatively analyzed the following sentence and named it an *Unagi-sentence* after the word *Unagi* (an eel)[1].

(1) Boku-wa Unagi-da.
("Boku"-noun, "wa"-topic marker, "Unagi"-noun, "da"-particle)
[I am an eel.]

Such an utterance is appropriate to a specific social situation. It would not, for instance, be used when entering a restaurant alone and requesting something on the menu. In this case, a customer would turn to his or her server and say, "Unagi" or

[1] The sentence "Boku-wa Unagi-da." is certainly heard in Japanese conversation, but it is not always uttered without any distinction in gender and generation differentiation in communication style. The personal pronoun "boku" is overwhelmingly used by men of all ages in an informal situation. The final particle "-da" creates such an arrogant atmosphere that almost all people avoid using it, except a privileged speaker. The natural use of the sentence "Boku-wa Unagi-da" has a close relationship to the speaker's gender and dominance balance. The neutral version is "Watasi-wa Unagi-desu." (X-wa [topic-marker] Y-desu [particle]) or its informal and simplified variation "Watasi Unagi" (XY [juxtaposition of two nouns without the topic marker and particle]); it has almost the same meaning as the "Boku-wa Unagi-da." Hereafter, brackets indicate "literally translated from Japanese into English."

"Unagi Kudasai" [*An eel, please*.]. However, if a client were seated at a table with one or more persons, he would acceptably give the waiter his order by using sentence (1). Like all Unagi-sentences, it includes the schematic pattern "X-wa Y-da." Literally and roughly translated, this linguistic combination corresponds to "X is Y," and in English, it would be uttered in the form of *I am an/the eel*, *I am a/the hamburger*, *I am (the) fish* and so on. Thus, in a restaurant, sentence (1) both indicates the person requesting an eel and asks the waiter to put this dish in its proper place when he returns with the table's orders. The inclusion of the topic or contrast marker *wa* as one of the sentence's components permits the fulfillment of this primary function. Therefore, one can also say "Boku-wa Unagi-da" to ensure the proper placement of the eel by the server.

This thesis is developed in three steps. First, I survey previous linguistic studies, both numerous and theoretically varied, of the Unagi sentence to clarify the place and significance of my planned contribution to this discussion. In particular, I elucidate the central arguments of several leading scholars and discuss the possibility that cognitive linguistics offers one of the most effective solutions to this long-standing dispute. Second, I indicate why the Unagi-sentence is easily regarded as a request in Japanese but not in English. Through the discussion, I point out that a contrastive study must consider the situation-construed tendency of the two languages. Finally, I suggest that the concepts *preferred construal* and *high/low context culture* are closely related and essential for contrastive studies in the field of pragmatics.

## 2. Previous Studies

Pervious studies are in accord that the Unagi-sentence is most naturally uttered when a speaker is in the company of one of more persons in a restaurant. Essentially, such a sentence makes sense when a speaker seeks to distinguish his order from any others. Although truly unique to the Japanese language, the Unagi-sentence is among its marked or peripheral language phenomena, in the sense that it is natural only in a specific situation. Most importantly, through the analysis of this marked utterance it is possible to discern the characteristics of Japanese that penetrate even such tangential cases.

### 2.1. The Classic View

The classic view of the Unagi-sentence is not uniform. Okutsu (1978) thinks of the Unagi-sentence as a sentence in which "-da" is used as the predicate, substituting the "-da" for the verb "taberu" (*eat*).

(2) Boku-wa Unagi-wo Taberu. [I will eat an eel.]
(2)' Boku-wa Unagi-da. [I am an eel.]

Sugiura (1991) and Sato (1992) regard the sentence as one in which "taberu" is omitted and to which "-da" is attached when necessary.

(3) Boku-wa Unagi-wo Taberu [I will eat an eel.]
(3)' Boku-wa Unagi. [I an eel.] (no verb and predicate)
(3)" Boku-wa Unagi-da. [I am an eel.]

On the other hand, Kitahara (1981) advances a new theory, arguing that the Unagi-sentence is one that derives from a cleft-sentence as follows:

(4) Boku-ga Tabetai-nowa Unagi-da. [It is an eel that I would like to eat.]
(4)' Boku-wa Unagi-da. [I am an eel.]

