

THE USAGE AND MEANING OF THE ADJECTIVE “KITSUI” IN JAPANESE SYNONYM

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Abstract

This study explores the semantic properties and contextual applications of the Japanese adjective *kitsui* within the domain of lexical semantics. As a branch of linguistics, semantics is concerned with meaning, including the study of synonymy, which involves words that share similar or closely related meanings. Considering the complexity of Japanese adjectives and the insufficient detail often found in dictionary definitions, this research seeks to offer a more thorough understanding of how *kitsui* operates across different contexts in everyday communication. The data were obtained from spoken Japanese produced by native speakers through interviews and note-taking methods. The analysis is based on a contextual approach to meaning, focusing on aspects such as situational, emotional, temporal, spatial, and object-related contexts. Using this framework, various example sentences were examined to demonstrate the range of meanings associated with *kitsui*. The results indicate that *kitsui* is a highly versatile adjective whose interpretation is strongly influenced by context. It may express physical strain (such as a steep slope), tightness (such as restrained arms), sensory intensity (such as a strong odor), emotional severity (such as harsh remarks), as well as abstract pressure (including demanding tasks, strict deadlines, or rigorous research plans). In addition, its adverbial form *kitsuku* plays a significant role in conveying how an action is carried out, for instance, speaking harshly or binding something tightly. In summary, the study underscores the importance of considering both contextual and grammatical elements when interpreting *kitsui*. This understanding is crucial for achieving accurate comprehension, effective communication, and greater proficiency in Japanese, particularly for learners dealing with subtle lexical distinctions.

Keywords – *semantics, adjectives, context, polysemy, kitsui*

Introduction

Semantics, also referred to as *imiron*, is a field within linguistics that focuses on the study of meaning in the Japanese language. The primary concern of semantics is *go no imi*, or lexical meaning, which encompasses categories such as *ruigigo* (synonyms), *tagigo* (polysemy), *douonigigo* (homophones), *hangigo* (antonyms), and *jouge kankei* (hierarchical relationships). Among these, synonyms (*ruigigo*) represent an essential area of semantic analysis. As stated by Dedi Sutedi (2003:129), synonyms refer to semantic relations that demonstrate similarity in meaning between linguistic units.

Kridalaksana (2008) describes semantics as both the system and the discipline concerned with meaning in a particular language as well as in language in general. In a similar vein, Shinmura (1973:166) defines semantics as a branch of linguistics that investigates words, morphemes, and semantic change from both historical and psychological perspectives. Soedjito (1989) explains that synonyms consist of two or more words sharing identical or closely related meanings. Likewise, Tokugawa (1976:3) characterizes synonyms as words whose meanings

are either the same or highly similar. From these viewpoints, it can be inferred that synonyms are lexical items with nearly equivalent meanings.

Word meaning constitutes a central focus of semantic studies because effective communication—particularly in a shared language such as Japanese—depends on mutual understanding of meaning between speakers and listeners. Nevertheless, dictionaries, especially Japanese–Indonesian ones, as well as instructional materials, often fail to provide complete semantic information for every word. As a result, learners of Japanese frequently encounter communication difficulties with native speakers due to limited comprehension of lexical meanings. Therefore, further research is required to provide a more comprehensive and systematic description of word meanings in order to enhance language proficiency.

A more precise understanding of word meaning can be achieved through comparative analysis with synonymous terms. Such comparisons help clarify semantic distinctions and similarities, thereby reducing ambiguity. The analytical procedure generally involves several steps: identifying the research object, reviewing relevant literature, collecting *jitsurei* (authentic examples), categorizing the data, pairing synonymous items, conducting the analysis, and drawing conclusions (Dedi Sutedi, 2003:121). This study specifically examines Japanese adjectives (*keiyoushi*).

Japanese adjectives are classified into two main types: *i-adjectives* (*ikeiyoushi*) and *na-adjectives* (*-na keiyoushi*). According to Situmorang (2007), *i-adjectives* characteristically end in *-i*, whereas *na-adjectives* end in *-na* or *-da*. These adjectives can function independently, describe the qualities or states of nouns, undergo inflection, and in the case of *i-adjectives*, serve as predicates. The Japanese language contains numerous synonymous adjectives, such as *hidoi* and *hageshii*, which can convey meanings like “harsh,” “severe,” or “intense,” depending on the context.

A number of previous studies have explored synonymous adjectives in Japanese. For instance, Nikmah, Jannatun (2017), in her study entitled “*The Use of Adjectives Tekitou and Tadashii as Synonyms in Japanese*,” applied an observational method combined with note-taking techniques. The findings revealed that both adjectives can modify nouns, verbs, phrases, and clauses, and may function as predicates. However, *tekitou* is applicable to both animate and inanimate nouns, whereas *tadashii* is limited to inanimate nouns. In terms of meaning, *tekitou* may carry both positive and negative connotations, while *tadashii* generally conveys positive meanings related to correctness and appropriateness.

