

# Semantic Distribution of Polysemous Verbs in Junior High School English Textbooks in Japan<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

This paper reports how the polysemous word TAKE is treated in the junior high school textbooks in Japan and its semantic distributions. Also, it looks into the ways in which Japanese junior high school students actually use TAKE in their compositions and analyses its semantic distributions in their writings. This paper uses the BBC 500 Word essay compositions (BBC 500 words) to compare these compositions with the ones written by English native speakers. Comparing the different semantic distributions of the word TAKE in Japanese junior high school textbooks, Japanese students' compositions and BBC 500 words, it is clear that compositions in BBC 500 words have a better balance. This result suggests that the English native speaking children use TAKE to convey various meanings. Also the core meaning of TAKE is the highest among the three contexts under investigation. This paper suggests the textbooks should include many more various objects to enable students to learn to use them in various situations and the core meaning of TAKE should be presented in the textbooks more often. Furthermore, the semantic features of the polysemous words and their semiotic value in English should be introduced in the textbooks and taught in intentional ways.

**Keywords:** *polysemous word, semantic distribution, junior high school textbook*

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, English textbooks in Japan have been analyzed in quantitative ways using corpus-based techniques. Also there are several studies that have made a corpus-based international comparison of English textbooks (Ban, 2002; Ishikawa, 2008; Murakami, 2009). However, there is almost no literature to analyze and discuss which various meanings of each word are used and how often each meaning appears in the textbooks.

Murakami (2009, p. 1) pointed out “Textbooks have been an integral part of English education. They are usually the primary source of input for learners in EFL environments and should be a model of English for students”. Therefore, it is worthwhile to analyze the meaning of words used in the textbooks to help students acquire them in effective ways.

This paper reports how a polysemous word TAKE is treated in the junior high school textbooks in Japan and its semantic distributions. Also, it reveals a part of the findings on how junior high school students actually use TAKE in their compositions and its semantic distributions. In this study, I have analyzed compositions in the JEFLL Corpus.

Moreover, in order to compare these compositions with those written by English native speakers, this paper analyses the BBC 500 Word essay compositions. This is one of the largest competitions of short stories written by children aged 5-13 years in the UK. Finally, it suggests how the textbooks should introduce the verb TAKE to help learners improve their vocabulary acquisition.

## 2. Background

All junior high schools in Japan are obliged to use textbooks evaluated and approved by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). Also MEXT provides the Curriculum Guidelines (学習指導要領) for each subject.

The Curriculum Guidelines of English used to have a word list that should be taught in each grade.

Table 1. The changes in the number of words in textbooks (1st-3rd grades) since 1958

year	1958	1969	1977	1989	1998	2009
(a)	1,100~1,300	950~1,100	900~1,050	~1,000	~900	1,200
(b)	520	610	490	507	100	None

Note. (a) The maximum range of words. (b) The number of words in the word list in the Curriculum Guideline. Jiji-Publishing. (2008, p. 65)

The current textbooks were designed based on the Curriculum Guideline revised in 2009. In 2009, the word list was abolished. It means the Guideline limits were removed and only a range of 1,200 was indicated in the Guideline. In other words, the textbooks should include at least 1,200 words, and they could include more.

As a result, publishers could select all the words in the textbooks. The number of words in the current textbooks can be seen in Table 2. Compared with the previous textbooks, it is found that the number of words varies and all the textbooks include more than 1,200. For example, one of the junior high school textbooks, *One World*, includes 1,829 words, which is about 1.5 times as many as the recommended 1,200 words.

