

SEMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS AND MEANING EXTENSION OF THE LEXEME ME (目 “EYE”) IN JAPANESE AND ITS TRANSLATION INTO VIETNAMESE

ĐẶC ĐIỂM NGỮ NGHĨA VÀ HIỆN TƯỢNG CHUYỂN NGHĨA CỦA TỪ “目” (MẮT) TRONG TIẾNG NHẬT VÀ SỰ CHUYỂN DỊCH SANG TIẾNG VIỆT

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Abstract - Polysemy is a common feature of lexical systems in natural languages, but the mechanisms of semantic extension vary across languages. This paper investigates the semantic features of the word me (目, “eye”) in contemporary Japanese through its basic meanings, extended meanings, and idiomatic uses. Based on representative examples, the study clarifies major mechanisms of semantic extension, particularly metaphor and metonymy, while also examining the semantic-pragmatic values of these meanings in context. From a Japanese–Vietnamese contrastive perspective, the paper identifies similarities and differences in the ways the meanings of me are rendered in Vietnamese. The findings contribute to a clearer understanding of the semantic characteristics of me and provide useful implications for research, translation and Japanese language teaching.

Key words - Semantic extension; metaphor; metonymy; me (目); Japanese–Vietnamese contrast

1. Introduction

In natural languages, body-part terms play a particularly important role. They reflect knowledge of the human body and serve as a foundation for cognitive processes and conceptualizing the world. Through language use, these terms extend to express abstract concepts such as cognition, emotion, evaluation, and lived experience. The semantic study of body-part terms thus illuminates the relationship between language, thought, and culture within specific speech communities.

In Japanese, the lexeme *me* (目 ‘eye’) is highly frequent and richly polysemous. Beyond its basic denotation as the visual organ, it is used to express attention, vigilance, evaluative ability, emotional stance, experience, and orientation toward a goal. Corpus-based resources support this lexical salience. The Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese (BCCWJ) contains 104.3 million words across books, magazines, newspapers, white papers, blogs, internet forums, textbooks, legal texts, and other registers [1]. In addition, A Frequency Dictionary of Japanese, compiled from more than 107 million words of spoken and written corpora, lists 目/眼 at rank 169 in its overall frequency list [2]. These data do not by themselves determine the relative frequency of each sense, but they do support the claim that me is a highly salient lexical item in contemporary Japanese.

Tóm tắt - Hiện tượng đa nghĩa là đặc trưng phổ biến của từ vựng trong các ngôn ngữ tự nhiên, tuy nhiên cơ chế chuyển nghĩa ở mỗi ngôn ngữ lại có những nét riêng. Bài viết khảo sát đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa của từ “目” (mắt) trong tiếng Nhật hiện đại qua các nghĩa cơ bản, nghĩa chuyển và nghĩa trong thành ngữ. Từ các ví dụ tiêu biểu, nghiên cứu làm rõ những cơ chế mở rộng nghĩa chủ yếu như ẩn dụ và hoán dụ, đồng thời xem xét giá trị ngữ nghĩa – ngữ dụng của từ trong ngữ cảnh sử dụng. Trên cơ sở đối chiếu Nhật – Việt, bài viết chỉ ra những điểm tương đồng và khác biệt trong cách chuyển dịch các nghĩa của “目” (mắt) sang tiếng Việt, qua đó góp phần phục vụ nghiên cứu, dịch thuật và giảng dạy tiếng Nhật.

Từ khóa - Chuyển nghĩa; ẩn dụ; hoán dụ; từ “目”; tiếng Nhật – tiếng Việt

From a research perspective, several semantic and cognitive studies have addressed the polysemy and semantic extension of body-part terms in Japanese. An earlier related study by the present author examined idioms containing the body-part element “eye” in Vietnamese and Japanese, focusing on idiomatic meanings and on similarities and differences in figurative expression between the two languages [3]. That study provided a useful starting point for understanding the symbolic and culturally embedded meanings associated with eye/me in the two languages. However, its scope was limited to idiomatic expressions and did not address me as an independent lexical item in the broader semantic system of contemporary Japanese. Therefore, no systematic analysis yet exists of the meaning-extension mechanisms of me in contemporary Japanese based on concrete usage examples, nor has the issue of rendering its meanings into Vietnamese been sufficiently clarified. This research gap motivates the present study.