Similarly, Basri, Edi Abdul (2015), in his research titled “*The Use of Synonyms Taisetsu, Juuyou, and Daiji*,” found that although these adjectives share the general meaning of “important,” they differ in nuance. *Taisetsu* and *daiji* tend to express subjective importance, whereas *juuyou* reflects a more objective evaluation. Despite these distinctions, the adjectives can occasionally be used interchangeably depending on the context.

Putri, Intan Dwi Dahidi (2018) investigated the adjectives *utsukushii* and *kirei da* in her study on Japanese semantic analysis. Both terms may be translated as “beautiful,” “good,” or “pleasant,” depending on the context. However, *utsukushii* is often associated with abstract harmony, whereas *kirei da* emphasizes physical cleanliness or visual appeal.

Finally, Anggraeni, Yunita (2012) analyzed the use of *ureshii*, *tanoshii*, and *yorokobu* in Japanese sentences. These expressions relate to emotional states aligned with expectations or desires. *Ureshii* is typically used to express happiness resulting from fulfilled expectations, *tanoshii* describes enjoyable situations or activities, and *yorokobu* conveys joy, often in more formal expressions. In general, these terms are not interchangeable, although substitution may occur in certain contexts with shifts in meaning.

Overall, these studies demonstrate that Japanese adjectives exhibit a wide range of synonymous forms with subtle distinctions in meaning and usage. This complexity makes them a significant and intriguing area for further linguistic research.

Methodology

The data in this article are derived from spoken language used by native speakers of Japanese. The data were collected through interviews and note-taking methods. In gathering the data, the author conducted direct interviews with three Japanese individuals residing in the Peliatan area, Ubud, Gianyar. The purpose of conducting direct interviews was to obtain in-depth information and to ensure the accuracy of the data presented in this article. According to Sugiyono (2017:194), interviews are used as a data collection technique when researchers intend to conduct preliminary studies to identify research problems, as well as to gain deeper insights related to the required data. The data were analyzed using the contextual meaning approach proposed by Pateda (2010:116), who states that contextual or situational meaning arises from the relationship between an utterance and its context. Context can take various forms. The contexts referred to in this study include: (1) individual context, including factors such as gender, social status, age, and socio-economic background of the speaker or listener; (2) situational context, such as calm or chaotic situations; (3) purpose context, for example requesting or expecting something; (4) the degree of formality in the interaction; (5) emotional context, such as fear, happiness, or annoyance; (6) temporal context, such as night time or after sunset; (7) spatial context, such as at school, in the market, or in front of a cinema; (8) object context, referring to the focus of the conversation; (9) instrumental context, relating to speech or hearing tools used by the speaker or listener; (10) linguistic context, referring to whether the language used follows accepted rules; and (11) language context, namely the language employed in communication. In this article, five contextual aspects are used to analyze the meaning and usage of the verb *ochiru* in Japanese, namely situational context, emotional context, temporal context, spatial context, and object context.

Finding and Discussion

The following presents the usage and meaning of the adjective “*kitsui*” in everyday Japanese sentences:

1. この坂道はきついよ。でも帰りは楽だよね。
Kono sakamichi wa kitsui yo. demo, kaeri wa raku da yo ne.
 This uphill road is extremely steep and exhausting; however, the return journey will be more comfortable and less demanding.
2. 彼女の両腕はきつく縛られた。
Kanojo no ryou ude wa kitsuku shibarareta.
 Her arms were tightly bound.
3. 彼女は香水の香りがきつすぎだ。
Kanojo wa kousui no kaori ga kitsu sugi da.
 Her perfume scent is too strong.

The sentence “*kono sakamichi wa kitsui yo. demo, kaeri wa raku da yo ne.*” is used in informal conversation to describe a situation in which an uphill road is physically demanding

and exhausting when ascended, but becomes easier on the return journey. In this context, the word “*kitsui*” does not merely mean “extreme” in a general sense, but more specifically refers to a steep and physically taxing incline. Meanwhile, “*raku da*” means “easy” or “not tiring,” indicating that the return trip feels less strenuous, likely because it involves going downhill. The particle “*yo*” in “*kitsui yo*” functions to emphasize the information to the listener, whereas “*ne*” in “*raku da yo ne*” serves both to reinforce the statement and to seek agreement or shared understanding from the listener. Overall, the sentence illustrates a common everyday situation in which a speaker casually evaluates road conditions while sharing their experience with others.

