

Role-denoting nouns are more ready for figurative uses than object-denoting nouns

Insight from a corpus analysis based on a theory of situation-specific semantic roles

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The theory of situation-specific semantic roles proposed by Kuroda et al. [1] claims that concrete nouns can be divided into at least two classes, i.e., object-denoting nouns and role-denoting nouns. An object-denoting noun is a noun whose meaning is defined by a group of objects that are characterized by a set of *common properties* intrinsically possessed by all of its members. In contrast, a role-denoting noun denotes a role that constitutes a specific situation. If this theory is right, it follows that the *reference to an object (or its set)* is not the essential property of role-denoting nouns.

The theory predicted that the role-denoting nouns are more ready for figurative use than object-denoting nouns, because such use requires the inhibition of literal, or referential meaning (see Nakamoto et al [2] for detailed discussion). In this study, we conducted a corpus analysis to examine the validity of this prediction. 16 pairs of role-denoting and object-denoting nouns were targeted. We collected all occurrences of target nouns in the corpus on the KWIC basis. For each occurrence, it was manually coded whether the target noun was used as a metaphor, used as a simile, or used as a literal expression. For example, in the sentence “We are not watch dogs”, the role-denoting noun *watch dog(s)* was coded as a metaphor, while in “This software monitors the input and output of function calls like a *watch dog*” the noun was coded as a simile.

The results of the coding procedure revealed that the role-denoting nouns are used as figurative expressions more frequently than the object-denoting nouns are. Moreover, they tended to be used more often as metaphor than as simile. These results are consistent with our prediction, suggesting that the distinction of concrete nouns proposed in the theory of situation-specific semantic roles has cognitive validity. In addition, detailed analysis of the examples strongly suggests that it is necessary to develop an elaborate theory of metaphor that gives us an *operational definition* of metaphor and simile, providing us the identification procedure for all figurative uses of nouns, and that no meaningful explanation on metaphors in actual uses of words would be possible without it.

References

- [1] Kuroda, K. & H. Isahara (2005). Towards a new classification of (word) concepts by distinguishing role names and object names. *Technical Report of IEICE*, 105 (204), pp. 47–54. The Institute of Electronics, Information and Communication Engineers.
- [2] Nakamoto, K., Kanamaru, T., and Kuroda, K. (2006). Correlation between metaphorical uses of nouns and their classes identified by a theory of situation-based theory of semantic roles. *Conference Handbook of the Annual Meeting of the 7th Japanese Cognitive Linguistics Association (JCLA)*, pp. 108–111.