Accordingly, a systematic account is still needed of how the meanings of me are structured and extended across actual usage contexts, especially with regard to the mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy and the problem of rendering these meanings into Vietnamese. The present study seeks to fill this gap by examining the basic meanings, extended meanings, and idiomatic uses of me in contemporary Japanese on the basis of representative examples. Through a Japanese–Vietnamese contrastive

perspective, the paper also explores how these meanings are translated into Vietnamese, thereby clarifying both shared and language-specific patterns shaped by cognitive and cultural factors.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Review of previous studies

Polysemy and semantic extension are central topics in semantic studies. Traditional semantic approaches view polysemy as the result of meaning development within the lexical system and through language use. In this view, a word's meanings form an internally coherent and systematic structure [4]. This perspective emphasizes the relationships among different senses of a word and treats polysemy as an inherent property of natural language.

Cognitive linguistics understands word meaning as the product of conceptualization grounded in embodied experience and human perception. Numerous studies have shown that metaphor and metonymy are not merely rhetorical devices but fundamental cognitive mechanisms that govern how word meanings extend and organize - particularly for body-part terms, which are closely tied to sensory experience and cognition [5]; [6]. Within this framework, body-part terms serve as important cognitive sources for expressing abstract concepts such as cognition, emotion, and evaluation.

In Japanese, several studies have highlighted the prominent role of body-part terms in expressing meaning and stance. Hasada [7] demonstrates that perception-related terms, including those referring to the “eye”, play a significant role in expressing emotions and social evaluation in Japanese. Additionally, studies on idioms and fixed expressions have noted the high degree of polysemy and strong conventionality of expressions containing body-part terms in Japanese [8].

More recently, interdisciplinary research combining linguistics with behavioral science and language modeling has confirmed that polysemy is a systematic phenomenon strongly dependent on context and cognitive mechanisms [9]. However, existing studies of the Japanese word *me* (目) have tended to address individual aspects in isolation. They have not yet provided a systematic analysis of the relationships among its basic meaning, extended meanings, and expressive values in contemporary Japanese based on actual usage examples. This research gap motivates the present study.

2.2. Theoretical framework

2.2.1. What Does Word Meaning Mean?

Word meaning is an abstract idea that exists in our minds. Researchers have tried to define it in different ways, and each approach has its pros and cons.

Ch. Stevenson looked at word meaning from a psychological angle. He said that when we hear a word, it triggers certain mental processes that depend on the situation we're in (as cited in [10, p. 154]). A. I. Smirnitsky had a similar view. He described word meaning as how our mind reflects objects, events, or relationships in the real world, and this reflection becomes part of the word itself (as cited in [11, p. 37]).

de Saussure [12] explained that word meaning comes from the connection between two parts: the signifier (the sound or written form) and the signified (what it represents). The signifier isn't just a sound or symbol - it's a mental picture that forms in our mind when we use language. Modern semantics views word meaning not as a static entity but as a dynamic structure that emerges through language use and interaction with communicative context [4].

N. D. Ton [10] defines word meaning as “everything - both knowledge and feelings - that comes to mind for a native speaker about an object, event, action, quality, or relationship when they hear or read a word” (p. 154).

D. V. Hung says word meaning is “all the mental content that appears in a native speaker's mind when they encounter (speak or understand) a particular word sound” [10, p. 38].

These definitions don't cover every possible view of word meaning, but they represent the main ways linguists think about it. Researchers choose different definitions based on what they're studying and how they approach their work. Generally, there are two main ways to think about word meaning:

- As a thing (an object, concept, or mental image);
- As a connection (the relationship between a word and what it refers to).