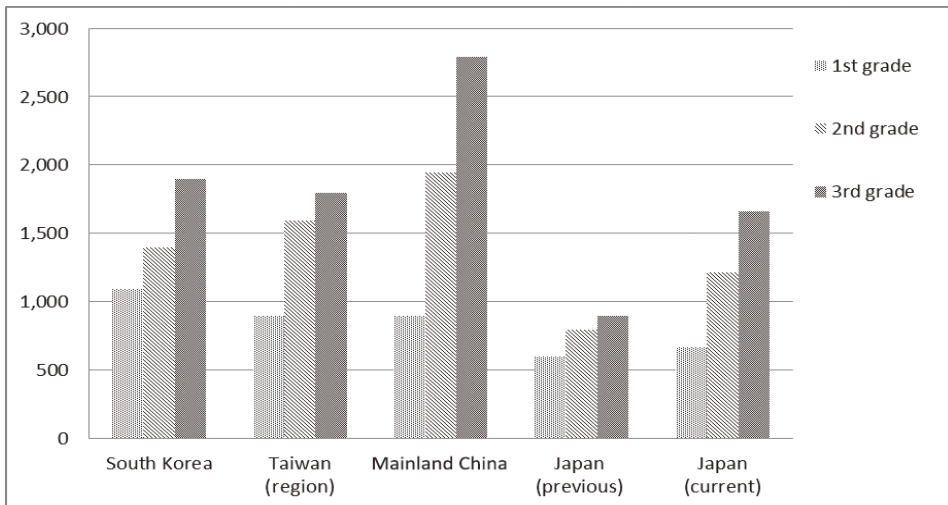
Table 2. The number of head words in current textbooks

Title	Total
<i>Columbus 21</i> (CO)	1,550
<i>New Crown</i> (NC)	1,672
<i>New Horizon</i> (NH)	1,762
<i>One World</i> (OW)	1,829
<i>Sunshine</i> (SS)	1,646
<i>Total English</i> (TE)	1,538

Note. Modified from Chu-O Institute for Educational Research. (2012, p. 4)

According to Tono (2008), the number of words in the previous textbooks in Japan was quite low compared with the textbooks in South Korea, Taiwan and Mainland China. In Figure 1, the number of words in the current textbooks is added to Tono (2008).

Figure 1. The number of head words in the junior high school textbooks in Asia. Modified from Tono. (2008, p. 3)



As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, compared with the previous textbooks, the number of words in the current textbooks in Japan increased. However, compared with the textbooks in Mainland China, the number of words in Japanese textbooks is still low, especially in the 3rd grade.

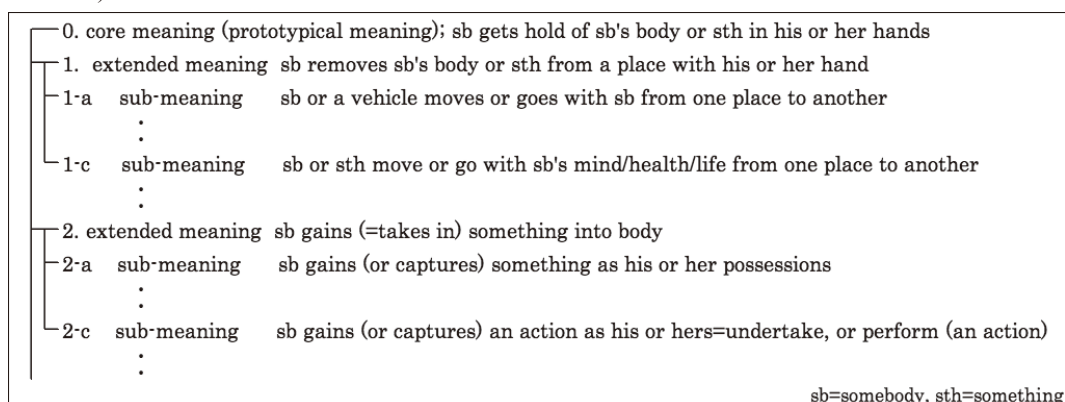
### 3. Polysemous verb TAKE

Many words can have more than one meaning. Polysemy refers to words with different

meanings derived from the same concept. Therefore, they have a semantic relationship to each other.

According to Seto (2007), a polysemous word has one core meaning and some extended and related meanings derived from the core meaning, which is also called the prototypical meaning. Figure 2 shows some of the many derivatives of TAKE. In Figure 2, ‘extended meaning’ refers to the meanings derived from the core meaning and ‘sub-meaning’ refers to the meanings derived from the extended meaning.

