

# **Comparison of Hand metaphors in English and Japanese**

Emiko Momoi

## **I. Introduction**

In comparing two different languages, there emerge many similar expressions, which initially seems very useful for purpose of translations, but in the end is very confusing. Second language learners are easily inspired by these similar expression because they judge them from their own cultural perspective. Learners from the cultures in which numerous metaphorical uses are favored and used frequently, such as Japanese students, tend to apply similar expressions from their language to the other language. Since even bilingual dictionaries do not include the conceptual difference, it is difficult to approach vocabulary and expressions on the conceptual level.

In this paper, I will focus on the word hand, which is a very important part of our bodies and also a popular part of metaphorical expressions, and I will compare the differences in concept between English and Japanese. I began by searching for differences in dictionary entries in ten dictionaries; seven were monolingual dictionaries for native speakers in each language, two Japanese-English dictionaries, one monolingual English second language learner's dictionaries. Regarding the findings, I will observe the metaphorical uses in expressions in translation, and approach a theory about the initial conceptual differences.

## **II. dictionary definitions**

### **1. Common entries in the dictionaries in both languages**

In all ten dictionaries that I looked at, the first entry concerns the description of the features of the hand. All the dictionaries illustrate the fact that the hand is the terminal part of the arm beyond the wrist, and consists of the palm and five digits, which embody the concept and character of grasping and holding things. Directional symbol shapes resembling it, its appearance or use are also categorized as hands. All these entries carry the connotation of the hand's appearance and orientation along with the prehensile functions and power of gestures which draw attention. Following these definitions, several metaphorical uses which seem to expand the connotations are raised.

Similar entries pertaining to the uses of hands appear in the dictionaries in both languages, such as a hired laborer, a part or share in doing something, direction meaning handwriting and a person's signature, skill and ability, execution and touch, handling, measuring breadth by hand, agreement, bundle of tobacco, and regard to a whole arm. Most of these shared meanings are used in similar ways.

### **2. Comparing differences in the physical divisions of the hand**

There are, of course, different metaphorical uses which seem to characterize the differing cultural backgrounds. In the description of the hand in physical terms, the Japanese dictionaries have more divisible explanations. The part extending from the shoulder to the wrist is the ude 'arm,' and from

the wrist to the fingertips is the te 'hand.' Also, the word, te is only applied to primates, in zoological terms. Furthermore, the te itself consists of three divisions, such as the te-no-hira 'palm,' the te-no-kou 'back of the hand' and the yubi 'fingers.'

### 3. Back of the hand and a palm

In English, the name of this part is the back of the hand and back itself conveys a negative nuance. In Japanese, back of the hand is expressed as a shell or a carapace of the hand in the Chinese character. That means either, like a shell or a carapace, it is always turned upwards and exposed and it exists as it can be seen. In Japanese, the back of the hand is actually the "front" or the te-no-kou. Te-no-hira is the Japanese "back," equivalent to palm. It has a negative connotation being on the back. In English, to hide in the palm of one's hand, especially when performing a trick or stealing something is bad. However, the different nuance of the palm and the back of the hand reflects a complete, black and white contrast in the related Japanese expression: as in te-no-hira (or ura) o kaeshita youni 'turning over a palm.' The translation shows the noticeable range of good and bad value judgments.

### 4. Limitations or defining hand

The English definitions include reference to not only primates but also animals with four limbs. For example, one of the entries exhibits a monkey's feet which have the prehensile ability. Regarding the prehensile function, the chela of a crustacean and the foot of a hawk--probably any foot and tail with the ability--are included. In fact, the trunk of an elephant is included. However, even though the prehensile ability is accompanied by the main function of foot, the Japanese dictionaries do not accept these

metaphorical uses. Having the ability to stand and walk is categorized as foot. Japanese entries include something which look and seem to move like a hand, such the grasping prop of a vine, as well as the tendril, or the grabbing movement of a flame spreading to other flammable things, and a flow of water, which looks like the movement of a reaching hand.

### **5. Hand in playing cards or chess**

Metaphorical uses which reflect each cultural background involve playing a hand of cards. In English dictionaries, this expression refers to playing cards, which is the same in playing Japanese chess shogi in terms of its strategies and configurations of chessmen, and also in playing cards in the Japanese term.