2.2.2. Semantic Extension of Words

Language serves as the primary medium of human communication. Its evolution is rooted in communicative practice, and linguistic features are most clearly understood when language functions as a communicative tool. Effective communication requires speakers to master not only the phonetic forms of words but also their meanings.

Semantic extension represents a fundamental principle of linguistic development. It constitutes “the result of changes in word meaning” [13, p. 13]. Semantic change generally follows predictable patterns: derived meanings emerge from a word's original meaning or from core semantic features within its conceptual structure. The central semantic feature is essential for maintaining coherence across different meanings. Even when a word's meanings vary considerably - or appear contradictory - they remain linked through this shared core feature. Despite the range of meanings a word may possess, these meanings function within an integrated semantic system, which characterizes lexical polysemy.

Word meaning is not static but evolves through various mechanisms of semantic change. Among these mechanisms, metaphor and metonymy are the most significant and pervasive, serving as primary drivers of lexical polysemy.

Metaphor operates as a mechanism of semantic extension based on perceived similarity between distinct conceptual domains. From a cognitive standpoint, metaphor functions not simply as a stylistic device but as a fundamental cognitive process that allows us to comprehend abstract domains through concrete experience [5]. Across languages, vision-related concepts frequently function as source domains for expressing cognitive activities including understanding, evaluation, and awareness [6].

Metonymy functions as a mechanism of semantic extension based on contiguity relations within a single

conceptual domain, including part–whole, state–action, or cause–effect relations. In contrast to metaphor, metonymy does not involve transfer across separate conceptual domains but instead reflects associative connections within human cognitive experience [14]. In the case of body-part terms, metonymy frequently extends meaning to indicate states, experiences, or structural characteristics.

Semantic extension is intrinsically linked to the cognitive and cultural experiences of a linguistic community. While metaphor and metonymy are rooted in universal cognitive processes, their specific manifestations are influenced by socio-cultural contexts, resulting in cross-linguistic variation. This is especially relevant in contrastive studies and translation, where divergent patterns of cognitive conceptualization may present challenges in conveying meaning across languages.

This study uses the concepts of word meaning and semantic extension as its theoretical foundation for analyzing how the lexeme *me* (目) develops semantically in contemporary Japanese. This approach illuminates the role of vision as a key cognitive source in the Japanese lexical system.

3. Research Objectives

This study examines the semantic characteristics of the Japanese word *me* (目) through analysis of its basic and extended meanings. It identifies the primary mechanisms of semantic extension - particularly metaphor and metonymy - and explains how the meanings of *me* are formed and developed. Furthermore, the study explores how the various meanings of *me* are translated into Vietnamese in order to determine similarities and differences in cognitive conceptualization and linguistic expression between the two languages, and to address challenges encountered in Japanese–Vietnamese translation practice.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Data

The dataset consists of two layers. The first layer comprises lexicographic descriptions and scholarly discussions drawn from authoritative Japanese dictionaries and relevant studies. The second layer consists of supplementary contemporary examples checked against corpus-based or public contemporary sources. In particular, the study uses BCCWJ and related corpus-based resources to establish the contemporary distribution of the lexeme *me* across written registers [1], and it also includes several recent examples from journalism and online writing in order to verify that the idiomatic expressions discussed are not restricted to dictionary citation alone [16]–[18].

The study remains primarily qualitative. The corpus evidence is used to establish lexical salience and contemporary attestation, not to provide a fully sense-tagged frequency comparison between literal and extended meanings. A large-scale quantitative comparison of sense frequencies should be pursued in future research.

4.2. Analytical Framework

The study employs semantic analysis to identify the basic and extended meanings of *me* (目). Drawing on principles of cognitive linguistics, the research examines

the principal mechanisms of semantic extension - notably metaphor and metonymy - to elucidate the relationships between the core meaning and its derived senses.