The sentence “*kanojo no ryou ude wa kitsuku shibarareta*” is used to describe a passive situation in which a woman’s arms are bound very tightly. The word “*kitsuku*” is the adverbial form of “*kitsui*,” which in this context does not mean “exhausting,” but rather “firmly” or “tightly,” emphasizing the intensity of the binding. The structure “*shibarareta*” is the past passive form of the verb “*shibaru*” (to tie or bind), indicating that the subject—“her arms”—undergoes the action performed by another party. The phrase “*no ryou ude*” specifically highlights that both arms are involved, not just one. Overall, the sentence portrays a situation in which a person is tightly restrained, rendering her unable to move her arms freely.

The sentence “*kanojo wa kousui no kaori ga kitsu sugi da*” is used to express the judgment that the fragrance of a woman’s perfume is excessively strong or overpowering to the person perceiving it. In this context, the word “*kitsui*” refers to a “pungent” or “intensely strong” smell, rather than meanings such as “exhausting” or “tight.” The addition of “*sugi da*,” derived from “*~sugiru*” meaning “too much” or “excessive,” emphasizes that the intensity of the scent exceeds a normal or acceptable level and becomes unpleasant. The structure “*kousui no kaori ga*” functions as the subject being described, namely the fragrance of the perfume itself, which is the focus of evaluation. Overall, the sentence conveys a direct negative opinion about an overly strong perfume scent and is typically used in everyday conversation when someone feels discomfort due to an overpowering smell.

4. こんなきつい仕事はこりごりだ。

Konna kitsui shigoto wa korigori da.

Work as demanding and strenuous as this is already quite exhausting.

5. 子供達にそうきついことを言うな。

Kodomo tachi ni sou kitsui koto wo iu na.

Do not say such harsh things to children.

6. ちょっときつく言い過ぎたかな、とずっと思っています。

Chotto kitsuku iisugita kana, to zutto omotte imasu.

I have been continuously wondering whether my words may have been too harsh.

The sentence “*konna kitsui shigoto wa korigori da*” contains the adjective “*kitsui*,” which fundamentally conveys meanings such as “harsh,” “demanding,” or “strenuous,” both physically and mentally. In this context, “*kitsui*” does not merely refer to work that requires significant physical effort, but also encompasses psychological pressure, high demands, and overall exhausting working conditions. This term belongs to the *i-adjective* class in Japanese, allowing it to directly modify nouns, as seen in the phrase “*kitsui shigoto*,” meaning

“demanding work.” Meanwhile, the expression “*korigori da*” is an idiomatic phrase used to express a sense of being fed up, discouraged, or unwilling to undergo the same experience again in the future. The combination of these elements produces a strong emotional nuance, in which the speaker not only describes the work as demanding but also emphasizes a deeply negative experience that has led to a firm reluctance to repeat it. Overall, the sentence conveys that the work is excessively demanding and exhausting, to the extent that the speaker feels they have had enough and do not wish to experience it again.

The sentence “*kodomo-tachi ni sou kitsui koto wo iu na*” employs the adjective “*kitsui*” in a meaning distinct from its physical sense, namely an emotional or verbal nuance. In this context, “*kitsui*” describes something “harsh,” “sharp,” or “hurtful” when spoken, so that “*kitsui koto*” refers to “harsh or hurtful words.” As an *i-adjective*, “*kitsui*” directly modifies the noun “*koto*.” The use of the particle “*ni*” after “*kodomo-tachi*” indicates the target or recipient of the action, namely the children. Meanwhile, the prohibitive form “*iu na*” functions as a strong negative imperative, typically used in informal contexts or when the speaker holds a position of authority. Taken as a whole, the sentence not only prohibits the act of speaking but also emphasizes that the content of the speech is excessively harsh or inappropriate for children. It reflects a broader social norm in Japanese communication that prioritizes politeness and sensitivity toward the listener, particularly when addressing those who are younger or more vulnerable.

The sentence “*chotto kitsuku iisugita kana, to zutto omotte imasu*” illustrates the use of the adjective “*kitsui*” in its adverbial form, “*kitsuku*,” which functions to describe the manner in which an action is performed. In this context, “*kitsuku iu*” conveys the meaning of speaking in a harsh, sharp, or overly forceful manner, potentially causing emotional discomfort to the listener. The verb “*iisugita*” is the past form of “*iisugiru*,” meaning “to say too much” or “to speak excessively,” thereby suggesting that “*kitsuku iisugita*” implies not only harshness in tone but also an excess that goes beyond acceptable limits. The particle “*kana*” introduces a nuance of uncertainty or indirect self-reflection, while the construction “*to omotte imasu*” indicates that this thought has been continuously held up to the present. Taken as a whole, the sentence expresses a sense of regret and introspection, in which the speaker acknowledges the possibility that their words may have been overly harsh or hurtful and continues to reflect on this realization.