### **6. Hand as a connector for relationship**

A use in Japanese which is not found in English is a connector for marking personal relationships and authority in intimate situations. In English use, only one expression 'to ask for her hand,' meaning 'to ask to marry her' seems to carry the implication of hand as a connector for relationship. On the other hand, in some Japanese expressions, hand implies a mean of immoral relationship mostly caused by man towards women. For example, 'te o kiru' meaning 'to manage to break up with a woman,' 'te ga hayai' meaning 'to have a physical relationship with any women easily,' 'te o dasu' meaning 'to have a physical relationship with an inferior woman' are the ones in which hand is used with a negative sense and the agent in every expression is always a man. While English uses express mental connection as seen in the example above, Japanese uses also focus on more external relations. Power over the partner does not exist in this relation, but agreement, especially in business situation, does apply. Te o

dasu, literally meaning 'put one's hands out to another things,' means seeking new business territory or cooperation and having more interests in other things. There is not parallel in English.

### 7. Different conceptual orientation in hand

One notable difference in denotation between English and Japanese is that English uses of hand are more visibility oriented than Japanese uses of the te. Mostly of the metaphorical uses in English convey reality brought about by the action and the movement of a hand. In contrast, Japanese uses are more imagination/emotion oriented. Metaphorical and imaginative uses follow pragmatic uses. For example, tesuu 'trouble' and sewa 'care' are listed under the entries for te. When considering these in isolation, they do not seem to carry any connotation of hand, but when considering what comes after trouble and care, namely assistance, movements involving hands such as giving or lending a hand, touching and helping. Needless to say, the hand action connected with the sacrifice and emotion. Therefore, there are a lot of expressions with hand dealing with the result caused by emotional movement.

## III. Verbal expressions corresponding in translation

There are expressions in which the words for hand are used and which corresponding to each other, in English and Japanese. Some of these expressions are used in the same way in direct translation, but other emerge with different translations in Japanese.

1. a. bear/give/lend a hand
- b. lend a hand----te o kasu

These expressions share completely the same intention in both languages--to help. In Japanese translation, bear and give could be interchangeable in the case when te can be replaced with tasuke 'help,' while "give someone a hand" conveys a meaning of suggested applause in English. However, te o kasu 'to lend a hand' has more nuance of voluntary help. When ageru 'give' is used in Japanese, as in tetsudatte ageru 'to help,' the voluntary feeling also exists, but with a sacrificial feeling.

2. a. bind hand and foot/fall into the hands of  
b. fall onto a hand----te ni ochiru

These expressions share the meaning of constraining so as to deny freedom of choice or action. In the Japanese translation, a hand is signified as someone's, especially an enemy's, control with a connotation of defeat.

3. a. change hands  
b. change hands----te o kaeru

This expression consists of the same words but does not corresponding in meaning. In English, substitution and a change of possessions from one person to another is the initial intention. The hand gesture of expression means a change of procedure and strategy for success is the initial intention. The word te signifies different ways and means.

4. a. come to hand  
b. get into a hand----te ni hairu

This expression seems literally the same and shares the intention of

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obtaining and receiving something. In both languages, hand signifies a possession.

5. a. have one's hands full
- b. be a handful----te ippai
- c. block a hand up----te o husagu

In these expressions, literally, the intention seems to correspond in each language. In fact, this expression in each language can very closely convey the same picture of an extremely busy business. The connotative sense is that of being unable to do more being too busy to manage or hold anything else than the business at hand. The direct translation into Japanese, te ippai 'be a handful,' means to cause a lot of trouble in English. Even though one of the entries in the Japanese dictionaries includes the meaning of trouble, in this expression, it does not correspond to the English expression. In the English expression handful denotes troublesomeness (especially those caused by children), which causes other people around the ones specified to busy themselves in trying to solve the problem. At the same time, such children can be preoccupied with planning more mischief.

6. a. eat out of another's hand
- b. eat another's hand----te o kuu

These two expressions are literally different but contain the same verb. In English, the initial intention is obedience to another's authority with a positive sense. This implies that the person is somehow fooled or blinded to a certain degree, or gullible in some cases, but in the best case, he/she is convinced a little disrespectfully to be under control. The Japanese expres-

sion has a negative sense. Usually it is used in negation, however, the expression itself conveys the result of being trapped.

7. a. join hands
- b. join hands----te o musubu
- c. grasp hands---te o nigiru

These expressions in both languages share the main intention, to become a partner, unite and work together. In Japanese translation, this expression is applied in business situation. The English translation contains an optional intention to marry. It illustrates an emotional nuance. In 7c, another Japanese translation can express a different emotional nuance. The expression includes the meaning of reconciliation. It does not indicate the direct emotion but the feeling of close relationship which is about to be made up.