4.3. Interpretative Approach to Vietnamese Rendering

In this study, Vietnamese is employed as an interpretative tool to elucidate the semantic values and meaning-extension mechanisms of the word *me* (目) in Japanese. The paper does not undertake a systematic contrastive analysis between the two languages; rather, it focuses on examining how the meanings of *me* can be interpreted and rendered into Vietnamese in specific contexts. Through this approach, the study discusses both the possibilities and limitations of meaning transfer, thereby shedding light on differences in cognitive conceptualization and modes of expression between the two languages.

5. Analysis and Results

5.1. The Basic Meaning of *me* (目) in Japanese

Farzaneh, M. [7] identifies the basic meanings of *me* (目, “eye”) as follows:

- (i) The eye is one of the most important sensory organs in humans and animals, functioning as the organ of vision;
- (ii) It receives light, enabling living beings to perceive the surrounding world;
- (iii) In humans and vertebrate animals, eyes typically appear as a symmetrical pair on the head;
- (iv) The number, position, structure, and function of eyes vary by species (p. 37).

According to the *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* [14], *me* (目, “eye”) has the following basic meaning: the eye is one of the most important sensory organs in humans and animals, serving as the primary organ of vision. With its delicate and complex structure, it receives and processes light and color stimuli from the environment. Through the visual nerve system, these signals are transmitted to the brain’s visual areas, where they are processed and transformed into meaningful images, enabling living beings to perceive and understand the external world.

5.2. Mechanisms of Semantic Extension of *me* (目)

5.2.1. Semantic Extension through Metaphor

Through metaphorical extension, *me* (目, “eye”) acquires the following extended meanings:

- a) Meanings related to vision and visual perception

The following examples illustrate how *me* extends from its core meaning as the organ of vision to encompass the function and activity of seeing.

Ex. 1: 澄んだ美しい目 (clear, beautiful eyes).

Ex. 2: 目をあける (to open one’s eyes).

Ex. 3: すどい目で見ると (to look with sharp eyes).

In these instances, *me* extends from its foundational meaning as a visual organ to represent the function and act of seeing. In Vietnamese translation, this meaning is frequently rendered through expressions that refer to visual action or function, rather than preserving the explicit body-part imagery.

b) Meanings denoting visual acuity

Ex. 4: 私は最近目が悪くなる。

(My eyesight has been getting worse).

In this example, *me* no longer indicates the act of seeing but instead refers to visual capacity - representing an abstraction from action to ability. Vietnamese translation generally emphasizes degree or capacity, thereby further reducing the bodily imagery.

c) Meanings denoting attention, monitoring, and surveillance

Ex. 5: 道を歩くときは、前方だけでなく、四方にしっかりと目を配って歩かないといけない。

(When walking, one must pay careful attention in all directions).

Ex. 6: 選手の日常の過ごし方にも目を配る。

(Also pay close attention to the athletes' daily routines and lifestyles).

In these contexts, *me o kubaru* (目を配る) expresses attentiveness and vigilant monitoring rather than literal seeing. Ex. 6 from recent newspaper usage confirms that the idiom remains productive in contemporary Japanese [15]. Vietnamese translation may preserve the visual metaphor partially (để mắt, dõi mắt) or use more abstract expressions such as *chú ý*, *theo dõi*, *quan tâm sát sao*.

d) Meanings denoting cognitive ability and evaluation

Ex. 7: 目が高い(to have a discerning eye).

Ex. 8: 私の目に間違いはない。

(My judgment cannot be wrong).

Ex. 9: 彼が優勝することは一目瞭然だった。

(It was obvious that he would win).

Ex. 10: 私は目測を誤った。

(I misjudged / misestimated).

These examples demonstrate how *me* extends from visual perception to encompass cognitive evaluation and judgment. Vietnamese translation generally conveys such meanings through abstract expressions that emphasize cognitive outcomes rather than perceptual processes.

e) Meanings denoting goals and orientation

Ex. 11: ランクが上の学校を目指す。

(to aim for a higher-ranked school).

