

# Reading *Haiku* poems in English with special emphasis on personal pronouns

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## Abstract

When reading *haiku* poems in English, the knowledge that surface subjects (and personal pronouns) are not obligatory in Japanese is indispensable for interpretation. Considering the geographical and temporal distribution of the overt grammatical subjects, it is suggested that the emergence of the concept of ‘ego’ in Western Europe may have something to do with the appearance of the obligatory use of overt grammatical subjects, especially in English, French and German, in the medieval period. The fact that Descartes himself seemed to have stuck to the overt subject ‘ego’ even in the Latin version of his famous theme, i.e. *Ego cogito ergo sum* instead of *Cogito ergo sum*, is also thought provoking.

## Keywords

Descartes, ‘ego’, grammatical subject, Japanese *haiku*, ‘person focus’ vs. ‘situation focus’

## Résumé

Lorsqu’on lit des poèmes *haiku* en anglais, savoir que les sujets grammaticaux (et les pronoms personnels) ne sont pas obligatoires en japonais est indispensable à l’interprétation. A partir de la distribution géographique et temporelle des sujets réels, il est suggéré que l’émergence du concept de ‘soi’ en Europe occidentale pourrait être liée à l’apparition de l’usage obligatoire de sujets réels pendant le Moyen-Age, particulièrement en anglais, français et allemand. Le fait que Descartes lui-même semble avoir conservé le sujet réel ‘ego’, même dans la version latine de son célèbre thème, i.e. *Ego cogito ergo sum* au lieu de *Cogito ergo sum*, est également sujet à réflexion.

## Mots-clés

Descartes, ‘ego’, ‘focus sur la personne’ vs. ‘focus sur la situation’, *Haiku* japonais, ‘soi’, sujet grammatical

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Father João Rodrigues, who came to Japan in the 16th century, is definitely one of the most prominent linguists of the Japanese language in history. Among various linguistic works concerning Japanese by Westerners up until now, the two grammars by Father João Rodrigues in the early 17th century are by far the most comprehensive and of highest academic standard. He says in his *Arte* (f. 172r.: 14–17):

Since this language lacks verbal conjugations according to number, person ... unless we see well what is said before and after the sentence in question, we would not know who is talking, nor about whom it is, and take one thing for another.

(... como careça esta língua de variedade de pessoas nos verbos, & de numeros, se senam olha bem pello antecedente, & consequente nam se entende de quem se fala, ou aquem pertence o verbo, & assi se diz hũa cousa por outra, &c.)

Here he points out the importance of the context in understanding Japanese. In other words, he implies that Japanese is a situation-focus language, in contrast with European person-focus languages.

This reminds me of an episode from a French scholar's experience in 20th-century Japan (Berque, 1994: 31–32):

About fifteen years ago I was strangely impressed by a scene of a Japanese war movie when I had just started to learn Japanese at the School of Oriental Languages at Paris. A doctor asks a nurse who is refusing to leave the hospital despite increasing impending danger. She remains silent for a moment, then without looking at him, suddenly says *Sukidesu* (polite form of 'to like/love'). The subtitle says *Je vous aime* (I love you). However, in the Japanese expression, there is no grammatical subject, object, pronoun, nor verbal conjugation. She does not even keep her eyes on him. This Japanese expression indicates the existence of 'some feeling of love or liking', and nothing more. That is all.

This story clearly teaches us the difference between the situation-focus character of the Japanese language and the person-focus character of major European languages (the concept 'situation vs. person focus' is from Hinds, 1986). When we say *samui* 'cold', we do not differentiate 'it is cold' and 'I am (we are) cold'. Admitting the unambiguous nature of major European languages, we Japanese are sometimes at a loss what to do with a grammatical subject, as is expressed in the following poem:

主語を省かず意志鮮明に伝へきて、深く疲れき英語の国に

(Without omitting grammatical subjects all the time, I have become very tired living in an English-speaking country.)

This poem, by Koichi Watanabe (in *Chunichi Shinbun* [Newspaper], 2004), was made by an author who lived in England for years.