Figure 2. Core meaning, some extended meanings and sub-meanings of TAKE (Seto, 2007, pp. 963-965)



The core meaning of TAKE is “0: somebody gets hold of somebody’s body or something in his or her hands”. Also there are extended meanings, which are derived from the core meaning. Moreover, each extended meaning has some sub-meanings, which are derived from the extended meaning. As a result, all these meanings are derived from the core meaning and all the meanings relate to each other. All the semantic distributions of TAKE by Seto (2007) are shown in the Appendix.

Also each meaning has one or more translation equivalents. For example, TAKE has several translation equivalents in Japanese, トル (*toru*)、ツレテイク (*tsureteiku*)、ノル (*noru*)、カカル (*kakaru*). Therefore, polysemous words like TAKE have many translation equivalent words. In fact, all junior high school textbooks have alphabetically arranged word lists with their translation equivalents in an appendix. For example:

#### take [teik] 動

- ① … を連れて行く、持っていく
- ② (乗り物) に乗る、乗っていく
- ③ (時間などが) かかる、必要である  
take time 時間がかかる
- ④ … を受け取る
- ⑤ (写真) をとる
- ⑥ (科目などを) 履修する

⑦ . . . する、行う

⑧ . . . を選ぶ、. . . を買う

I'll take it. [店で]それをください。(*New Horizon*, 3rd grade)

This is how it is presented in the 3rd grade textbook of *New Horizon*, which is the most popular textbook and adopted in about 33.2% of the junior high schools. More than eight kinds of Japanese translations of TAKE are listed. Unfortunately, we do not realize that, at the beginning of vocabulary learning, learners tend to match an English word and its translation equivalent.

Sato (1998) investigated whether Japanese high school and university students could understand various meanings of TAKE in target contexts. Her results suggested that the more different the target meaning was from the prototypical meaning in Japanese (*toru*), the more difficult the meaning was. This result suggests that only memorizing a translation equivalent in students' first language is not an effective way to capture the meanings of a second language word.

Also Nation (2001) points out that it is very hard for L2 learners of English to acquire all the meanings of polysemous words because most words have more than one meaning. He also pointed out that learners tend to look for a translation equivalent in their first language in order to capture the meaning of a second language word.

For these reasons, it is worthwhile to analyze the semantic distributions in the textbooks and students' compositions. Furthermore, these results would allow the textbook writers or publishers to introduce and include polysemous words in more effective ways. As a result, students would understand the meaning, value, and usage of TAKE and begin to use it in the various situations and contexts.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1 Materials

Along with the junior high school textbooks in Japan, this paper analyses the JEFLL Corpus and the BBC 500 Word essay competition. This section introduces these two materials.

#### 4.1.1 JEFLL Corpus

The JEFLL Corpus is a collection of free compositions written by more than 10,000 Japanese-speaking learners of English. The corpus size is approximately 700,000 words. It consists of a range of beginners to intermediate levels contestants, covering mainly junior and senior high school students in Japan. The students were asked to compose under these conditions:

1. 20 minute in-class essay
2. No dictionary use

3. No preparation in advance
4. No homework
5. Students are allowed to use L1 whenever they find it difficult to put ideas in English  
(<http://jefll.corpuscobo.net/>)

Students can choose one from the six topics listed below.

- (1) *Urashima*: *Urashima Taro* is a famous traditional fable in Japan. . . . The essay task is to guess what happened to *Urashima* afterwards.
- (2) Rice or Bread? Which do you prefer, rice or bread for breakfast? Why?
- (3) Festival: Tell us about your school festival.
- (4) Earthquake: What are you going to take with you when a major earthquake hits your area? Why?
- (5) *Otoshidama*: *Otoshidama* is a custom of Japanese New Year. Older people or parents give money to their juniors to celebrate the New Year. The task is “What do you want to buy if you have 100,000 yen for *Otoshidama*?”
- (6) Bad Dreams: What is the worst dream that you have ever had? Tell us the story.  
(<http://jefll.corpuscobo.net/>)

#### 4.1.2 BBC 500 words competition (BBC 500 words)

This is one of the largest competitions of short stories written by children aged between 5 and 13 years who are full time residents of the UK. It started in 2012 and was organized by the BBC, which collected and analysed all the words used in the 118,000 stories received that year, and with the help of the Oxford Children’s Corpus, the BBC also explored the ways children use language today; their favourite words, invented words, and new words. (<http://blog.oxfordchildrens.co.uk/2013/01/21/exploring-childrens-language-the-bbc-radio-2-500-words-competition-and-the-oxford-childrens-corpus/>)

BBC 500 asks children in two groups (5-9 and 10-15 years old) to compose an original work of fiction using no more than 500 words. In 2015, the number of stories received in the competition was 403,243 and the top 50 stories were selected. In this study, I picked up TAKE in the top 50 stories.