In this context, *me* expresses goal-oriented direction, reflecting a cognitive metaphor that connects seeing with targeting an objective. Vietnamese generally conveys this meaning through abstract goal-related expressions rather than visual imagery.

f) Meanings denoting facial expression and emotional manifestation

Ex. 12: 周囲から「白い目で見られた」という。

(They say that people around them looked at them with disapproval).

Ex. 13: 愛犬のかわいいうさぎに目を細める。

(to narrow one's eyes affectionately).

These usages conceptualize the eyes as a locus of emotional expression. Ex. 12, attested in contemporary newspaper writing [17], shows that white-eyed looking remains a productive way of expressing social disapproval. In Vietnamese, the bodily imagery may often be preserved effectively because it contributes strongly to the affective tone of the expression.

5.2.2. Semantic Extension through Metonymy

a) *Me* (目) denoting the state of opening/closing the eyes

Ex. 14: これくらいの失敗には目をつぶってやろう。

(Let us overlook mistakes of this degree).

In Ex. 14, *me* extends metonymically from the physical act of closing one's eyes to the attitudinal meaning of overlooking or ignoring something. This reflects a shift from a physiological state to a behavioral stance. In Vietnamese translation, this meaning is typically generalized, reducing the bodily imagery.

b) *Me* (目) denoting spatial and temporal proximity

Ex. 15: 彼は目先の利益のために信用を失った。

(He lost his credibility because he pursued short-term gains).

Ex. 16: 試験を目前に控えて忙しい。

(I am busy preparing for the upcoming examination).

Ex. 15 and Ex. 16 illustrate the metonymic use of *me* to express spatial or temporal closeness, rooted in the association between visual range and "what lies before one's eyes." In Vietnamese, this meaning is commonly rendered through expressions denoting near distance or imminent time, without preserving the visual imagery.

c) *Me* (目) denoting experience

Ex. 17: 知らない人を信用して、ひどい目にあつた。

(I suffered badly because I trusted a stranger).

Ex. 18: いい目を見た。(I had a fortunate experience).

In Ex. 17 and Ex. 18, *me* represents what a person directly undergoes, reflecting a metonymic relationship between perception and lived experience. In Vietnamese translation, this meaning is typically expressed through abstract notions of experience, with the visual image largely omitted.

d) *Me* (目) denoting awakening or realization

Ex. 19: 気もの優しさのおかげで目が覚めたよ、これからは本気で頑張るよ。

(Thanks to your kindness, I have come to my senses; from now on, I will make a serious effort).

Ex. 19 demonstrates a metonymic extension from the act of opening one's eyes to a state of cognitive awakening or realization. In Vietnamese translation, emphasis is placed on the outcome of awareness rather than the underlying physiological state.

e) *Me* (目) denoting parts or abstract concepts based on formal similarity

Me is extended to denote parts of objects and abstract concepts based on formal resemblance to the eye. This

extension relies primarily on two perceptual features: “small and round” and “gap/opening.”

- “Small and round” feature: Expressions such as *nuime* (縫い目, ‘stitch’) and *hakari no me* (はかりの目, ‘scale marking’) derive from similarity to the small, round shape of the eye.

- “Gap/opening” feature: Drawing on the structure of the eye corner, this feature is mapped onto other entities, yielding expressions such as *ami no me* (網の目, ‘mesh’), *nuime* (縫い目, ‘seam’), *goban no me* (碁盤の目, ‘grid point’), *sakaime* (境目, ‘boundary’), and *wakareme* (分かれ目, ‘junction’).

Overall, the metonymic extensions of *me* are grounded primarily in the two perceptual features of “small and round” and “gap/opening.” Vietnamese shows high correspondence in meanings related to physical form (e.g., *mát luóí, lổ kim*) but diverges in more abstract usages, where Vietnamese favors conceptual expressions over bodily imagery.