For reasons of space, I have only provided the conclusions of these researchers. Their ideas concur in viewing the Unagi-sentence as a derivative form. It is essential to note, however, that this way of understanding this linguistic element cannot explain other sentences that have the same schematic pattern "X-wa Y-da," which often means *request*. Having the same form indicates the probability that such sentences share several common characteristics. Conversely, the underlying forms and the Unagi-sentence are not identical, since different forms have different meanings.

(5) Boku-wa Kuruma-da.
("Boku"-noun, "wa"-topic marker, "Kuruma"-noun, "da"-particle)
[I am a car.] "I have to drive my car, so please do not offer me any alcohol."
(6) Hokkaido-wa SapporoBiru-da.
("Hokkaido"-proper noun, "wa"-topic marker, "SapporoBiru"-proper noun, "da"-particle)
[Hokkaido is SapporoBiru] "Hokkaido is famous for Sapporo Beer, so please drink Sapporo Beer."
(7) Kyou-wa Kaigi-da.
("Kyou"-noun, "wa"-topic marker, "Kaigi"-noun, "da"-particle)
[Today is a meeting.] "We will have a meeting today, so please understand me if I cannot answer the phone."
(8) Ore-wa Otoko-da.
("Ore"-pronoun, "wa"-topic marker, "Otoko"-noun, "da"-particle)

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> [I am a man.] "I am a man, so please believe and support me because I will courageously try something hard."

## 2.2. The Cognitive View

Cognitive linguistics insists on the intimate relationship between language and human cognition, focusing on the abilities required to construe a situation before encoding. For this reason, cognitive linguists distinguishes a *speaking subject* from a *cognizing subject,* that is, one who apprehends the state of affairs to be transformed into language by selecting a proper perspective by which to encode relevant features and by finding out meaningful forms in grammar and lexicon that closely correspond to the constructed cognitive image of the situation (Ikegami 2009: section 1). This insight implies that the analysis of language phenomena is not simply a matter of language but one of concept.

> Language is an integral part of human cognition. An account of linguistic structure should therefore articulate with what is known about cognitive processing in general. (Langacker 1987: 12)

We human beings do not accept everyday experiences as givens; we unconsciously manipulate and cognize them in terms of ourselves or of our prior concepts. This process is called the *cognitive process* or *conceptualization*, and it is crucial for cognitive linguistics, since semantic-centric linguistics equates meaning with conceptualization (Langacker 1987: 5). It is so flexible, creative, and open-ended that our use of language is strongly influenced by figurative thoughts. Cognitive linguistics sheds a fresh light on the Unagi-sentence, one not found in classic views, for it disposes of effective tools that can acutely analyze the pragmatic meaning of a sentence.

Langacker (2008: 69), for instance, discusses the sentence below from the viewpoint of metonymy, although he makes no allusion to the relevance to the Unagi-sentence in Japanese.

> In a narrow sense, we can characterize metonymy as a shift in profile. For example, a customer who says (7)(a) to a waiter is not claiming to be an Italian dessert. While this would be the usual referent of *tiramisu,* in the restaurant context its profile shifts from the dessert to the person who ordered it…
> (7) (a) *I'm the tiramisu.* (Langacker 2008: 69)

The concept *profile* is defined as the specific focus of attention within the immediate situation within which an utterance occurs. In Langacker's (7)(a), the

proper reading of the context can exclude the interpretation that the *I* is identical to the dessert *tiramisu*.

> Mediating the shift in profile is a cognitive domain establishing some connection between the two entities: the restaurant scenario of customers placing orders…More precisely, then, we speak of metonymy when an expression that ordinarily profiles one entity is used instead to profile another entity associated with it in some domain. A single expression is susceptible to any number of metonymic extensions, reflecting different associations. (Langacker 2008: 69)

As Taylor (2002: esp. chapter 6) states, language is essentially, more or less, metaphorical, and expressions that comply with strict compositionality are very uncommon. This observation suggests that the appropriate interpretation of a linguistic message requires us to refer to the context and the relevant encyclopedic knowledge (Haiman 1980, Taylor 2003: 84-101), that is, the chronologically organized *script* of diners ordering in a restaurant. (Schank and Abelson 1977). In other words, it is encyclopedic knowledge (script) and context, in addition to metaphor and metonymy, which bridge the gap among the senses of the constituent parts in a sentence.