The reason why this competition was chosen in this paper is that, compared with adults, the number of words for children is likely to be limited and it was worthwhile to clarify how children convey meaning using TAKE in a limited number of words.

## 4.2 Methods of Classification

In order to analyze the semantic distributions, the sentences including TAKE, TAKES, TOOK, TAKEN and TAKING were chosen in the three contexts (textbooks, JEFLL Corpus and BBC 500 words). Then their meanings were classified based on the semantic classification in Seto (2007) as in Figure 2. For example, the meaning of TAKE in sentences (1) and (2) can be classified into [0], which is the core meaning of TAKE, and [2]

respectively.

- (1) Each man took the other man's hand. [0] (*Sunshine*, 3rd grade)
- (2) With more information on body conditions, doctors have started to find the best times of the day for us to take medicine. [2] (*One World*, 3rd grade)

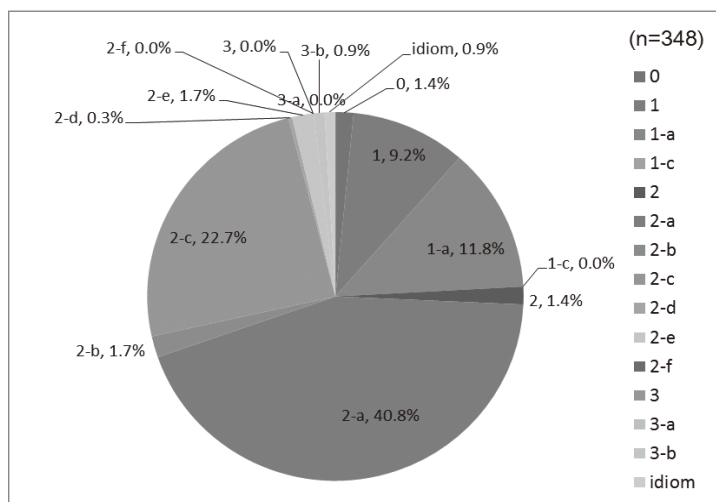
TAKE, which could not be classified into the categories in Seto (2007), was categorized into “idiom”, as in *We are about to take off*. (*Sunshine*, 3rd grade)

## 5. Results

### 5.1 English textbooks in Junior high schools in Japan

The result of the semantic distribution in the English textbooks is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Distribution of TAKE in the textbooks



The total number of occurrences of the word TAKE in the textbooks is 348 and it includes all the sentences and phrases containing the word TAKE, except TAKE in the word list shown in the appendixes.

It is clear that the category [2-a] has the highest frequency and makes up about 40.8% of the occurrences in the textbooks. These are the example sentences of [2-a]:

- (1) OK. Let's take a picture. (*Columbus*, 1st grade)
- (2) This is the bus I took every morning. (*Sunshine*, 3rd grade)

Besides [2-a], the category [2-c] accounts for 22.7%. Also TAKE in [2-c] serves as a light verb<sup>2</sup>. Here are the example sentences of [2-c]:

- (1) My mother was taking a bath when I called her. (*Total*, 2nd grade)  
 (2) We can also learn a lot from plants about taking care of ourselves. (*New Crown*, 3rd grade)

Some researchers regard TAKE in *take a picture* as a light verb, but according to Seto (2007), this usage was classified into 2-a, not as a light verb in 2-c. By following Seto (2007), this paper classifies TAKE in *take a picture (pictures)* into 2-a. Also it is interesting to note that only five sentences (1.4%) were classified to [0], which is the core meaning of TAKE.

