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# A Cross-Linguistic Study on Frameworks of Understanding in Terms of Senses

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This paper explores the cross-linguistic tendency of cognitive linkage between mental activities of understanding and experiential functions of senses. It will demonstrate that the affinity of understanding with sight, hearing, taste, and smell and touch declines universally in this order. In so doing, some notable characteristics and idiosyncrasies among languages will be discussed with regard to the relation of understanding and each of the senses. The data base for this paper is essentially the same as that used in Miyahata (1999).

## 1. Understanding in Terms of Sight

### 1.1. Seeing Verbs and Visibility

It may be generally observed in German and Romance languages that verbs of sight and/or perception (in general) are applied with few reservations to mean “to understand”.

In English “see” or “perceive” means “to understand” in “I see” or “I cannot perceive what you mean”.<sup>1</sup> Similarly in Italian *vedere* as in *vedo* (= I see) means “to understand”; *percepire il significato* (= to perceive the meaning) is equivalent to “to understand the meaning”. In Portuguese *Estou a ver* (= I’m seeing it) means “I understand it” while *Percebes o que eu quero dizer?* (= Do you perceive what I want to tell you?) is used in the meaning of “Do you understand what I want to tell you?”. In Dutch, as well, *de betekenis inzien/doorhebben* (= to see/perceive the meaning) is naturally interpreted as “to understand the meaning”. Spanish provides *Veo lo que quieres decir* (= I see what you’re trying to say) which is uttered to mean “I understand what you’re trying to say”. In German, *einsehen* (= to see in) and *durchschauen* (= to see through) meaning “to understand” may be noted. In French *voir ce que quelqu’un veut dire* (= to see what someone wants to say) is used to express “to understand what someone wants to say”.

On the other hand, many other languages often associate seeing with understanding instead of applying verbs of seeing to mean “to understand”, though some languages like Slovene, Arabic

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1 Incidentally, “perceive” derives from *per-* (through) and *capere* (take) in Latin etymologically, which falls into the metaphorical framework of understanding as manipulation.

(Lebanese), Korean, and Hebrew do present examples of see-verbs meaning “to understand”.<sup>2</sup>

For example, in Japanese \*意味が/ ?? あの人の言いたいことが見える (= I see \*the meaning/ ?? what he or she wants to say) cannot be accepted to mean “I understand the meaning/what he or she wants to say”, but we may readily find out many expressions of seeing related to understanding like 目が洗われる (= eyes are washed out), 目が良い (= have good sight), 目があく,<sup>3</sup> and 目から鱗が落ちる,<sup>4</sup> where clear sight implies lucid<sup>5</sup> understanding in all cases.<sup>6</sup> Nepali gives a similar example in *angkha khulnu* (= get open the eye) meaning “to understand”. Estonian, as well, provides us with such instances as *nagijaks saama* (= to become a see-er) meaning “to understand (usually suddenly)” and *nagu kae langeb silmilt* (= a cover falls from eyes) meaning “to understand”.

## 1.2. Clarity or Brightness to the Eyes

Visibility and understanding are often associated, appearing in contrast as clear and unclear, or bright and dark, in many cases.<sup>7</sup>

Think of *klar/unklar* (= clear/unclear) in German, *claire/obscur* (= clear/obscure) in French, *duidelijk/vaag* (= clear/vague) in Dutch and 明らか/不明 (= bright/not bright) in Japanese, each pair meaning “easy/hard to understand”. In Nepali *chharlanga hunu* (= very clear) refers to “easily understandable”. In Turkish *açık* (= open or clear) may mean “easy to understand”. In Latvian *skaidra lieta* (= clear thing) and *tumsa bilde* (= dark picture) can be applied to mean “something understandable/not understandable” respectively. Amharic provides an example of *gilitse* (= clear) in *Tegeletselih* meaning “Do you understand?”.

Still other languages provide us with more examples. In Arabic (Lebanese) *Woudhett Es Soura* (= get clearer the picture) means “to understand”. Bulgarian offers examples such as *izyasni mi se* (= it became clear to me) and *svetna mi* (= it dawned on me). In Dutch *het begint mij te dagen* (= it begins me

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2 For instance, *razumeti dejstvo* (= to see the truth) means “to understand the fact” in Slovene; *Shift keef?* (= Do you see how?) is used in the meaning of “Do you understand that?” in Lebanese; the verb *bonda* (= to see) also means “to understand (or know)” in Korean; and a Hebrew reports all the words in Hebrew which mean “I see” also mean “I understand”.