Langacker's view of the Unagi-sentence is preferable to classic views in that it operates on the conceptual level, paying attention to the cognitive source of the sentence. However, as I mentioned earlier, the construction of the Unagi-sentence "X-wa Y-da" is used in request situations other than that of a restaurant. The next section discusses this thesis's analysis of the sentence in a broader perspective than that of Langacker, by concentrating on the explanation for this sentence pattern in requests.

## 3. Metonymy and Preferred Construal

It is often said in the framework of cognitive linguistics that metonymy produces countless sentences and is pervasive in our daily communication. In Langacker's example (= *I'm the tiramisu.*) and in that of the Unagi-sentence (= *Boku-wa Unagi-da*), the words *I/Boku*, *the tiramisu/unagi* have a metonymic interpretation: When we give an order to a waiter, we use the *I/boku* in the sense of *my order/boku-no tyumon* (= my order). However, when we request a waiter to put a dish in proper place, we convey the precise meaning of the expression *the tiramisu* and *unagi* (= the person who ordered the tiramisu/unagi). This section will discuss the construction of the Unagi-sentence from the viewpoint of Langacker's claim that it can be regarded as a lexical-level metonymy; in contradistinction, I will explain the metonymic construction of the schematic pattern "X-wa Y-da," in a wider perspective.

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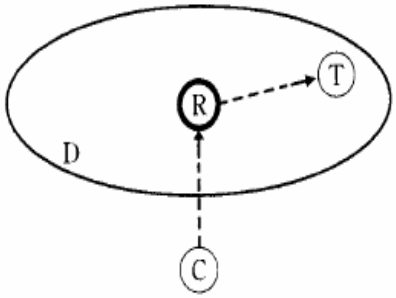
## 3.1. Reference Point Construction

According to Langacker (1993: 6), *reference point ability* motivates metonymy. When a conceptualizer or a cognizing subject has difficulty in reaching a target directly, he or she attempts to gain mental access to it by way of a more cognitively salient and accessible indicator. In cognitive linguistics, this salient entity in the conceptual shift is referred to as a *reference point*, and it is selected as a target from among a limited field of possibilities, called a *dominion*.




C: conceptualizer
(= cognizing subject)
R: reference point
T: target
D: dominion
→: mental path

**Figure1**. Referent Point Construction (adapted from Langacker 1993: 6)

Such mental access is not unique to language; we often use this cognitive strategy in our daily lives. For instance, we underline an important part in a passage. By this action, the line placed under certain words functions as a reference point and makes us notice the significant part quickly. Likewise, a hearer, without a reference point, would encounter difficulty narrowing down a target among numerous candidates.

The cognitive process of reference point selection is, according to Yamanashi (2000: 95-96), closely related to the language phenomenon of *topicalization*. The topic marker "-wa" in Japanese works as the reference point and through it, the focus of a message in a context, which is closely related to a topicalized concept, can be specified.

(9) Ano Gakusha-wa Hon-ga Ooi.
("Ano"-demonstrative adjective, "Gakusha"-noun, "wa"-topic marker, "Hon"-noun,
"ga"-subject marker, "ooi"-adjective)
[As for that scholar, he has many books.]

(10) Ano Ko-wa Atama-ga Ii.
("Ano"-demonstrative adjective, "Ko"-noun, "wa"-topic marker, "Atama"-noun,
"ga"-subject marker, "ii"-adjective)
[As for that boy/girl, he/she is wise.]
(11) Tanaka-san-wa Musume-san-ga Utsukusii.
("Tanaka"-proper noun, "san"-form of address, "wa"-topic marker, "Musume"-noun,
"san"-form of address, "ga"-subject marker, "Utsukusii"-adjective)
[As for Mr./Mrs. Tanaka, his/her daughter is beautiful.]
(Yamanashi 2000: 95)

The concepts referenced by the topic marker "-wa" in the examples (9) to (11) differ from that marked by the subject marker "-ga": the first (9) indicates owner-possession; the second (10), subject-attribution; and the third (11), subject-relative. However, even if those relationships presented by the topic and subject markers differ, the "-wa" functions as a topic marker and offers the hearer the clue to approaching the appropriate interpretation of the sentence. If the speaker does not indicate, by topicalization, the appropriate reference point for a target, the hearer cannot fully understand what he or she hears because the thinkable candidates comprise too large a dominion. It is true that in the Japanese language, the part of the topic marker is often omitted, as in *Hon-ga Ooi*, *Atama-ga Ii*, *Musume-san-ga Utsukusii*. However, such exclusions are only acceptable when the speaker and hearer have in common the elementary premise for the proper interpretation, which is often offered by obvious contextual information. Without contextual support, the utterance of the sentences above without "-wa" prevents the hearer from understanding the precise meanings of *who* and *what*.