Furthermore, about 51.4% of the objects of TAKE in [2-a] are as in *take a picture (pictures)*, 23.2% of the objects are of transportation, such as *take a boat, bus, bus*, etc. and 7.0% are of the type as in *I will take it/this*, which is a useful expression for shopping. These examples account for 81.6% of use throughout the three years of junior high school.

Table 3. Objects of TAKE in [2-a] and [2-c]

Objects of [2-a]	n		Objects of [2-c]	n	
a picture (pictures)	73	51.4%	care	34	43.0%
boat / bus / train, etc.	33	23.2%	a bath	23	29.1%
I'll take it / this, etc.	10	7.0%	a walk	5	6.3%
a class (classes)	6	4.2%	action	4	5.1%
order	6	4.2%	part	4	5.1%
a message	5	3.5%	place	2	2.5%
name	3	2.1%	a look	1	1.3%
a test	2	1.4%	courage	1	1.3%
notes	1	0.7%	guess	1	1.3%
a trip	1	0.7%	a nap	1	1.3%
pride	1	0.7%	a shower	1	1.3%
a tour	1	0.7%	a step	1	1.3%
	142		flight	1	1.3%
				79	

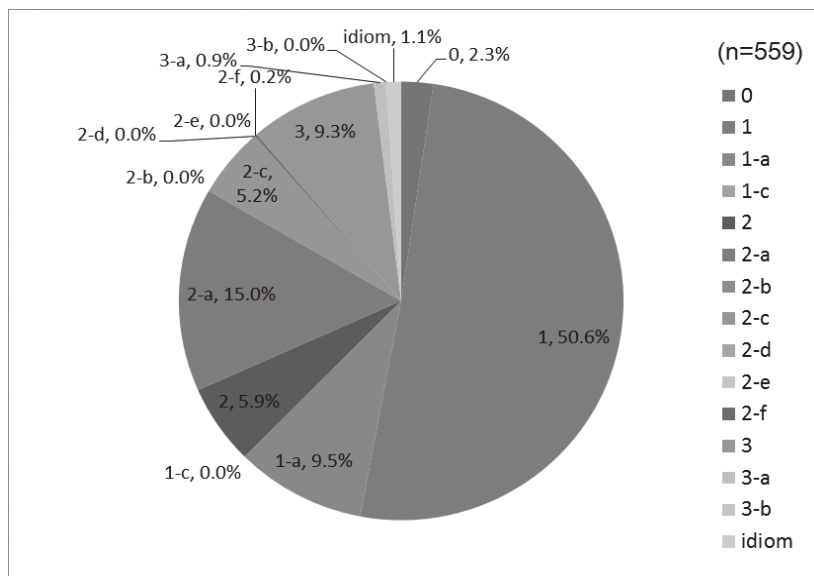
Like [2-a], the kinds of objects of TAKE in [2-c] are limited and about 72.1% of the objects are “care” (*take care*) and “a bath” (*take a bath*).

In summary, these results show that the English textbooks in Japan tend to use the same words and expressions repeatedly over three years. This is probably because the Curriculum Guidelines suggested the words and expressions should be repeated over three years in order to enable students to understand and use them in various situations.

## 5.2 JEFLL Corpus Results

Figure 4 shows the result of the distribution of TAKE in the JEFLL Corpus.

Figure 4. Distribution of TAKE in the JEFLL Corpus



It is noted that the number of sentences with TAKE was 621, but 62 of them were removed and couldn't be categorized because the sentences included grammatical, spelling or word choice mistakes, for example *One day I was taking a dream....* Therefore, the total number of the sentences categorized in this study was 559.

50.6% of TAKE was classified into [1]. Moreover, about 72% of [1] is “take out”, as in *I will take out my purse*. This high percentage may be the result of the Japanese loan word テイクアウト borrowed from English “take out” and it seems easier for Japanese students to memorize and use this loan word.