7. 彼はとてもきつい研究計画を立てていた。

Kare wa totemo kitsui kenkyuu keikaku wo tatete ita.

He had devised a very demanding research plan.

8. きつい生活が彼の健康にこたえてきている。

Kitsui seikatsu ga kare no kenkou ni kotaete kite iru.

His harsh lifestyle has begun to take a toll on his health.

The sentence “*kare wa totemo kitsui kenkyuu keikaku wo tatete ita*” is used to describe a situation in which a man had formulated or designed a highly demanding, strict, or rigorous research plan. In this context, the adjective “*kitsui*” does not refer to a physical meaning such as “tight,” but instead indicates a level of difficulty or intensity. It can therefore be interpreted as “demanding,” “stringent,” or “seriously challenging,” for instance due to a tight schedule, ambitious targets, or a heavy workload. In addition, the grammatical pattern “*tatete ita*” suggests that the act of “formulating the plan” took place in the past and was either already completed or ongoing at a specific point in the past. Thus, the sentence as a whole emphasizes

that he had developed a highly demanding research plan, one that would likely require considerable effort, discipline, and commitment in order to be successfully carried out.

The sentence “*kitsui seikatsu ga kare no kenkou ni kotaete kite iru*” is used to convey that a strenuous or pressure-filled lifestyle has gradually begun to have a detrimental effect on a person’s health. In this context, the adjective “*kitsui*” characterizes a way of life that is harsh, exhausting, or burdensome, both physically and mentally, such as excessive workloads or persistently stressful circumstances. Furthermore, the expression “*ni kotaeru*” means “to affect” or “to impact,” typically with a negative implication. The form “*kotaete kite iru*” indicates that this influence has been ongoing from the past up to the present and has progressively become more noticeable. Therefore, the sentence as a whole emphasizes that such a demanding lifestyle has gradually begun to undermine the individual’s health, and its effects are now becoming evident.

9. トムは頭にきつい一発を受けた。

Tomu wa atama ni kitsui ippatsu wo uketa.

Tom received a hard blow to the head.

10. きつい締め切り期限。

Kitsui shimekiri kigen.

A tight deadline.

The sentence “*tomu wa atama ni kitsui ippatsu wo uketa*” is used to describe that an individual named Tom received a strong or forceful blow to the head. In this context, the adjective “*kitsui*” indicates a high degree of physical intensity and can be interpreted as “hard,” “powerful,” or “severe,” emphasizing the significant impact of the strike. The term “*ippatsu*” means “a single blow” or “one strike,” while the construction “*wo uketa*” conveys the meaning of “to receive” or “to undergo” an action inflicted from an external source. Therefore, the sentence as a whole express that Tom sustained a single, forceful удар to the head, likely resulting in pain or a serious effect, and it is commonly used in narrative or descriptive contexts to depict a sudden and impactful physical incident.

The phrase “*kitsui shimekiri kigen*” is used to describe a deadline that is extremely tight, restrictive, or pressuring for the person required to meet it. In this context, the word “*kitsui*” does not refer to a physical meaning such as “tight,” but rather to a condition that is difficult or demanding. It can therefore be interpreted as “strict,” “burdensome,” or “pressing,” for example due to very limited available time or a substantial workload that must be completed within that period. Meanwhile, “*shimekiri kigen*” means “closing deadline” or simply “deadline.” Taken as a whole, the phrase emphasizes a situation in which an individual is under significant time pressure to complete a task, and it is commonly used in academic, professional, or project-based contexts where schedules are dense and timely completion is strongly required.

Conclusions

Overall, the article demonstrates that the Japanese adjective “*kitsui*” possesses a highly flexible and context-dependent range of meanings. It is not limited to its literal sense of “tight” or “firm,” but extends to various nuances such as “exhausting,” “demanding,” “harsh,” “painful,” and “pressuring.” Through multiple example sentences, it becomes evident that the

interpretation of “*kitsui*” is determined by the situation in which it is used, whether referring to physical conditions (e.g., a steep road or a strong blow), emotional expressions (e.g., harsh words), or more abstract contexts such as work, plans, lifestyle, and deadlines.

Furthermore, the article highlights those grammatical transformations, such as the adverbial form “*kitsuku*,” significantly influence the function of the word within a sentence, particularly in describing how an action is performed—for instance, speaking harshly or tying something tightly. The use of sentence structures and particles in Japanese also enriches meaning by conveying emphasis, prohibition, self-reflection, and even regret, thereby illustrating the close relationship between grammatical form and lexical meaning.

In conclusion, the article emphasizes the importance of contextual understanding when interpreting the meaning of “*kitsui*,” as a single word can represent a wide range of physical, psychological, and situational conditions. Such understanding is essential not only for accurate translation but also for achieving natural and effective communication in both every day and formal Japanese usage.

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