Some other examples expressing the situation-focus character of the Japanese language are as follows:

*Boku wa sensee desu.* (I TOP teacher COP) = I am a teacher.

[TOP = topic marker, COP = copula]

*Boku wa Burajiru desu.* (I TOP Brazil COP) = I (go to) Brazil.<sup>2</sup>

*Boku wa natsu desu.* (I TOP summer COP) = I (like) summer.<sup>3</sup>

And one of the most interesting examples is,

*Uchino musume wa otoko desu.* ((Kindaichi, 1988) (our daughter TOP male COP) = Our daughter('s child) is a boy [in the conversation on a train between two old ladies talking about their daughter's child, especially concerning the gender of their grandchild].

## Subject and major European languages

In most European languages the following two expressions are distinguished by verbal form, as in Portuguese – *Está frio* ([It] is cold) and *Estou frio* ([I] am cold). Here also, however, the grammatical subject is not indispensable, at least on the surface level. For the latter case, the grammatical subject *Eu* (I) can be considered to have been deleted, while in the former example no linguistic form can be supplied, because Portuguese does not have impersonal subjects. Actually very few languages in the world have impersonal subjects for weather expression, and English, French and German are among those few languages.

The impersonal subject is required or obligatory in the expressions below, for example, only in a few languages (including English, French and German) even in Europe. Outside Europe, I believe, virtually no language requires this kind of impersonal subject for weather expression:

(1) *It rains*; (2) *Il pleut*; (3) *Es regnet* vs. (4) *Chove* (Portuguese).

We should keep in mind that, even in English, French and German, the impersonal subject was introduced only in the medieval period (Sekiguchi, 1994; Strang, 1970; Von Wartburg, 1950; etc.). In other words, in old English, old French or old German, not to mention ancient Greek or Latin, impersonal subjects did not exist. Why they were introduced in these neighboring languages<sup>4</sup> at a certain period of time is a very interesting topic. This must surely have had something to do with the medieval European tendency to distinguish doers from actions in verbal expressions.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore it might even have something to do with the eventual later emergence of the Cartesian philosophy, which distinguishes the soul from the body. The direction of cultural and geographical shift from ancient to medieval times was from the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia and Greece to Western Europe, France, Germany and the British Isles (Yamamoto, 1992: 33). Moreover all the political happenings and cultural circumstances in medieval Europe cannot be discussed without including the background of Christianity. The concept of the 'individual', for example, is said to have appeared in 12th-century Western Europe owing to the custom of Catholic confession and the birth of city life (Abe, 2001: 21).

**Table 1.** The four types of world languages concerning the predictability of pronouns and the pro-drop nature

Type	1	2	3	4	
Predictable	o	o	×	×	pronoun form predictable from verbal form
Pro-drop	o	×	×	o	pronoun-drop permitted, or pronoun deletable

Catholic confession originated with group confessions in the 6th century but developed into private confidential confession in the 12th century.

We also should bear in mind that Latin had been a common language among certain strata of educated people all over Europe up until the 18th century. However, most ordinary people must have used their own colloquial language in everyday conversation.

### The so-called ‘pro-drop’ character of languages

Concerning the predictability of pronouns and the ‘pro-drop’, or pronoun-drop, nature, four types of languages exist on earth (see Table 1).

*Type 1.* Pronouns can be deleted and are usually recoverable from the form of verbs, or verbal conjugations. (Romance languages like Latin, Spanish, Portuguese; Altaic languages like Turkish; Slavic languages like Russian, Polish, Bulgarian; Finno-Ugric languages like Hungarian, etc. French – Type 2–3 – is the most notable exception among Romance languages).

*Type 2.* In spite of the fact that the pronouns are recoverable from the verbal form, the pronoun-drop is not permitted (English *to be*, French *être*, and German *sein*).

*Type 3.* The pronoun form is not always predictable from verbal forms, and the pronoun-drop is not generally permitted (modern English, modern French, modern German, etc.).

*Type 4.* The pronoun-drop is permitted in spite of the fact that pronouns are not at all predictable from verbal forms with no verbal conjugation (Japanese, Korean, Chinese, etc.).

