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One Sentence – Multiple Meanings

He is giving this money to Herbie.

I never said he ate my cookie.

I didn't say he stole the money.

What is your impression of these three sentences?

They seem to be pretty clear, don't they?

However, if we consider these sentences from the perspective of vocalics (音調学) and stress (音節), we can 'identify' different meanings for each – meanings that emphasize a certain aspect. Let's see how this works.

One of the 'elements' that makes *a native speaker* of any language *a native speaker* is the 'control' of the language that they have. This control appears in all aspects of the language – vocabulary, grammar, sentence length, and so on – but vocalics and stress are two areas that are very important. I often find that Japanese speakers of English have relatively good control of word order, vocabulary choices, and pronunciation, for example ... and yet something is missing. What is often missing is the 'stress control' of the speaking ... this stress control of certain words in the sentence makes *the meaning clear* ... or *a specific meaning clearer*. By controlling the stress of even a single word in an utterance, you can change the overall communicative meaning and clarity of the sentence.

The learning experience here is to read each sentence aloud, with stress on each successive underlined word each time. You should be able to 'sense' a difference in meaning – even though the words are the same and they are offered in the same order.

Sentence One *He is giving this money to Herbie.*

I found this sentence in a communication textbook that I often use: 『コミュニケーション学：その展望と視点』, written by 末田清子 & 福田浩子 and published by 松柏社.

He is giving this money to Herbie.

Means: He is the one who is giving the money to Herbie, not someone else.

He is giving this money to Herbie.

Means: He is not loaning the money to Herbie or anything like that, he is giving the money to him.

He is giving this money to Herbie.

Means: The money that he is giving to Herbie is this money, not some other money.

He is giving this money to Herbie.

Means: It is money that he is giving to Herbie, not something else.

He is giving this money to Herbie.

Means: He is giving the money to Herbie, not to someone else.

Sentence Two *I never said he ate my cookie.*

Remember – you have to read the sentence aloud seven times, placing stress on each successive word each time. If you don't do it aloud, you won't 'sense' the difference. In addition, you have to 'imagine' the situation that would lead to the word being stressed ... imagination is very important in learning vocalics.

1. Emphasis on 'I' *I never said he ate my cookie.*

- "I never said it ... someone else may have said it, but not me."

2. Emphasis on 'never' *I never said he ate my cookie.*

- indicates that the speaker may be accused of being a liar ...

- "Are you saying that I said that? No, no, no! I never said such a thing!"

3. Emphasis on 'said' *I never said he ate my cookie.*

- "I may have implied it by saying that my cookie had mysteriously disappeared and he was the only one in the room, but I never directly 'said' in the exact words that he ate it."

4. Emphasis on 'he' *I never said he ate my cookie.*

- "The cookie is gone ... someone ate it ... but I am not saying that he is the one who ate it ... I mean, it might have been someone else."

5. Emphasis on 'ate' *I never said he ate my cookie.*

- "I know he doesn't like cookies, but I know that he is responsible – maybe he threw it out the window or something."

6. Emphasis on 'my' *I never said he ate my cookie.*

- "Yea, all the cookies are gone except for the one with my name on it. - Yea, he ate all the cookies, but he never touched my cookie."

7. Emphasis on 'cookie' *I never said he ate my cookie.*

- "Yes ... I am accusing him of eating my chocolate bars, my apple, and my yogurt. But, he didn't touch my favorite item - the cookie."

There are many examples of this that can be found on the internet:

Sentence Three comes from the Voice of America Learning English site;

I didn't say he stole the money. it is the same pattern as Sentence Two, with different content
<<https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/a-simple-sentence-with-seven-meanings/4916769.html>>

Another example comes from the British Council.

<https://africa.teachingenglish.org.uk/classroom/pronunciation/same-sentence-different-meaning>

I asked you to buy two kilograms of sweet potatoes!

who:	<u>I asked, she</u> didn't ask.
what:	<u>I asked</u> you politely; I didn't <u>order</u> you.
who:	I asked <u>you</u> to buy them, not <u>your brother</u> .
what/how:	I asked you to <u>buy</u> the potatoes, not to <u>steal</u> them.
how much/many:	I asked you to buy <u>two</u> kilograms, not <u>three</u> .
how much:	I asked you to buy two <u>kilograms</u> , not two <u>potatoes</u> .
what kind:	I asked you to buy <u>sweet</u> potatoes, not <u>white</u> potatoes.
what:	I asked you to buy <u>sweet potatoes</u> , not <u>sweet onions</u> .

Remember that you can combine the two parts: the *original sentence* – with the stress – and the *follow-up part* – again, with the stress. This makes your meaning even more clear. For example:

I asked you to buy two kilograms of sweet potatoes ... she didn't ask.
I asked you to buy two kilograms of sweet potatoes ... I didn't order you.
I asked you to buy two kilograms of sweet potatoes ... not to steal them.
I asked you to buy two kilograms of sweet potatoes ... not white potatoes.

Finally, ... another interesting aspect of 'playing around' with stress is that it clearly reveals the different sentence structure between Japanese and English.

Step 1: Find or create a sentence with sufficient complexity that allows for several 'stress' options. This can be either in Japanese or in English.

Step 2: Try the sentence out with the different stress variations so that you can understand what the stress pattern means and how it might be different from the meaning in a simple or flat reading.

Step 3: Put those meanings into the other language – *Japanese to English* or *English to Japanese* – and notice how it mixes the sentence patterns up. And remember: have fun doing it.

Finally (2) ... if you have any comments or questions about 'anything English', hurry up and mail me at
<telesaomori[at]gmail.com>

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