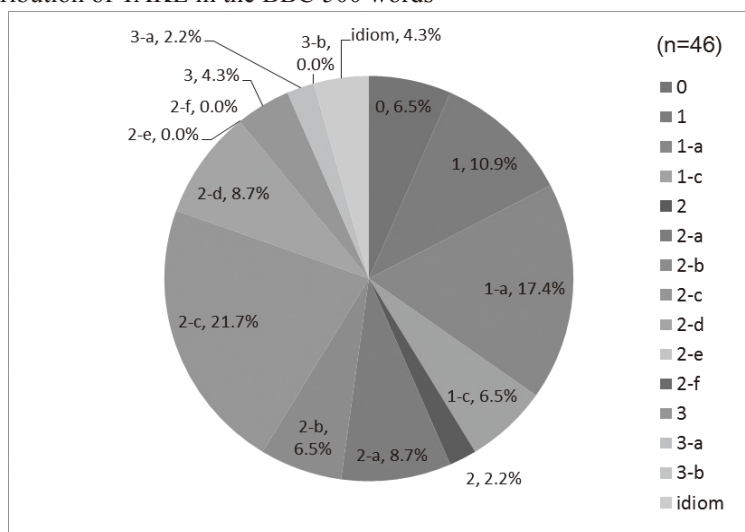
Unfortunately, it is difficult to compare the students' compositions in the corpus with the current textbooks because most of the compositions were written in the 1990s. However, 1. *take a picture (pictures)*, 2. *take a bus, train*, etc. and 3. *I'll take it/this*, etc. are the highest frequency objects in [2-a]. The order is exactly the same as in the textbooks shown in Table 3, so I assume the words used in the textbooks might affect the students' writing.

Also it is interesting to note that the category [2-c] makes up only 5.2%. This result indicates that using TAKE as a light verb is difficult for junior high school students.

## 5.3 BBC 500 words

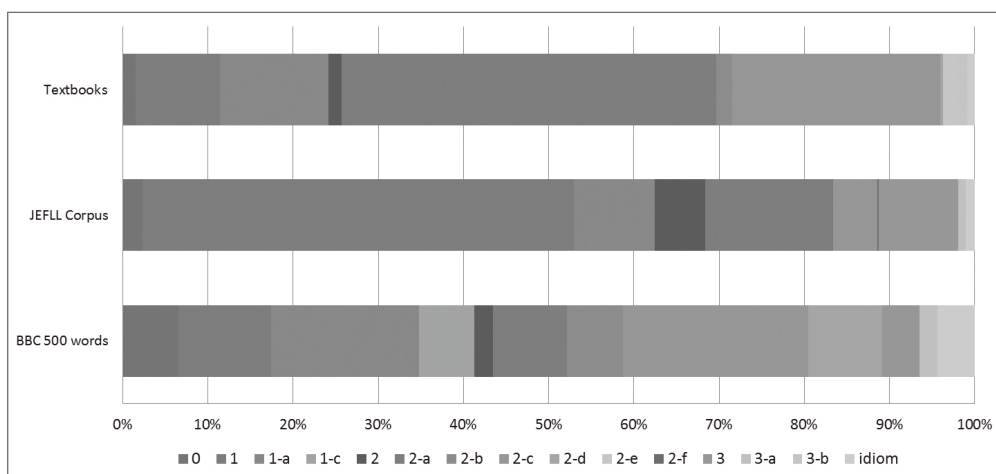
The distribution of TAKE in the BBC 500 words can be seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Distribution of TAKE in the BBC 500 words



Moreover, Figure 6 shows the distribution of TAKE in the three contexts.

Figure 6. Distribution of TAKE in the textbooks, JEFLL Corpus, BBC 500 words



	Textbooks	JEFLL Corpus	BBC 500 words		Textbooks	JEFLL Corpus	BBC 500 words
0	1.4%	2.3%	6.5%	2-d	0.3%	0.0%	8.7%
1	9.2%	50.6%	10.9%	2-e	1.7%	0.0%	0.0%
1-a	11.8%	9.5%	17.4%	2-f	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
1-c	0.0%	0.0%	6.5%	3	0.0%	9.3%	4.3%
2	1.4%	5.9%	2.2%	3-a	0.0%	0.9%	2.2%
2-a	40.8%	15.0%	8.7%	3-b	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%
2-b	1.7%	0.0%	6.5%	idiom	0.9%	1.1%	4.3%
2-c	22.7%	5.2%	21.7%				

A comparison of these results clearly shows that the semantic distribution of the word TAKE in BBC 500 words seems well-balanced. These results indicate that native English speaking children tend to use TAKE to convey various meanings in their compositions. And like [1-a], the percentage of TAKE as a light verb [2-c] is also the highest.