5.3. Meanings of *me* (目) in Japanese Idiomatic Expressions

In Japanese idioms containing *me* (目, “eye”), this lexeme performs two important semantic-structural functions. First, *me* functions as an independent lexical unit that follows grammatical combination rules and expresses basic meanings related to vision. Second, *me* appears as a fixed component within idiomatic expressions, where it contributes to conventionalized, non-compositional meanings.

As a body-part term denoting the organ of vision, *me* retains its core semantic functions in idioms: seeing and observing, receiving and processing information, and expressing psychological states, attitudes, and emotions. Building upon this foundation, the extended meanings of *me* develop through mechanisms of semantic extension, enriching the expressive potential of Japanese idiomatic expressions.

5.3.1. *Me* (目) Denoting the Act of Looking

a) Denoting the act of looking

Ex. 20: 彼は私の顔を見もしないで、廊下の奥に目を据えたまま淡々と答えたのだった。

(He did not even look at my face, but kept his eyes fixed on the end of the corridor and replied calmly.)

Ex. 21: 今や私たちはこの国の環境の変化に目を注がねばなりません。

(At present, we must pay close attention to environmental changes in this country’).

The two idioms above illustrate typical uses of *me* (目) in Japanese idiomatic expressions. The idiom *me o sueru* (目を据える), which literally means “to set one’s eyes,” conveys the extended meaning of looking steadily or observing attentively over a period of time. In Vietnamese, it is commonly rendered as *nhìn đăm đăm*. Similarly, *me o sosogu* (目を注ぐ), whose literal meaning is “to pour one’s eyes onto,” is semantically extended to denote

concentrated attention or focused observation. Both idioms express a type of gaze characterized by strong attraction and sustained focus on a specific object.

In contrast to acts of concentrated looking, idioms such as *me o somukeru* (目を背ける) and *me o nusumu* (目を盗む) denote actions involving avoidance of gaze or covert observation.

Ex. 22: 子供達は親の目を盗んでおやつを食べていた。

(The children secretly ate snacks behind their parents’ backs.)

Ex. 23: 現実 is 厳しいけれど、目を背けずに努力するしかない。

(Reality is harsh, but we have no choice but to face it and make an effort).

In Ex. 22, the verb *nusumu* (“to steal”) in the idiom *me o nusumu* does not denote literal theft but rather conveys the notion of acting secretly or furtively - doing something while deliberately avoiding others’ notice. This idiom exemplifies the use of *me* to express concealment and evasion of attention. Likewise, in Ex. 23, *me o somukeru* (“to turn one’s eyes away”) is semantically extended to denote avoidance or refusal to face reality, highlighting a more abstract form of evasion through the metaphor of gaze avoidance.

b) *Me* (目) Denoting Vision and Cognitive Capacity

Vision refers to the spatial range within which an individual can observe and recognize objects from a given position. It encompasses everything within reach of one’s eyesight. More broadly, vision also denotes cognitive capacity - the ability to think, perceive, and evaluate an issue comprehensively from multiple perspectives.

Ex. 24: 年末になるたびに故郷の様子が目に浮かぶ。

(Whenever the year draws to a close, images of my hometown come vividly to mind).

The verb *ukabu* (浮かぶ, “to float” or “to rise”) in the idiom *me ni ukabu* (目に浮かぶ) literally means “to appear before one’s eyes.” It evokes the image of something emerging clearly into view. When combined with *me* (目), this expression metaphorically describes how images, memories, or thoughts arise vividly in one’s mind. The idiom denotes mental visualization or recollection, highlighting the close conceptual link between visual perception and cognitive imagery.

Ex. 25: 彼は絵には目が利く。

(He has a keen eye for painting).

Ex. 26: ロンドンの観衆は全世界でも一番気難しく、目が高い観衆だとされている。

(London audiences are considered the most demanding and discerning in the world).