The important factor is whether the pronouns can be deleted or not. Even in Type-4 languages like Japanese, there are many instances of pronouns appearing in sentences. However, they are usually deleted if understandable from the context. Also in Sanskrit, which is classified as Type 1, there are many instances of pronouns appearing in sentences. However, whether pronouns often appear or not in text depends on the style of discourse or the nature of the classical texts (Nakatani, personal communication).

### ‘Cogito ergo sum’<sup>6</sup>

The original expression of the famous remark ‘*Cogito, ergo sum*’, supposedly uttered by René Descartes (1596–1650), cannot be found verbatim in any of the original works of Descartes. It is a version corresponding to the French ‘*Je pense, donc je suis*’, which Descartes actually did write, in his *Discours de la méthode (pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences)* (1637). In *Meditationes*, written four years later, he uses a Latin expression with a slightly different nuance but with the first-person subject unequivocally stated, ‘*Ego sum, ego existo*’ (Descartes, 1641).<sup>7</sup> In *Principia philosophiae* (Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VIII-1: 7–8) the phrase appears as ‘*ego cogito, ergo sum*’.

The Latin phrase without a surface grammatical subject, *Cogito, ergo sum*, is said to be a later translation from the earlier French to Latin by one of his friends, Father Marin Mersenne (1588–1648) (Ikeda, 1998: 257–258). It is of course highly likely that, being friends, Descartes knew, and probably approved, of that version. However, strangely enough, this Latin translation by Father Mersenne cannot be found in any library or in any catalogue so far available to me.<sup>8</sup>

The corresponding Latin translation of the phrase in question by the French clergyman Etienne de Courcelles, published in 1644, is '*Ego cogito, ergo sum, sive existo, ...*' (Descartes, 1644a: 558). According to Rodis-Lewis (1995), Descartes himself welcomed this Latin edition of his *Méthode*. Etienne Gilson, in his annotated edition of Descartes' *Méthode* (1947), says that the expression with *ego* in Latin would be *moi qui pense, je suis* (I who think, I am) in French and that *ego cogito* is a stronger statement (linking the subject with the action) than the French expression *je pense*, and this is exactly what Descartes wanted to say.<sup>9</sup>

Taking what we have investigated so far into consideration, Descartes himself seems to have adhered to the expression *ego* in Latin, and '*Ego cogito, ergo sum*' might be considered more appropriate to what Descartes actually had in mind than the later prevalent expression '*Cogito, ergo sum*'.<sup>10</sup> How this famous expression has become as fixed as it is without *ego* is still unclear to me.<sup>11</sup>

However, if Descartes himself did not use the expression *Cogito, ergo sum* – which seems to be the case – but always employed the expression putting the overt subject even in Latin, using the word *ego* in his writings, this very fact is thought provoking and suggests to me something significant concerning the person-focus character of major modern European languages.

## Buddhism and the concept of subject

According to Professor Sadakata (1990), a Japanese scholar of Buddhist philosophy, the concept of 'subject' is rather different from our standard concept nowadays. Acharya Nāgārjuna (龍樹 c. 150–250), an Indian philosopher, says in his *Philosophy of the Middle Way*:

Indeed, how appropriate will be the view that a mover moves?

For, a mover without movement is certainly not appropriate. (II–9)

(Indeed, how can we look on the 'moving' of a 'mover'?)

It is not possible and appropriate for one described as acting as a 'mover' not to be 'moving'.)

We usually say as follows (at least in English):

John goes.

John comes.

John cries.

John laughs.

John moves ... etc.

If we try to abstract the unchanging entity referred to as ‘John’, there can be no such thing. We only have the ‘John who is going’, the ‘John who is coming’, the ‘John who is crying’, the ‘John who is laughing’, the ‘John who is moving’, etc.

We also say (at least in English):

John moves.

Mary moves.

Bill moves.

Nancy moves, ... etc.

However, there is no such action in the abstract as ‘moving’. We only have ‘John moving’, ‘Mary moving’, ‘Bill moving’ or ‘Nancy moving’, etc.