3 It is interesting to note that あく can be represented as 開く (= to open) or as 明く (= to dawn). The two may be metonymically linked (eyes open, then it dawns) and mean the same thing in terms of visibility.

4 The expression is originally a literal translation of “The scales fall from the eyes” from the Acts of the Apostles ix. 18. Considering the way the borrowed expression has been accepted naturally among Japanese – few of them would even notice that it originates from the New Testament, we can conclude that the metaphor perfectly matches the cognitive framework the Japanese have.

5 Note this adjective comes from *lucere* in Latin meaning “to shine”. Brightness and understanding go well as will be discussed in the following subsection.

6 Another example of 見て取る which is a compound verb of 見る (= to look) and 取る (= to take) means “to understand”, in which, interestingly, frameworks of visibility-understanding and manipulation-understanding are united.

7 See Seto (1995) for a discussion on how seeing-understanding metaphors can be motivated basically by brightness.

to become day) means “I am beginning to understand what is meant” and *het daagt* (= day breaks) “I begin to understand”. And the expression *het is een soep* (= it’s a soup), implying it is unclear, can be used to mean “it’s hard to understand”, which may be somehow related, interestingly enough, to the usage of *erwtensoepe* (= pea soup) referring to a thick fog which obscures the vision. In Estonian *koitma* (= to dawn) means “to understand” while *tume olema* (= be dark) means “not to be understood”. In Hebrew *Hainyan hitbaher* (= the matter got brighter) implies that it has become understandable while *dvarim meurpalim* (= things covered by fog) is what cannot be understood. Italian, Portuguese, and Slovene respectively ask *È chiaro?* (= Is it clear/light?), *Está claro?* (= Is it clear?), and *Ti [Vam] je jasno?* (= Is it clear to you?), which all mean “Do you understand?”. Expressions like “enlighten” in English, *illuminer* (= to illuminate) in French, *fazer-se luz* (= to make light) in Portuguese, and 説明する (= to state and make bright) in Japanese may fall into the same framework in which casting light results in making the matter understandable.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly enough, in some languages verbs for, or related to, “divide” may mean “to understand”, which seems to have much to do with our cognitive function to distinguish something clear from something dark, that is, a part to be understood from a part not to be understood. In Estonian verbs like *jagama* (= to divide) and *loikama* (= to cut) can be used to mean “to understand”. In Nepali such expressions as *aartha chuttyaunu/pahilyaunu* (= to separate/distinguish the meaning) may be applied in the meaning of “to understand the meaning”. Etymologically, the Japanese verb わかる as in 意味がわかる (= I can understand the meaning) derives from 分ける which means “to divide”; and the English verb “discern” has a Latin origin of *dis-* (apart) and *cernere* (separate).

## 2. Understanding in Terms of Hearing

In contrast to the universal prevalence of the metaphorical framework of understanding in terms of sight, a metonymical linkage of hearing and understanding seems to be clearly observed in only some languages.

English uses “I hear you” in the meaning of “I understand you”. *Oigo lo que quieres decir* in Spanish and *J’entends ce que vous voulez dire* in French, both literally “I hear what you want to say”, are readily interpreted as “I understand what you want to say”. In many other languages, however, counterpart

8 We also use such phrases as “have a light come on” or “have a bulb turn on” or their literal – or rather, graphical – representation often in comic strips to mean “to get an idea suddenly”. This may be motivated by our physical sensation of feeling hot suddenly in the head, possibly because of intoxicated blood circulation, when we get to understand all at once, or we may structure a thought completed in the head on our experiential basis or knowledge of electrical line connected in the light bulb. Regarding connection, by the way, we observe *het kwartje valt* (= the quarter drops) in Dutch or *jeton düştü* (= token fell) and *trink etti* (= it sounded “trink” [the sound of a falling token]) in Turkish, meaning “understand suddenly”, which may be based upon their daily experience of connection established and communication made possible just after the coin falls into the telephone device.

expressions mean either your voice has reached me or that I'm paying attention to you, not going further beyond audibility.