8. a. keep one's hand in
- b. have one's hand raised----te ga agaru

In these expressions hand refers to skill or in English to involvement in some situation, such as business. Then English translation, to keep up one's skill or keep in practice, does not exactly corresponding to the Japanese translation; however, regarding the practicing of the skill, the nuance of the process of becoming skillful in Japanese translation is parallel. Two more translations for te ga agaru follow this translation--to improve one's penmanship, and gain in one's capacity. These two Japanese translation reflect traditional Japanese culture. Handwriting with a brush--calligraphy--is considered an art and at the same time a necessary skill for

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men, to indicate and to show they are educated, that means they are from an upper class family. This is also used in reference to alcohol capacity, as men who drink alcohol are considered more sociable. Since bars are regarded as men's social places, a man with an alcohol capacity is recognized as a sociable person who can get along with people very well. Presumably hand in this case can be accepted as a skill.

9. a. lay hands on
- b. put hands on----te o dasu

The English translation for this expression shows both positive and negative applications. In these two translations, to take and to get are neutral, while to bless by touching with the hands is positive, and to attack, harm and to arrest are negative translations, such as to meddle with, to attack, to steal as in 9b, and to have or a start a physical relationship with a woman.

10. a. put one's hands to
- b. grind hands----te o kudaku

These expressions correspond well in translation as in, to exert oneself, or to use one's energy to do something. The Japanese translation illustrates a situation in which the person is trying in every possible way to succeed. When considering only the literal expression in Japanese, there is one expression which corresponds the English translation; te o tsukeru to begin working on,' 'to steal or use someone's belongings or to have a physical relationship with an inferior woman.' One of the translations, 'to begin working on,' can correspond well to the other English expression, "set

one's hand to," by determining only from the translation.

11. a. show one's hand
- b. have one's hand be seen----te ga mieru

The most noticeable difference between these expressions is the use of verbs. In the English expression, the verb show is in the active mode, while the verb have ~ be seen takes a passive mode in Japanese expression. This difference already demonstrates the existing consciousness in the English translation, of revealing one's real intention. In the Japanese translation, however, the intention in this expression is not supposed to be revealed, in spite of the fact that it is somehow seen by someone. Strictly speaking, the hand indicates something grasped and hidden, that is, a secret and blame/mistake, which can correspond to the verb palm.

12. a. sit on one's hands
- b. cross hands----te o komanuku

These two expressions share one translation for the action, to do nothing. In the English translations, apathetic nuance is observed in another translation: to applaud feebly, show little enthusiasm for a play, performance etc. However, in colloquial use in English, the literal translation, to sit back tight, is close in meaning to the Japanese translation, te o komanuku. The Japanese translation conveys different pictures. Strictly speaking, the translation should be corrected to 'to fold arms.'

The translation clearly depicts the state of thinking of someone attempting to decide how to deal with the trouble, without starting the action but folding arms.

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### 13. a. strike hands

#### b. clap one's hands----te o utsu

As seen in these two expressions, the action caused by the conclusion of a business deal is different. The result reached to signifying the conclusion of an agreement, seems to be sharing the intention. In both the Japanese and the English translations, the literal expression is carried into the practical translation, but in a different manner. For example, Japanese people would clap their hands with the agreed rhythm san-san-nana-byoushi, but English speaking people, especially (young) American people hit each other's hands while saying give me five. The action occurs as a result, claspng right hand, in the English translation could also occur or could be considered in the actual situation, while the Japanese translation does not imply this action.

### 14. a. throw up one's hands

#### b. raise hands----te o ageru

These two expressions are not literally similar, but similar in nuance. The English translation includes the feeling of anger, as it is; to give up in exasperation. The Japanese translation rather supports the feeling of disappointment directed by failure. The other English translation is shared by one in the Japanese translations, to admit failure. However, the Japanese translation covers aggressiveness, which may be seen in exasperation as a result, such as, to raise the fist and be about to hit someone.

### 15. a. wash one's hands of

#### b. disconnect one's hand with----te o kiru

These two expressions are similar in translation. The English translation covers general use, such as to have no more to do with someone refuse to be responsible for another, while in Japanese the translation involves greater specificity. The direct translation for this expression in Japanese is to break up an intimate relationship between a man and a woman, which follows the English translation--to have no more to do with the relationship. In order for the English translation to correspond to the Japanese translation, the Japanese expression needs to be changed, as it contains the verb arau 'wash' in the English expression: wash one's feet 'ashi o arau.' The translation for this expression means to have no more relationship with a dishonest and vicious habit or group of people.