They also used various objects of TAKE in [2-c], for example, *take a look/a stroll/nap/delight/turns*. It is important to note that, even though only 6.5% of the total number of sentences were classified into the core meaning [0], this is the highest rate among these three results.

## 6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Suggestions

This study clarified the semantic distributions of the polysemous verb TAKE in the three contexts, which are 1. English textbooks in junior high school in Japan, 2. JEFLL Corpus, and 3. BBC 500 words.

This study reveals that the English textbooks in Japan tend to use the same words repeatedly over three years. In addition, the results of the distribution of TAKE in the JEFLL Corpus imply that it is difficult for junior high school students to use TAKE as a light verb. Also the distribution of TAKE in their compositions is not well-balanced, as 50.6% of TAKE was classified into category [1] and 72% of usage of [1] was “take out”, which is the source of the Japanese loan word テイクアウト.

Compared with the semantic distribution of TAKE in Japanese junior high school textbooks and students’ compositions, compositions in BBC 500 words show better balance. It suggests that the English native speaking children use TAKE to convey various meanings. Also the percentage of [0] (Core meaning) is the highest among the three contexts under investigation.

As mentioned earlier, it is difficult for L2 learners to understand and use polysemous words fully even though many of them have been treated as “basic” words. Schmitt (1998) found that even advanced learners had difficulty in knowing all the meanings of a polysemous word. Also Schmitt (1998, p. 281) concluded, “The participants had little problem with spelling, but rarely knew all of a target word’s meaning senses or derivational word forms.”

From this point of view, getting knowledge of basic words with multi-senses such as TAKE is not easy, so teachers and materials, such as textbooks, need to make learners aware of the polysemy and support them in acquiring these words in intentional ways.

Based on the results of the semantic distributions and the literature above, I suggest three points to enable students to understand and use the polysemous verb TAKE.

First, even though the number of words in Japanese junior high school textbooks is limited, the textbooks should include a greater variety of words. As I mentioned, in the case of TAKE, the textbooks used the same objects, for example, *take pictures/buses, take care/a bath* over three years. This phenomenon might affect the students’ compositions. Also compared with other Asian countries and regions, the number of English words

in Japanese textbooks is small, especially in the 3rd grade. The word TAKE is one of the most common and high frequency verbs in English. Therefore, the textbooks should include more various objects to enable students to use them in various situations. Especially, the number of words should increase in the 3rd grade.

Second, the core meaning of TAKE should be presented in the textbooks more often. Understanding the core meaning is an effective way of vocabulary acquisition because as the semantic distribution of TAKE in Seto (2007) showed, the core meaning connects to every other meaning within a word. In fact, Verspoor and Lowie (2003, p. 547) argued that abstract and figurative senses of polysemous words are better retained when learners are given core senses as cues, because providing a core sense helps learners to develop a “precise elaboration” as a result of a series of vocabulary experiments involving Dutch learners of English.

Third, the semantic relationship between the core and extended meanings should be introduced in classrooms. As for TAKE, it is an “activity verb”, which denotes actions and events that could be associated with choice, and so it takes a subject with the semantic role of agent (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 361-362). So there is a possibility of introducing the core meaning of TAKE visually. Sökmen (1997, p. 244) considered “the dual coding theory of human memory” and pointed out that the mind contains a network of verbal and imaginal representations for words. Also Sökmen (1997, p. 244) suggested that the possibility for later recall is much greater than if they only make verbal links and that making illustrations, showing pictures, drawing diagrams, and listing details are effective ways to present vocabulary. This suggestion supports that only showing or telling translation equivalents in students’ first language is not enough to capture the meaning of the word, and more intentional ways of teaching would be effective.

McCarthy (1990, p. viii) emphasized that “No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way”. In summary, textbooks and the Curriculum Guideline in Japan should put more emphasis on vocabulary acquisition. Especially, the semantic features and their semiotic value in English of the polysemous words should be introduced in the textbooks and taught in intentional ways.

