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Concept-based Language Instruction: Usage-based Linguistics and Sociocultural Theory in Teaching Japanese.

By **Kyoko Masuda, Amy Snyder Ohta, and Rie Tsujihara.** New York: Routledge, 2025. 311 pp. $51.99.

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Concept-based Language Instruction: Usage-based Linguistics and Sociocultural Theory in Teaching Japanese challenges the conventional rule-based approach to teaching Japanese grammar and pragmatics by proposing that grammar and pragmatics should be understood not as collections of rules to be memorized, but as components of a meaning-motivated conceptual system. Rather than emphasizing the mastery of isolated grammatical forms, the volume advocates concept-based language instruction (C-BLI), an approach that supports learners' meaning-making through conceptual understanding. Central to this perspective is the recognition that Japanese conceptualizes experience differently from languages such as English. This conceptual orientation is illustrated through the distinction between *objective construal* and *subjective construal* (p. 8), a foundational concept that underlies many of the grammatical and pragmatic phenomena discussed throughout the volume.

The volume's theoretical framework integrates usage-based linguistics and Vygotskian sociocultural theory. The authors note that their shared focus on meaning-making makes usage-based linguistics "a natural partner" (p. 12) for sociocultural theory. Within concept-based language instruction, the two perspectives play complementary roles. Usage-based linguistics provides the linguistic foundation by explaining grammar and pragmatics as meaning-motivated conceptual systems, while sociocultural theory offers a theory of learning that emphasizes mediation, concept

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formation, and the gradual internalization of conceptual knowledge through instruction and social interaction. Together, these two perspectives explain both what should be taught and how conceptual understanding can be developed in the Japanese language classroom.

This volume consists of twelve chapters formally organized into three parts: Part I, "Concept-based language instruction: A radical blending of theory and practice" (Chapters 1-2); Part II, "Using concept-based language instruction to teach Japanese pragmatics" (Chapters 3-6); and Part III, "Using concept-based language instruction to teach Japanese grammar" (Chapters 7-12). As noted in the overview at the end of Chapter 1, Chapters 1-3 in particular provide the foundation for the volume. These three chapters explain what C-BLI aims to accomplish, the theoretical perspectives on which it is based, and how these theoretical principles can be applied to classroom instruction. They also introduce the major pedagogical tools and procedures of C-BLI, including the use of Schemas for the Complete Orienting Basis of an Action (SCOBAs).

Part I lays the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of C-BLI. Chapter 1 introduces the central concept and motivation of C-BLI, as mentioned above, and provides an explanation of usage-based linguistics and sociocultural theory as its theoretical background. It illustrates conceptual differences between English and Japanese as objective construal and subjective construal by presenting their different construal patterns in several examples, such as "Where am I" in English and "*koko wa doko*" [Here TOP where] 'Where is here?' in Japanese, noting that, whereas English typically construes the self as an object viewed from outside the scene, Japanese tends to merge the self with the scene, leaving it unexpressed (p. 11). To visualize those differences and materialize them for explanation and class instruction, the authors introduce Schemas for the Complete Orienting Basis of an Action (SCOBAs) in Chapter 1. SCOBAs materialize such abstract linguistic and cultural concepts in visual forms such as diagrams, drawings, and flow charts, providing learners with mediational tools for understanding and making language choices. Chapter 2 further develops this pedagogical framework by focusing on *languaging* and the internalization of conceptual knowledge. Rather than simply providing explicit explanations, this chapter presents internalization tasks through which learners verbalize and re-verbalize concepts to themselves and others by using and creating SCOBAs in various ways. Through this iterative process, learners gradually move from reliance on external mediation toward independent use of the concepts.

Thus, SCOBAs are not ends in themselves but tools that support the internalization of conceptual knowledge and, ultimately, learners' ability to make meaning-based choices in Japanese.

Part II turns to the teaching of Japanese pragmatics. Chapter 3 establishes the foundation for this section by emphasizing that grammatical and lexical accuracy alone do not necessarily result in effective communication. To explain this, the authors present two types of knowledge essential for effective communication: *sociopragmatic knowledge*, which enables learners to understand the societal and contextual expectations underlying how and why language is used in particular ways, and *pragmalinguistic knowledge*, which enables them to select appropriate lexical and grammatical resources to express their intentions in context (p. 35). Developing these two dimensions of pragmatic knowledge poses a particular challenge for classroom instruction, where pragmatics is often neglected and instruction tends to rely on native-speaker norms (NS norms) as models of appropriate language use. C-BLI challenges this reliance on prescribed norms by making the conceptual knowledge underlying pragmatic choices explicit and available to learners. Through the internalization of such concepts, learners are expected not simply to reproduce how native speakers use language, but to develop the ability to make their own context-sensitive choices in expressing intended meanings.