16. a. try one's hand  
b. try every hand----te o tsukusu

These two expressions are close both in expression and in translation, to try to do, to test one's ability. Comparing the translation in English and Japanese, the Japanese translation conveys a more concise, stronger and challenging nuance, to try every possible way, even if it seems to guarantee only fifty percent success.

17. a. wring one's hands  
b. rub one's hand----te o momu

In these expressions, the actions arise from strong emotion. In the English translations, the emotion is caused by sorrow, indecision and despair. In Japanese translations, the emotion is caused by anxiety, especially when used for asking a favor and making an apology. Psychologi-

cally, when people (or only Japanese people) ask a great favor and/or apologize for bothering someone, anxiety lies behind the action.

#### **IV. Expressions not found in English**

There are only a few English expressions with metaphorical uses which are expressed by metaphors in Japanese. Differing from English, te does not feature a prepositional phrase, such as *at hand*, which can function as if it were a verb in meaning. There are many expression using a variety of verbs, while the English prepositional phrase can imply a similar meaning.

##### **1. Evil and interference**

'To have a hand in something' is the only expression dealing with the evil sense of a hand, with a translation of have an influence on or share in some action or event. This expression can be used in a negative meaning, but can be used in a positive meaning depending on what the action and the event the agent is involved. On the other hand, there are twelve Japanese expressions implying this evil sense of a hand.

- (1) lower one's hand---te o kudasu  
(to steal, to excute)
- (2) put one's hand on---te o kakeru  
(to attack, to steal)
- (3) ride on someone's hand---te ni noru  
(to be trapped and be controlled by someone)
- (4) have a bad hand---te ga warui  
(to do something vicious)
- (5) push one's hand--te o sasu

(to meddle, to attack)

(6) put hands around---te ga mawaru

(to institute a search for a criminal)

(7) have a long hand---te ga nagai

(to have a habit of stealing)

(8) put one's hand on the back---te ga ushiro ni mawaru

(to be arrested)

(9) move hands quickly---te ga hayai

(to be easily violent, to have a physical relationship with a woman)

(10) let hands in---te ga hairu

(to arrest the criminal and have police officials join together to collect evidence; to happen to have other's corrections in completing a work)

(11) hang on my hand---te ni kakeru

(to kill something or someone by oneself)

(12) pollute one's hand---te o yogosu

(to execute practical crime)

These expressions imply that hands are easily directed by emotion, and do whatever emotion directs. Analyzed from the Japanese grammatical point of view, in half of these expressions with the particle ga, te itself stands as a subject and an act whatever it moves, however the deeds are always something vicious. In four of these expressions with a particle o, and one with ni in (11), hand is controlled by the person's will and consciousness. When will and consciousness exist in using a hand, the action will be worse. The other expression with a particle ni in (3) shows the hand as a trap. As seen in these expressions, hand is regarded as a tool or a mind controlled by evil. It will act by itself unconsciously unless it is controlled by a correct judgment and power.

## 2. Trouble

There is no English expressions except for these two-- 'to get one's hands dirty,' 'to lay one's hands on someone,' which indirectly imply that hands are dealing with troubles or are about to get into trouble because of the person's anger. 'To get one's hands dirty' is close in meaning and the translation, te o yogosu in the Japanese expression. I found the there are eight such Japanese expression.

(1) have hand away from---te ga hanareru

(to have no connection with something after it has been solved and settled; to have no more trouble after a child has grown up)

(2) burn one's hand---te o yaku

(not to know what to do with it because of too much trouble)

(3) dye one's hand---te o someru

(to begin to work; to engage in business)

(4) have no hand---te mo naku

(to have no trouble doing something; to do easily)

(5) hand one's hand---te o kakeru

(to take in charge of something with knowing how many problems to solve)

(6) lower one's hand---te o kudasu

(to do things by oneself which basically should be done by subordinate to the person)

(7) pull one's hand out of---te o hiku

(to retire from or to break off a (dishonored) connection which a person was engaged in)

(8) trouble one's hand---te o wazurawasu

(to bother someone by being taken care of and by having one have a responsibility)

These expressions above show that hand is working and moving in trouble, or is about to enter or leave from the trouble. As in (1), hand is regarded as something which troubles a person, such as child, in the translation. The other expression, with a particle o, which are used differently, indicate that what the hand does is trouble or something not favored. In other words, if the hand does not work and move, there could be no trouble. Seemingly, the hand is very sinful tool, and when the action is done intentionally, it will be even worse. However, some of these expressions can be categorized as to care, which follows next.