This reflection sheds new light on the analysis of the Unagi-sentence. The *boku* marked by the "-wa" activates the scope of the appropriate interpretation of the following part. In other words, the "-wa" tells the hearer that this part is about the *boku*. Thus, the part of the topicalization implies the close association between the *boku* and *Unagi* in the restaurant context. The following sections discuss the usual encoding of the association in Japanese.

## 3.2. Subjective Construal and Objective Construal

*Construal* is a cognitive operation that helps select the proper structural option among various alternatives. As conceptualizers or cognizing subjects, we consciously or unconsciously construe a given situation that we wish to describe from a certain viewpoint and evoke a mental image before linguistic encoding.

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Ikegami (2009: section 4) classifies this conceptual operation into two types: subjective construal and objective construal.

> Subjective construal: The conceptualizer is on the very scene she is to construe and construes the scene as it is perceivable to her. Even if the conceptualizer is not on the scene she is to construe, she may mentally project herself onto the scene she is to construe and construes it as it would be perceived by her.
>
> Objective construal: The conceptualizer is outside the scene she is to construe and construes it as it is perceivable to her. Even if the conceptualizer is on the scene she is to construe, she may mentally displace herself outside the scene she is to construe and construes it as it would be perceived by her.

For example, *Vanessa is sitting across the table* is usually uttered when the conceptualizer is involved in the same scene as Vanessa, whereas *Vanessa is sitting across the table from me* is naturally acceptable when the speaker is commenting on a photo in which she and Vanessa are shown sitting across a table from each other (Ikegami 2009: section 3, Langacker 1990: 17-21). The former utterance is based on the subjective construal and the later on objective construal. The crux of the difference between these two operation is that in the former, the speaker herself is not encoded because she is integrated in the situation that she is going to construe and, hence, beyond the scope of her own perception; in the latter, in comparison, the speaker tends to be encoded, since she can perceive herself from the outside of the situation to be construed. The person who construes selects the appropriate linguistic construction.

As is often said in Japanese linguistics, English speakers prefer encoding in terms of objective construal, whereas Japanese native speakers tend to interpret a given situation subjectively. This conclusion is, in part, based on the fact that the cognizing subject is not as easily expressed in a Japanese sentence as in an English one. This means that the Japanese speaker tends to construe a scene from her own perspective without detaching herself from the scene. Thus, the speaker cannot conceptualize herself and be omitted.

The Unagi-sentence thus seems to be generated from an objective construal in that it encodes the speaker as *boku*. In this way, the sentence is regarded as marked in Japanese and has a great influence on the limited usage. One basic question arises here: Why is encoding different in English and Japanese, despite a common conceptual base? More precisely, the Unagi-sentence and its English equivalent encode the speaker, but the latter connects the subject *I* to the object *an eel* with the verb *have*, whereas the former has no verb (roughly speaking, *to be* is the closest.).

## 3.3. Construal and Fashions of Speaking

The previous section reveals that the Unagi-sentence and its English equivalent are based on the same construal, but encoded in different ways. This observation suggests that there is a preferred way of encoding the construed in each language, through processes called *fashions of speaking*. Various English expressions are equivalent to the Japanese sentence with the "X-wa Y-da" construction.

### 3.3.1. High/Low Context Culture

For years, studies in linguistics and anthropology have offered typological classifications of language. The distinction between a *be*-language and a *have*-language, a categorization that is deeply concerned with the metonymic proximity of *existence* and *possession*, emerges from this discussion and is probably applicable to the study of the Unagi-sentence. However, this section discusses *the fashions of speaking* in English and Japanese in terms of *high/low context culture*.