Through these expressions, or ‘NP plus VP’ structure, we tend to think that there probably exists something like an abstract ‘John’ or an abstract ‘moving’. However, we sometimes should consider the thinking of Nāgārjuna about how appropriate it is to consider that a ‘mover’ can only be in the act of ‘moving’.

From another side of Indian philosophy, Professor Nakatani (Personal communication) once taught me the following two points concerning ‘subject’ in Buddhism:

- 1 There is no ‘subject’ in Buddhism. Consequently, speaking ill of others (behind their back), hurting others’ feelings, or wishing for the unhappiness of others is equal to doing the same thing to oneself.
- 2 People cannot escape from this kind of ‘bounded by language’ world through language. We need some physical ascetic practice instead.

The second point here reminds me of the book written by a famous German philosopher, Eugen Herrigel. After coming to Japan in 1924, he took up the practice of traditional Japanese archery to approach an understanding of Zen. In his book entitled *Zen in the Art of Archery*, first published in 1953, Professor Herrigel says (1999: 21–22):

When, to excuse myself, I once remarked that I was conscientiously making an effort to keep relaxed, he (the Master) replied: ‘That’s just the trouble, you make an effort to think about it. Concentrate entirely on your breathing, as if you had nothing else to do!’ It took me a considerable time before I succeeded in doing what the Master wanted. But – I succeeded. I learned to lose myself so effortlessly in the breathing that I sometimes had the feeling that I myself was not breathing but – strange as this may sound – being breathed.<sup>12</sup>

In the introduction to this book, the famous Japanese philosopher Daisetz Suzuki says (Herrigel, 1999: viii):

In the case of archery, the hitter and the hit are no longer two opposing objects, but are one reality. The archer ceases to be conscious of himself as the one who is engaged in hitting the bull’s-eye which confronts him. This state of unconsciousness is realized only when, completely empty and rid of the self, he becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill, though there is in it something of a quite different order which cannot be attained by any progressive study of the art.

Here, also, it is suggested that the departure from *ego*, which emerged relatively recently in the history of mankind, is sometimes the key for us to living in this world. However, as I am not ready for any physical ascetic practice, the only thing I can do for the moment is to relativize my world, at least partially constructed by my mother tongue, Japanese, and to learn other kinds of viewpoints partially based on other languages. Whether we can attain some common synthetic standpoint or not is still a debatable question for me.

### Three types of English translation of *haiku* poems

Comparing the English translation and the original of *haiku* poems (Blyth, 1952), there are at least three cases concerning the appearance of personal pronouns in English.

The first is the case in which both English and Japanese versions have personal pronouns, like *I* and *ware* or *my* and *waga* as follows:

- (1)-1 Tsuki to ware bakari nokorinu hashisuzumi. (Kikusha-ni)  
 (moon, and, I, alone, remain, cool on the bridge)  
 The cool on the bridge; / The moon and I / Alone remain.

Here there is a word meaning *I*, or *ware*, in the original.

- (1)-2 Waga io wa kusa mo natsuyase shitarikeri. (Issa)  
 (my, hut, TOP, grass, also, summer thinness, did [suffered])  
 [TOP = Topic marker]  
 The grass round my hut also, /  
 Has suffered / From summer thinness

Here there is a word meaning *my*, or *waga*, in the original.

The second type concerning the appearance of personal pronouns in English is that in which the hidden personal pronouns of Japanese versions, which do appear in their English translations, are predictable from some grammatical clues like an antecedent for the following anaphoric pronouns,<sup>13</sup> the existence of feeling adjectives, etc., as follows:

- (2)-1 Magusa ou hito wo shiori no natsumo kana (Basho)  
 (fodder, carry, man, Acc., guide, Gen., summer moor, CW [admiration])  
 [Acc. = accusative particle, Gen. = genitive, CW = cutting word]  
 A man carrying fodder on his back, /  
 As if our guide / Over the summer moor.

Here, the pronoun *his* is an anaphoric pronoun referring to the antecedent *man*, while there is no clue to the pronoun *our*, which seems to be the third type of my classification.