### 3. Care and attention

The expressions implying care constitute the second largest number of all expressions using hand. In English, the following expressions can be put into the category, to take someone in hand, to lead someone by the hand. In Japanese, meticulous attentions is the hidden connotation.

(1) put hands around---te ga mawaru

(to pay careful attention to everything)

(2) hang something on one's hand---te ni kakeru

(to take good care of something by oneself)

(3) put hand into---te o ireru

(to care, mend, maintain, trim very well; to compensate for; to supply)

(4) put hand on--te o oku

(to be at a loss how to deal with)

(5) take someone's hand---te o toru

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(to teach carefully and kindly)

(6) pull hand out---te o nuku

(to cut corners in one's work)

(7) be away from hand---te o hanareru

(not to need to take care of)

(8) pass hands---te o mawasu

(to make secretly necessary arrangement in advance)

(9) let hand reach---te ga todoku

(to have care taken enough)

(10) make hand elaborate---te ga komu

(to make something(or products) minutely, accurately, elaborately)

In these expressions, the hand is used as a tool along with the purpose which should be sought after. Noticeably, te functions as a object with a particle o, which is an object-marker. Needless to say, there is a hidden subject and the will. It seems that when the hand is tightly under the agent's control, it does not trouble anything or anyone.

### 4. Hand at work

There are only five Japanese expressions relating te to work. These following expressions indirectly show the connection between a hand and a mind.

(1) have hands open---te ga aku

(to reach close enough to a goal and have a break; to have nothing to do)

(2) unable to put one's hand on---te ni tsukanai

(to have something else in mind and lose concentration on what one was

doing and is supposed to do)

(3) be a good doer and talker---te haccho, kuchi haccho

(to do work well and talk appropriately)

(4) extend one's hand---te o nobasu

(to expand the business)

(5) loosen hand---te o yurumeru

(to slack)

In addition to these expressions above, there is a proverb which is based the notion:

When hands are open, (the person's) mouth will open ---te ga akeba,  
kuchi ha hiraku

(When having no work, the person starts gossip)

These expressions above show that the hand should always be connected with the mind and is controlled by the person's will with correct judgment. Again, as with te with a particle ga in (1), and ni in (2), something interferes with the connection, and the action of the hand stops. Or, as shown in (5), when the action of the hand stops, the will may be lost, and the person will be nothing but lazy. Then, the emptiness of the hand will be led to the evil side of the hand, which was introduced earlier. Therefore, in Japanese expressions, hand is mind-connected, while in English it is mind-alienated.

## V. Conclusion

There are entries which both languages' dictionaries list, but the differences are revealed more clearly in translation. This is specially so of

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the differences in metaphorical expressions which show the conceptual difference in each culture.

As I discovered in looking at the dictionary entries, metaphorical use with hand in English is visibility-oriented, while te in imagination/emotion-oriented in Japanese. Related to this discovery, is the fact that hand in English is mind-alienated, while in Japanese te is mind-connected. Therefore, there are expressions in which the hand is expressed as a troublemaker when disconnected from the mind, but there are no expressions dealing with trouble with the hand alone. This reveals that in Japanese expression, te cannot be connected with the cleanliness, while there are two expression in English implying that hands should always be clean. It is connected to another expression using in religious terms in English, which does not carry over to Japanese translation. As seen in lay hands on, hand conveys or gives power from authority. As in this translation, hand is used when blessing; it means that a hand for blessing is pure and precious. However, te in Japanese emphasized minuteness, which there is no correspondent for in English. To conclude, my findings are as follows:

<u>English</u>	<u>Japanese</u>
1. visibility-oriented	1. imagination/emotion-oriented
2. mind-alienated	2. mind-connected
3. care	3. evil, interference
4. cleanness and pureness	4. trouble
	5. care, attention
	6. work

These are the differences only in terms of metaphorical expressions. It seems likely that more differences would emerge if explored in more

detail as to other functions. Therefore, learners should pay more attention to the process of metaphorical uses and expressions, but at the same time, those differences should be introduced more generally, so that language instructors can be made aware of the cultural background hidden in words.

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