SPLITTING, CUTTING, and BREAKING talk in Japanese

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Studies of lexical items from various semantic fields suggest that metaphoric extensions often depend very closely on details of literal senses (Sullivan 2006, Croft 2009, Bouveret & Sweetser 2009). We examine three Japanese verbs of SEPARATION: \textit{oru} and \textit{waru} are often translated as ‘break’, and \textit{kiru} as ‘cut’. Previous work on separation verbs has focused on concrete senses (Majid et al. 2007, Fujii, Radetzky, & Sweetser [in press]). But these three verbs extend metaphorically to “separation” of conversations, in very different ways. “\textit{Kiru} the conversation” means to end it abruptly, as in (1). But in (2), “\textit{oru} the hip of a conversation” means ‘(temporarily) derail, change the conversational direction’ and “\textit{wari-} \textit{komu} ([break-]enter)” the conversation means ‘interrupt to make your voice heard’—but, crucially, not to change the subject.

\begin{center}
(1) \textit{ma} \textit{da} \textit{hanasi} \textit{no} \textit{toryuu} \textit{na} \textit{noni} \textit{kikite} \textit{ga} \textit{hanasi} \textit{o} \textit{kitte-simatta} \textit{baai} \\
\textit{still talk GEN middle COP although listener NOM talk ACC \textit{KIRU-ADVERS.PAST} case}
\end{center}

‘In the case where the listener unfortunately ends the conversation (lit.: CUTS the talk) even though you are still only partway through [your turn].’

Context: A heading on a handout distributed to participants in a workshop on how to improve parent-child communication.

\begin{center}
(2) \textit{alte} \textit{ga} \textit{mosi} \textit{hypothetically anata no itte-\textit{iru} koto ga wakaranai toki,} \\
\textit{partner NOM you GEN say-PROG thing NOM understand.NEG when}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\textit{alte} \textit{wa} \textit{anata no hanasi no kosi o \textit{otte} demo,} \\
\textit{partner TOP you GEN talk GEN hip ACC ORU even}
\end{center}

‘When perhaps your interlocutor doesn’t understand what you’re saying, one can imagine that your interlocutor, even at the risk of ORU THE HIP OF the conversation, might \textit{WARU-ENTER} [it] in order to clarify [what it is you’re saying].’

Context: From a blog, “A Course on English Communication.” The author explains that Westeners consider it fine to ask for clarification about what the interlocutor meant, even in the middle of a conversation. http://yamakuseyoji.com/2012/01/29/communication_skills_lesson7/

These contrasting metaphorical senses arise from the physical meanings of the verbs, we claim. \textit{Kiru}, often translated ‘cut’, typically profiles an intentional agent creating a clean separation with a blade-like instrument. In (1), a \textit{willful agent creates abrupt temporal discontinuity} by ending the conversation (ACTIVITIES ARE CONTINUOUS ROPE/SUBSTANCES THROUGH TIME). Its intransitive counterpart \textit{kireru} never involves a deliberate agent or a blade; \textit{kireru} refers to events like unintentional breakage of 1-D themes (shoelaces) or tearing of 2-D ones (towels). Thus, \textit{Hanasi ga kireta} ‘conversation \textit{KIRERU.PAST}’ can refer to a conversational lull—no agent is assumed to create the lull, just as no agent deliberately causes accidental shoelace-snapping. But English “\textit{The conversation cut} is impossible; cut profiles agentic use of an instrument, and correlates with precise separation (vs. imprecisely torn towel-edges, or gradual development of a conversational lull).

\textit{Oru} literally means ‘fold, bend [a pliace theme] over on itself’ or ‘break [something rigid] by bending’. \textit{Oru} is used to refer to both breakage of bones and bending of bodily joints like hips. Metaphorically in Japanese, CONVERSATIONAL TOPIC IS DIRECTION; TOPIC-CONTINUITY IS MAINTAINING DIRECTION. In (2), ‘\textit{ORU} the hip of a conversation’ means the conversation gets \textit{bent} (shifted to a new topic), but not irrevocably \textit{broken} (stopped); after the topic-shift, it is expected to continue. Finally, \textit{waru} refers to breakage into largeish pieces (breaking dishes). However, it also means ‘split—either irrevocable (karate-chop an apple), or reparable (split a crowd by threading one’s way through it). This “reparable splitting” frame is what maps onto conversation in (2)—after the person interjects him/herself, talk will continue on the same topic.

Precise examination of the physical frames of separation verbs thus exposes systematic motivations for their metaphorical uses. English \textit{cut}, being almost exclusively transitive, does not extend to spontaneous cessation of conversation—but \textit{kiru} has a common intransitive \textit{kireru}, referring to non-agentic events and thus extendable to unintentional lulls. We cannot predict the extension to conversation of \textit{waru}’s ‘reparable mass-splitting’ sense rather than the ‘break into pieces’ sense, nor the extension to conversation of \textit{oru}’s ‘bend’ rather than ‘break’ physical sense. But English separation verbs, not being ambiguous between bending and breaking, predictably lack metaphorical senses equivalent to those of \textit{oru}. 