Hall (1976) classifies culture that a certain language speaker unconsciously belongs to into *high context culture* and *low context culture*. Our communication is, more or less, affected by context. This is particularly true for Japanese speakers, who tend to read contextual information more positively than English speakers. Living in a culture that compels them to talk and behave vaguely, Japanese avoid direct specification when speaking, preferring instead to infer a precise sense from a given context. Thus, it is unnecessary for them to define linguistically the specific relation between *boku* and *unagi,* and they may even juxtapose these elements in the Unagi-sentence, since they can easily understand what this utterance means from the background information, even if the association is not clearly encoded[2]. Specifically, Japanese, which basically has a "topic-comment" construction, can easily connect the two concepts *boku* and *unagi* in the Unagi-sentence with the less-meaningful verb *to be*; while English, which has a "subject-predicate" construction, requires a more specific verb, such as *to have*, that clarifies the relationship between the two (Ikegami 2007: 38-39). In a scene where the Unagi-sentence makes sense, the speaker is definitely aware of what information he or she should give to a waiter. Thus, the construction "X-wa Y-da"

[2] We Japanese often experience that we can grasp what the other would like to say even if they utter nothing. This is because our utterances and actions depend on contextual information to a large extent and do not always need specific words or signs.

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as a linguistic expression does not mean *request* in essence; it is the context of *request* that permits the interpretation of the sentence as a *request*[3].

### 3.3.2. Speaker Responsibility and Hearer Responsibility

Toyama (1973) and Tatara (2008) point out that Japanese like to juxtapose several concepts both in haiku, a Japanese poem with three lines and usually seventeen syllables, and in newspaper headlines. Further, they explain that English speakers tend to specify linguistically logical and cause-effect relationships, while Japanese generally avoid doing so. The Japanese regard logically clear statements as uninteresting in that the hearers have no room to interpret and infer the meaning for themselves. Thus, it is widely observed that the speakers of Japanese understand what they hear on the basis of the circumstantial evidence—physical, social, psychological, and temporal—enveloping them within a given context. At the same time, it is clear that they tend to gather much contextual information before they utter, in order to precisely understand what situation they are in and what they are expected to do in it.

Hinds (1987) characterizes this Japanese communication style as *reader responsibility,* as opposed to *writer responsibility* in English. The readers or hearers of Japanese should be cooperatively involved in communication with the positive attitude to understand what others would like to convey. In comparison, their English counterparts have to use specific words and expressions to be effortlessly understood when expressing ideas or feelings and when giving information to others. The conversation below involves a Japanese taxi driver and his American client in the situation where the taxi arrived at the wrong destination.

> Client: I'm sorry I should have told you more specifically.
> Driver: No, it was me who had to listen carefully.
>
> (Ikegami 2007: 284-285)

The exchange clearly shows the difference between the preferred successful communication strategies in English and Japanese. This example suggests the same difference in the acceptability of utterance between *"Boku-wa Unagi-da"* (*"Boku, Unagi,"*) and "*I am an eel*." In other words, the speaker and hearer in Japanese share the comprehension of the correct relationship between two concepts by the contextual information based on the restaurant script, so that they do not have to

[3] This is also true of the examples (5) to (8) in the Section 2.1.

specify the connection with a specific expression. In English, however, the expression "*I am an eel.*" forces the hearer to make an effort to catch the appropriate sense.

## 4. Conclusion

This thesis discusses the use of the Japanese Unagi-sentence as a request in terms of the constructional metonymy of the "X-wa Y-da" pattern; the preferred construal, high context culture of Japan; and reader/hearer responsibility in the Japanese language. Most importantly, it argues that Japanese people, in order to correctly comprehend the relationship among speakers and hearers themselves and among other elements involved in a scene, tend to concentrate much more on contextual information when they utter and understand a linguistic message. This observation confirms that the *request* made by using the construction "X-wa Y-da" is not inherent in the pattern but is caught by a reading of the context, especially based on the restaurant script. The fact that context-dependency and reader/hearer responsibility in Japanese can be observed even in the Unagi-sentence, which is a marked and peripheral phenomenon in Japanese, means these two linguistic practices penetrate both the structure and use of this language. In contrastive linguistic studies, especially those of languages such as English and Japanese that vary greatly in syntactic and pragmatic practices, it is essential to consider the two types of construal behind encoding, as well as the way of encoding based on such construal, that is, the fashions of speaking.

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