(2)-2 Atsukurushi midaregokoro ya rai wo kiku. (Shiki)

(sweltering, muddled, CW, thunder, Acc., listen to)

Oppressive heat; / My mind in a whirl /

I listen to the peals of thunder.

Here the feeling adjective *sweltering* strongly suggests that this is a description by the first person singular, or *I* and *my*.

The third type concerning the appearance of personal pronouns in English is the case in which English translations do have definite personal pronouns despite the fact that the corresponding Japanese versions do not have any personal pronoun, or any grammatical clues.

(3)-1 Yuuzuki ya suzumigatera no hakamairi. (Issa)

(evening moon, CW, enjoying the cool, visit the graves)

Under the evening moon, /

They visit the graves, /

Enjoying the cool.

Here, the subject of the verb *visit* does not necessarily have to be *they*, for which the original poem does not have any grammatical clue. This *they* is only a translator's interpretation and the original does not specify who is visiting the grave(s).

(3)-2 Shishoku shite rooka tooru ya satsukiamie. (Buson)

(paper lantern in hand, verandah, walk along, CW, early summer rain)

The rainy season; /

A paper lantern in hand /

I walk along the verandah.

Here, too, although the first reading might be *I walking in deep night*, strictly speaking, there is no clue for determining the grammatical subject of the verb *walk*. It is exactly this third type of example concerning the appearance of personal pronouns in English that attracts my attention.

## Non-emergence of ego and the situation-focus character of Japanese

I believe that these two factors are part of the force used to establish the tradition of minimal verbal expressions like *haiku* in Japan. Here let me give a few examples from Basho (1644–1694) and Shiki (1867–1902).

*Furuikeya* (An old pond)

*kawazu tobikomu* (A frog jumps in)

*mizuno oto* (A splash of water)<sup>14</sup>

Matsuo Basho

Here, Basho hears a sound breaking the silence when a frog jumps into an old pond.

*Shizukesaya*<sup>15</sup> (Ah, tranquillity!)

*iwani shimiiru* (Penetrating the very rock)

*semino koe* (a cicada's voice)<sup>16</sup>

Matsuo Basho

Basho hears a cicada's chirping which seems to penetrate a rock in tranquil surroundings. The keen hearing perception, suppressing *ego*, enables him to appreciate the sound of a frog jumping into an old pond in silence or the cicada's voice in tranquillity and to express his impression in 17-syllable short Japanese *haiku* poems, each depending on its situation-focus character.

*Kakikueba* (Persimmons; as I chew)

*Kaneganarunari* (a temple bell begins to boom)

*Hooryuuj* (from Horyuji)<sup>17</sup>

Masaoka Shiki

Since there is no grammatical subject in this poem, we do not know, from just reading the original, who is eating persimmons and who is hearing the bell's peal. This ambiguity itself includes the possibilities of me or the author, Shiki, or you, the reader, or other third person(s), or the world, or even the universe, hearing the bell's peal. All the other sounds having vanished from the world, only the bell is pealing as if it were the source or sum of all things. The whole world around us is absorbed in it. Here again can be seen the expressive level of the *haiku* elevated through the suppression of *ego* depending on the situation-focus character of the Japanese language. The appearance of *I* in the phrase *as I chew* in the English translation seems to limit and even prevent the infinite possibility of interpretations listed above as if only *I* can hear the bell's peal.

Here I am definitely *not* saying that *haiku* poems cannot be understood through translations into English or any other foreign language. On the contrary, I do believe that any person from any culture can appreciate literature from different cultures through translations, as we Japanese appreciate Shakespeare, Stendhal or Schiller in Japanese. However, one tiny little thing I would like to insist on here is that the knowledge that Japanese speech patterns frequently lack subjects (and personal pronouns) helps a great deal in understanding *haiku* poems, even if you read them in English translations.

## Conclusion

Considering the geographical and temporal distribution of the overt grammatical subjects, it is suggested that the emergence of the concept of *ego* in Western Europe may have something to do with the appearance of the obligatory use of overt grammatical subjects, apparently in the early medieval period, especially in English, French and German.