## Notes

- 1 This paper is based on a presentation made at “English Teaching in Asia” International English Education Forum, held at World Traders Hotel Zunyi, Zunyi, Guizhou, China on October 31st, 2015.
- 2 The term “light verb” was introduced by Otto Jespersen in 1965. Sinclair (1990) used “Delexical structure” instead of “light verbs” and he pointed out that “Delexical structures are very common in current English. He explained “There are a number of very common verbs which are used with nouns as their object to indicate simply that someone performs an action, not that someone affects or creates something. These verbs have very little meaning when they are

used in this way.” (Sinclair, 1990, p. 147). According to Seto (2007), the usage of the light verb is classified into [2-c] and *take a nap/rest/a bath/a walk* are the examples of this category.

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## Corpus

Japanese EFL Learner (JEFL) Corpus operated by Shogakukan Corpus Network. Retrieved from <http://jeffl.corpuscobo.net/index.htm>

## Appendix: Semantic distribution of TAKE

	Definitions in Japanese	Definitions in English*	Examples
0	【中心義】 <人が><人（の身体）・物を>手でつかみとる。	(Core meaning) sb gets hold of sb's body or sth in his or her hands	<i>She took him by the arm. He took her hand to lead her out of the gym.</i>
1	<人が><人（の身体）・物を>手につかんで移動させる	sb removes sb's body or sth from a place with his or her hand	<i>Let me take your coat. Don't forget to take a camera with you. The nurse took me aside to say something.</i>
1-a	<人・乗り物などが><人を>連れて行く	sb or a vehicle moves or goes with sb from one place to another	<i>She took me home [out to lunch.] This bus takes us to our hotel.</i>
1-b	<人などが><問題などを>（議論の場などに）持ち出す	sb brings problems, etc. into a place for argument	<i>They will take the matter to court. They agreed to take the proposal to future meetings.</i>
1-c	<人（の心・健康・命など）を>連れて行く	sb or sth move or go with sb's mind/health/life from one place to another	<i>Her husband couldn't take his eyes off her. Two things particularly took my attention.</i>
1-d	数を～から取る	subtract	<i>If we take 2 from 4, we have 2 (left over).</i>
2	<人が><物を>手でつかむように取り込む（◆体内に取り入れる）	sb gains (= takes in) something into body	<i>Maggie was taking breakfast when he came in.</i>
2-a	<人が><物を>自分のものとして取り込む	sb gains (or captures) something as his or her possessions	<i>They were disinclined to take bribes. I will take this one, please. He took many pictures of national parks and mountains.</i>
2-b	<人などが><場所を>自分のものとして取り込む	sb gains (or occupies) a place as his or hers	<i>It is proper to take any seat that is vacant. He should have taken the position of vice president.</i>

2-c	＜人が＞＜行動を＞自分のものとして取り込む	sb gains (or captures) an action as his or hers = undertake, or perform (an action)	<i>take a nap [a rest, a bath, a walk]. decide to take action Take care of yourself.</i>
2-d	＜人が＞＜責任・申し出などを＞受け取る	sb accepts a responsibility/an offer, etc.	<i>Men can take the responsibility for birth control.</i>
2-e	＜人が＞＜感情・見解などを＞受け取る	sb accepts a feeling/ an opinions, etc.	<i>All complaints should be taken seriously.</i>
2-f	＜物が＞＜人・物などを＞取り込む	sth gains (or captures) sb/sth	<i>This bus takes 50 people.</i>
3	＜人（の行為）などが＞＜時間・労力などを＞必要なものとして取る	sb considers someone's time or effort as necessary	<i>He took 7 years to decide to marry me.</i>
3-a	＜行為などが＞＜人に＞＜時間・労力などを＞必要とさせる	sb's action makes sb require time/efforts, etc.	<i>It takes you three hours to write a thousand-word document.</i>
3-b	＜もの（の活動・状態）などが＞＜時間などを＞必要なものとして取る	sth activity/status require time, etc	<i>A glass bottle takes one million years to decompose.</i>

\*The definitions were translated by the author of this paper. sb = somebody, sb's = somebody's, sth = something

### About the author

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