The fact that the Turkish verb *duymak* (= to hear) also means "to feel" as in *acı duymak* (= to feel pain) or that the Italian word *sentir* (= to hear) is also applied to mean "to taste/feel"<sup>9</sup> suggests that the difference in the verb's coverage of semantic fields in senses may be a possible factor blocking metonymical linkage. However, generally, audibility and understanding do not demonstrate the same affinity as visibility and understanding. In an interesting report, the two Dutch verbs, *verstaan* (= to hear correctly) and *begrijpen* (= to understand correctly), are often confused, that is, *Ik versta je* (= I hear you) is applied in the meaning of *Ik begrijp je* (= I understand you), and the confusion is so common that teachers of Dutch generally regard it as one of the major problems in using Dutch. Consequently, hearing and understanding are so closely related as to possibly produce a metonymical linkage in human mental activities, while they are distant enough to prevent the linkage within the realm of human reasoning that the two are essentially different actions which do not always cooccur.

We can observe absolute predominance of sight over hearing here, considering that seeing and understanding fit together with far greater naturalness as we saw in the previous section.

### 3. Understanding in Terms of Taste, Smell, and Touch

Concerning the rest of the five senses, a few expressions of taste may be applied to refer to related aspects of understanding; there is not likely to be any framework of understanding in terms of smell or touch since no examples have been provided so far in the corpus at hand – except in the special case of a blind person reading braille in which touch and understanding are readily and naturally associated.

Among the few samples of understanding in terms of taste, a framework is observed for the verb "to taste" meaning "to appreciate or understand properly," such as *gustare* in Italian, 味わう in Japanese, *goûter* in French, etc. And also "taste", or "salt" in some cases, is related to "meaning/sense", often in the form of its absence, as in *smaakloos* (= tasteless) and *zoutloos* (= salt-less) referring to something blunt in Dutch, *Yemitilew chew yelewum* (= There is no salt in what you are saying) meaning "There is no sense in what you are saying" in Amharic, or *bala taameh* (= no taste to it) used in the meaning of "no meaning" in Arabic (Lebanese).

Incidentally, a metaphorical framework based upon "eating", which is not directly connected to taste, may interestingly function to refer to some aspects of a process of understanding. The verb for "to digest/absorb" is applied quite universally to mean "to understand (usually completely)" as in 消化する/吸収する in Japanese, *sagremot* in Latvian, *prebaviti* in Slovene, *pachaunu* in Nepali, *sohwahada* in Korean, *verdauen* in German, *assimiler* in French, etc.

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9 Incidentally, *intendere* (= to hear) can be used for "to understand", though.

The verb for “to swallow” is also readily associated to a certain kind of understanding, but two ways of paraphrasing are reported. One applies “to swallow” in the meaning of “to believe” or “to understand (completely)” like *Dit is moeilijk te slikken* (= This is hard to swallow) meaning “This is hard to believe” in Flemish and *Ele engoliu a minha explicação* (= He swallowed my explanation) meaning “He understood my explanation” in Portuguese. French verbs of *avaler* and *gober* may also be used in the same way. The other application uses “to swallow” in the sense of “to accept reluctantly” as in *ingoiare* in Italian. And also in Japanese, for instance, 飲み込む as in 彼女は飲み込みが早い (= She is quick to swallow) means “to understand (completely)” while 飲む as in 彼は我々の要求を飲んだ (= He swallowed our requests) is used to mean “to accept reluctantly”. Considering this, we may suppose that the different behavior is related to the semantic range that the counterpart verb carries or to what phase is profiled in the whole scenario of the action it covers in the language in question. However, that issue will require further research.

#### 4. Conclusion

We observed in the first section that the framework of understanding in terms of sight, covering see-verbs metaphorically applied to mean “to understand” and visual functions cognitively mapped onto various aspects of understanding, is ubiquitous and can be regarded as an example of universal linkage. The following section demonstrated that auditory functions may be used metonymically to structure the activity of understanding but that the linkage does not happen in all languages. Compared to the predominance of visibility and some preference for audibility with regard to applications of expressions of senses to understanding, taste has a minor status, while smell and touch do not seem to qualify for metaphorical or metonymical usage. This phenomenon appears to be cross-linguistic and, therefore, probably a general tendency in human cognition.

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