Identical perception of an object, e.g. an apple, may be possible because we have similar human senses, but the perception of an event is inevitably coloured by the cultural, political, religious, etc., filters through which the perceiver views the event. The utmost we can do is not to seek for an absolute truth but to present the image of the world we recognize or our interpretation based on geographical or temporal distribution. This indubitably varies from age to age, from region to region, from specialized field to field, and even from person to person. Consequently we need to continue to strive to understand each other, even if it is more difficult to convey our thinking through different languages.

When reading *haiku* poems in English, for example, the knowledge that surface subjects (and personal pronouns) are not obligatory in Japanese is indispensable for interpretation. The key to this mutual understanding is that we are all humans using a human language to communicate.

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## Notes

- 1 This is a revised and expanded version of my article 'Emergence of the concept of "ego" in the grammatical structure of the languages of Western Europe', which appeared in *Circulaire de la Société Franco-Japonaise des Etudes Orientales* nos 28–33, Kyoto–Tokyo, March 2009. It is based on my presentations at the first and second seminars on the Generalized Science of Humanity held at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris on 25–26 March 2008, and 2–3 April 2009. I would like to express my gratitude to all of the scholars who listened to my talk and who gave me pertinent comments. Special thanks are due to Professor James Patrick Barron for his continuous encouragement and insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
- 2 In a restaurant it could mean 'I (want) Brazilian (food)', and at a soccer stadium it could mean 'I (root for) Brazil', etc.
- 3 It could also mean the opposite, 'I (hate) summer', depending on the context; and furthermore, talking about trips it could mean 'I (go abroad) in summer', etc.
- 4 There also must have been a possibility of 'Sprachbund' influence, i.e. languages having become similar in some way because of geographical proximity as well as language and cultural contact.
- 5 'Cette tendance à séparer dans l'expression l'agent et l'action conduit aussi à une extension plus grande de la construction impersonnelle' (Von Wartburg, 1950: 135).
- 6 The following discussion concerning this famous phrase by Descartes owes a great deal to Professor Kosei Kurisu, Professor Emeritus of Nanzan University. Sincere thanks are also due to Professors Tetsuya Shiokawa and Satoru Nagami of Tokyo University for giving me valuable information concerning Descartes and his famous, '*Je pense, donc je suis*'.
- 7 *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641). More precisely, 'Ego sum, ego existo, quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessario esse verum' (*Meditationes*, II (*Oeuvres de Descartes*, t. VII: 25).

- 8 This translation from French to Latin by Father Mersenne has not been completed (Shiokawa, personal communication). Consequently it may never yet have been published thus far.
- 9 Etienne Gilson says in the notes to his translation of Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode*: 'On ne pouvait, en effet, le transposer en français sans user d'une formule assez lourde, telle que: Moi qui pense, je suis. C'est cependant le sens exact et complet, que Descartes veut exprimer, comme on peut s'en assurer en rapprochant le je pense de la phrase qui précède ...' (Gilson, 1947: 292).
- 10 Through his expression '*ego cogito, ergo sum*', instead of the commonly known form *cogito ergo sum*, Descartes seems to be enthusiastically trying to make the first person for *cogito* accord with that for *sum* (Shingu Kazushige, personal communication).
- 11 There is a possibility, although perhaps slight, that the expression *Cogito, ergo sum* may have appeared in an abundant number of letters between Father Mersenne and the European scholars with whom he corresponded or in those between Descartes himself and the European philosophers or theologians with whom he corresponded. However, there is no proof so far (Shiokawa, personal communication).
- 12 It is highly symbolic to me that the German philosopher Eugen Herrigel burned an enormous number of manuscripts of his writings just before his death, despite his wife's trying to stop him. Verbalization of philosophy is extremely difficult, not to say totally impossible.
- 13 An 'anaphoric pronoun' generally means a pronoun that refers to an antecedent.
- 14 Translated by Inazo Nitobe (Sato, 1983: 154).
- 15 Also read as *Shizukasaya*.
- 16 Translated by Helen Craig McCullough (1990: 539).
- 17 Henderson (1958: 158). Horyuji - 'ji' means 'temple' - is one of the most famous temples in Japan.

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