Building on the framework established in Chapter 3, Chapters 4-6 demonstrate how C-BLI can be applied to three particularly important areas of Japanese pragmatics, presenting SCOBAs that can be readily adapted for classroom use. Chapter 4, "Japanese style-shifting through concepts," addresses politeness and style shifting, showing how speakers' choices among speech styles can be understood conceptually rather than as fixed rules associated with particular social relationships or situations. Chapter 5, "Teaching subjective construal and interactional particles as invaluable linguistic resources in Japanese conversation," focuses on interactional particles, such as *yo*, *ne*, and *yone*, and the ways in which they function as resources for managing meaning and interaction in Japanese conversation. Chapter 6, "Teaching thanking in Japanese: A conceptual approach to speech acts," turns to expressions of gratitude, illustrating how a range of linguistic resources for thanking can be understood and selected according to the interactional context. Throughout these chapters, visually engaging SCOBAs translate otherwise abstract pragmatic concepts into materials that appear readily usable in the

classroom. The chapters also report classroom applications and research findings, providing empirical illustrations of how learners respond to and develop through concept-based instruction.

Part III extends C-BLI to the teaching of Japanese grammar, demonstrating how seemingly distinct grammatical phenomena can be understood through underlying conceptual patterns, particularly differences in construal and speaker perspective. Chapters 7-11 each examine a different area of Japanese grammar through conceptual patterns involving construal and speaker perspective. Chapter 12 concludes the volume.

Chapter 7 begins with the motion verbs *iku* 'go' and *kuru* 'come,' including their use as auxiliary verbs. This foundational topic helps learners examine how Japanese and English differ in the perspective from which motion is construed. Chapter 8 turns to Japanese benefactives, including *ageru*, *kureru*, and *morau*, whose use involves a more complex interaction among subjective and objective construal, speaker perspective, and *uchi/soto* relationships. Chapter 9 addresses tense and aspect, conceptualizing grammatical choices in terms of how speakers locate and construe events in time rather than through simple correspondences with English tense forms. Chapter 10 examines the Japanese causative, drawing particularly on findings from corpus studies to move beyond conventional explanations based on English equivalents such as *make* and *let* and to capture the range of meanings found in actual language use. Chapter 11 turns to the Japanese passive, focusing on the concept of "undergoing" and the speaker's perspective in construing an event from the standpoint of an affected participant. Across the five chapters, the authors provide visually accessible SCOBAs and classroom applications that demonstrate how grammatical forms often taught as separate sets of rules can instead be understood as manifestations of broader conceptual patterns.

Among these practice-oriented chapters, Chapter 5 offers a representative example of how C-BLI is implemented in practice. Rather than presenting *yo*, *ne*, and *yone* as a set of rules, the chapter conceptualizes these interactional particles in relation to subjective construal and the perspectives of the interlocutors and represents these relationships visually through SCOBAs, using circles and arrows to illustrate how attention is directed and shared in interaction (pps. 79, 82). Learners use the SCOBAs not simply as explanatory diagrams but as mediational tools for verbalizing the concepts, considering their own particle choices, and applying them in conversation. The chapter then

compares learner conversations before and after instruction, showing changes in how learners used the interactional particles, although the extent and nature of their development varied across individuals.

Chapter 12 concludes the volume by considering both the potential and the challenges of moving C-BLI forward. While the studies presented throughout the volume demonstrate its potential to support language development, the authors also emphasize variability in learners' developmental trajectories and acknowledge the practical challenges involved in implementing concept-based instruction. In particular, C-BLI requires teachers to move beyond reliance on textbook explanations, engage with research on language use, and develop or adapt conceptual materials appropriate to their own learners and instructional contexts. The authors therefore call for greater collaboration among teachers, researchers, curriculum developers, and materials designers, envisioning C-BLI not as a fixed instructional method but as an evolving framework supported by a broader "community of praxis."