Ex. 26a: 長い目で見る。(to take a long-term view).

Ex. 26b: 長い目で見ると、そういう関係に助けられることのほうが多い。

(In the long run, such relationships are more often helpful than not).

In Ex. 25 and Ex. 26, the idioms *me ga kiku* (目が利く) and *me ga takai* (目が高い) are both rendered in Vietnamese by expressions such as *tinh tường* or *tinh mắt*, denoting sharp perceptual and evaluative ability. However, a closer semantic analysis reveals notable differences in usage. *Me ga kiku* refers to the ability to judge and discern accurately, particularly in distinguishing genuine from fake, right from wrong, or good from bad. By contrast, *me ga takai*, while also denoting refined judgment, is typically used as a compliment directed at others and is not conventionally used for self-reference. This pragmatic distinction reflects subtle differences in how cognitive and evaluative capacities are linguistically encoded through the concept of *me* in Japanese.

The expression *nagai me de miru* (長い目で見ると) deserves separate attention because it extends the notion of visual range onto the temporal axis. Here, *me* no longer refers to the physical organ but to a widened evaluative perspective that does not judge matters only by immediate appearance. In Vietnamese, it can be rendered as *nhìn về lâu dài*, *xét về đường dài*, or *có cái nhìn dài hạn*. Ex. 26b shows that this expression remains active in contemporary public discourse [18].

5.3.2. *Me* (目) Denoting Emotions

a) Emotion of surprise

Ex. 27: お会計で想像以上の金額に2人で目を丸くした。

(The two of us were astonished at the unexpectedly high bill).

The idiom *me o maruku suru* (目を丸くする), literally “to make one’s eyes round,” serves as a figurative expression in Japanese that describes the physical appearance of the eyes during moments of surprise or astonishment. In this context, it captures the speakers’ reaction upon learning that the bill exceeded their expectations. This example demonstrates how Japanese frequently employs bodily imagery to express emotional states.

Ex. 28: 甘いものに目がない。

(I have a weakness for sweets).

The expression *me ga nai* (目がない), literally “to have no eyes,” extends semantically to indicate strong preference or deep affection. The idiom suggests more than mere liking; it conveys intense attachment or fascination to the extent that one disregards flaws or negative characteristics of the object, indicating an uncritical or indiscriminate fondness.

Ex. 29: 彼は人を見る目がないから、誰とでもすぐに仲良くなって、そしてすぐに裏切られる。

(Because he has no eye for judging people, he quickly befriends anyone and is soon betrayed).

In Ex. 29, *me ga nai* conveys cognitive and emotional impairment - specifically, the inability to assess others’ true character. The idiom reflects not only emotional engagement but also a deficiency in evaluative judgment, consistently resulting in adverse consequences for the subject.

b) *Me* (目) Denoting Positive Emotions

Positive emotions encompass mental states such as joy, affection, and tolerance, particularly within social

interactions. These emotions are conveyed through various idioms in everyday usage.

Ex. 30: 日本人だけど、アメリカ生まれのアメリカ育ちなんだから、日本文化に疎くても大目に見てくれないか。

(Although I am Japanese, I was born and raised in the United States, so please be understanding if I am not familiar with Japanese culture).

The adjective *ōme* (大目) indicates generosity, tolerance, and leniency. The idiom *ōme ni miru* (大目に見ると) refers to viewing something with indulgence - being lenient and overlooking minor faults. In this context, *me* conveys a positive, accommodating stance toward others.

Ex. 31: 彼は子供たちが遊ぶ姿を目を細めて見ていた。

(He watched the children playing with a gentle, pleased expression).

The idiom *me o hosomeru* (目を細める), literally “to narrow one’s eyes”, possesses significant emotional depth. In emotional contexts, it conveys contentment, affection, or quiet joy of such intensity that one smiles unconsciously, resulting in naturally narrowed eyes.

c) *Me* (目) Denoting Negative Emotions

Idioms incorporating *me* also express negative emotions such as anger, irritation, jealousy, or hostility.