One of the volume's most significant contributions is the shift in perspective it brings to Japanese language pedagogy. Japanese grammar has traditionally been taught as a collection of individual forms, conjugation patterns, and rules of usage, which can leave learners—and sometimes teachers—with what appears to be a patchwork of explanations for seemingly unrelated grammatical phenomena. C-BLI offers a fundamentally different perspective: rather than beginning with linguistic forms and rules, it directs learners' attention to underlying conceptual patterns, particularly construal and speaker perspective. As the chapters on grammar demonstrate, phenomena as diverse as motion verbs, benefactives, tense and aspect, causatives, and passives begin to make greater sense when viewed through these conceptual patterns. Importantly, this shift does not require teachers to abandon their existing textbooks or curricula. Because C-BLI provides a conceptual framework for understanding and teaching language rather than a prescribed sequence of grammatical items, its principles and materials can be incorporated into a variety of existing Japanese language courses.

A second major contribution of C-BLI is its potential to foster learner autonomy and agency. As Chapter 2 emphasizes, SCOBAs are not intended to remain teacher-provided explanatory tools. Through *languaging*, repeated application, and eventually the creation or modification of SCOBAs themselves, learners gradually internalize the concepts and become increasingly capable of applying them

independently to new contexts. This process also fundamentally changes the role of the teacher. As the authors note, "A task of the teacher is to figure out how much time is needed, the kinds of tasks that will help students to internalize the concepts taught, and the nature of language practice needed both to further internalization and to promote proceduralization of declarative knowledge" (p. 31). The teacher's role, then, is not simply to provide correct forms and explanations or model appropriate language use, but to guide learners through the processes of internalization and proceduralization, creating the conditions under which they can gradually make their own meaning-based linguistic choices. In this sense, C-BLI ultimately seeks to develop learners into autonomous language agents who can make their own informed linguistic choices rather than relying on prescribed linguistic models.

A related and potentially far-reaching contribution of C-BLI is its challenge to the goals and assessment practices traditionally shaped by native-speaker norms. In the concluding chapter, the authors explicitly argue, "We need to re-think the goals that drive our instruction, classroom assessment, and testing procedures, to eliminate reliance on idealized native-speaker norms" (p. 273), calling for an "ideological shift" in the assessment of Japanese language development. This proposal follows logically from C-BLI's emphasis on conceptual understanding and learner agency. If the goal of instruction is to enable learners to understand the conceptual resources of Japanese and use them to make context-sensitive choices, successful language development cannot be measured simply by the extent to which learners reproduce idealized native-speaker usage. Assessment must instead recognize learners' developing ability to understand meanings, evaluate contextual possibilities, and make informed linguistic choices. Such a shift may also have important implications for non-native-speaking teachers of Japanese, whose linguistic judgments need not depend exclusively on native-speaker intuition. In this respect, C-BLI invites a broader reconsideration of linguistic expertise and authority in Japanese language education.

At the same time, the flexibility and conceptual depth of C-BLI may present practical challenges for classroom implementation. Because conceptual explanations and SCOBAs are not necessarily available in conventional textbooks, teachers who wish to incorporate C-BLI into their courses may need to go beyond the materials they normally use. As the authors themselves acknowledge in Chapter 12, developing concept-based instruction requires teachers to engage with research on language use,

identify the concepts underlying particular linguistic phenomena, and develop or adapt SCOBAs and other instructional materials for their own learners and teaching contexts. This process may be demanding, particularly for instructors who have limited backgrounds in linguistics or limited time for materials development. The volume itself, however, goes some way toward addressing this challenge. The practice-oriented chapters provide numerous visually accessible SCOBAs that appear readily adaptable for classroom use, and the authors indicate that SCOBAs developed for the volume will be made freely available as open-source materials. Together with their call for a broader "community of praxis," in which teachers, researchers, curriculum developers, and materials designers collaborate and share resources, such efforts may help make C-BLI more accessible and sustainable for classroom practitioners.

Finally, the value of C-BLI may lie not in replacing other approaches to language instruction but in expanding teachers' pedagogical repertoires. As the authors themselves acknowledge, learners vary in how they respond to and develop through concept-based instruction. The highly visual and conceptual nature of SCOBAs may be particularly accessible to some learners, while others may benefit from different forms of explanation or practice. Such variability need not be viewed as a limitation of C-BLI. Rather, C-BLI provides teachers with an additional set of conceptual and pedagogical tools that can be used selectively and adapted to particular learners and instructional contexts. In this sense, the volume expands the range of choices available not only to learners, who develop greater agency in making linguistic choices, but also to teachers, who gain additional ways of making complex aspects of Japanese meaningful and accessible.