Ex. 32: 本人が聞けば目を剥くようなことを、彼は涼しげにさりと言ったのだった。

(He casually said things that would make the person concerned flare up in anger if they heard them).

In Ex. 32, the idiom *me o muku* (目を剥く) does not literally mean “to open one’s eyes wide” but instead indicates intense anger expressed through glaring eyes.

Ex. 33: 本人に全く悪気がなかったのだから、目に角を立てることはないのではないかな。

(Since there was no ill intent, there is no need to react so harshly).

6. Discussion

This analysis identifies several important findings regarding the semantic characteristics and extension mechanisms of the Japanese word *me* (目) in comparison to Vietnamese.

Both Japanese and Vietnamese employ the body-part term “eye” (*me/mắt*) as a central cognitive domain. In both languages, *me/mắt* refers not only to the visual organ but also extends through metaphorical and metonymic processes to express abstract concepts such as seeing, attention, monitoring, cognitive capacity, and evaluation. This reflects the universal role of visual cognition in human thought, where “seeing” serves as a primary pathway to “knowing,” “understanding,” and “evaluating.” Many Japanese expressions containing *me* have direct equivalents in Vietnamese, particularly those related to attention, observation, and emotions expressed through gaze.

However, significant differences arise from cognitive and cultural factors. In Japanese, *me* demonstrates broader

semantic extension and greater lexicalization in idiomatic expressions, particularly in abstract meanings related to experience, awakening, realization, and spatial-temporal ordering. These meanings reflect Japanese communicative culture, where visual perception is closely linked with subtle observation, indirect evaluation, and a strong sense of order. Vietnamese, in contrast, reduces the emphasis on the bodily image of the “eye” in abstract meanings and tends to favor conceptual expressions or action verbs, indicating different approaches to conceptualizing experience and constructing meaning.

These differences present challenges in translating idioms and expressions containing *me* into Vietnamese. Literal translation often fails to capture the full semantic and pragmatic values and may lead to obscurity or distortion. Flexible translation strategies are therefore necessary: retaining eye-related imagery when both languages share cognitive similarity; shifting to abstract or conceptual expressions when Vietnamese does not conventionally employ bodily imagery; and adjusting syntactic or stylistic structures to maintain expressive value and communicative function. These strategies highlight that translating *me* is not simply a linguistic operation but a process of mediation between two distinct cognitive and cultural systems.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the semantic characteristics and extension mechanisms of the lexeme *me* (目) in contemporary Japanese through analysis of its lexical meanings, extended meanings, and idiomatic expressions. The results indicate that *me* functions not merely as a designation for the visual organ but as a central semantic node from which diverse meanings emerge via two primary mechanisms: metaphor and metonymy.

Analysis of representative Japanese examples demonstrates that the extended meanings of *me* systematically derive from its foundational meaning associated with vision. Building on this core sense, *me* encodes abstract concepts such as attention, cognitive capacity, evaluation, goal orientation, experience, realization, and affective states. These findings highlight the fundamental role of visual perception in conceptualization and semantic construction within Japanese, illustrating the interconnection between perception, cognition, and linguistic expression.

In Vietnamese translation, the extended meanings of *me* are frequently rendered without recourse to anatomical imagery. Rather, they are abstracted or reconfigured into expressions consistent with Vietnamese linguistic conventions. This observation reflects cross-linguistic variation in preferred modes of meaning expression, notwithstanding potentially shared cognitive foundations underlying semantic extension.

This study provides enhanced understanding of the semantic profile of *me* (目) in Japanese and establishes a theoretical basis for investigating body-part terminology

from a cognitive-semantic perspective. The findings indicate productive avenues for subsequent research on comparable lexical items and carry practical implications for semantic analysis and interpretation in Japanese language pedagogy.

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