

What Is the Heart Made of?: An Analysis of a Phrase "Kokoro-ga Orer-u"

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the Japanese expression "kokoro-ga orer-u," which literally means "(my) heart collapses" (mentally, not medically) in English.

(1) Kokoro-nai netto-no kakikomi-ni, kokoro-ga ore-sooni-naru-koto-mo
heart less internet-GEN posting-DAT heart-NOM break almost become thing also
atta.
there was

'There was (a time when my) heart almost collapsed due to heartless postings on the internet.'
(Yomiuri Online 2015)

Mori (2011) indicates that the phrase started to be used more frequently in 2011, when many people were suffering from the Great East Japan Earthquake.

I will first discuss how this phrase became widely used, and talk about how it is used based on the data I collected. I also discuss how a heart is conceptualized based on the survey I conducted.

2. The Phrase "Kokoro-ga orer-u"

2.1 The "Original" Meaning

A playwright and novelist Kido Okamoto wrote "kokoro-ga ore-te" in his novel "Osakabe-hime" in 1920, and a novelist Ryunosuke Akutagawa used the expression "kokoro-ga ore-ta" in his novel "Koshoku" in 1921. The expressions both meant "you turn your feelings towards the other person," and Nakagawa (2013) indicates that *Nihon Kokugo Dai-jiten 2nd edition* lists "kokoro orer-u," which is first used in this meaning in 1714.

2.2 How the Phrase Was Used in Another Sense and Became Popular

The expression is, however, now used in a different sense; it means that you are discouraged enormously and feel like you cannot recover easily. Nakagawa (2013) indicates that this phrase was first used by Shinobu Kandori, a female professional wrestler, in 1987 in her interview. He also says that this phrase was included in a book by Ida (1990), which deals with female professional wrestling. This is regarded as the first example that was published. Kandori associated the phrase with an expression "hone-o or-u (break a bone)," and in the certain match, she didn't want to break a bone in her opponent's arm, but instead wanted to inflict psychological damage and cause intense fear, which led the expression "kokoro-o or-u" (cf. Nakagawa 2013). The new meaning, therefore, is more about losing

motivation and the spirit of fighting in a certain situation, and more widely, experiencing a serious setback.

Nakagawa (2013) says that this new meaning was included in the dictionary *Dai-jirin 3rd edition* in 2006, and Mori (2011) shows how many articles in Asahi, Yomiuri, Mainichi and Sankei newspapers used the expression, though he doesn't show the exact numbers of the articles:

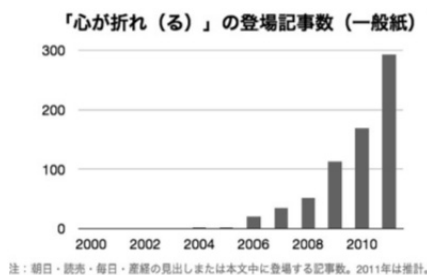


Figure 1: The number of articles that use "kokoro-ga ore(r-u)" in the newspapers (Mori 2011)¹

He also indicates that sport papers started to use the expression earlier in 2002-2003, especially in articles about combat sports. The number of books on athletes and their efforts has increased since 2009, and people started to be exposed to this expression.



Figure 2: The number of published books whose titles with "kokoro-ga orer-u" (Nakagawa 2013)

3. The Way the Phrase Is Used: From Data

3.1 From the Corpus Data

In the Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese (BCCWJ), which was conducted by National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL) and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), there are eleven examples that used the phrase "kokoro-ga ore-."

- (2) Omake-ni choo-no-tsuku mukai-kaze, ooro-no koohan-wa
 moreover extra-GEN added against wind outbound-GEN latter-half-TOP
 chigau-imi-de kokoro-ga or-e-mashita...
 different meaning-INST heart-NOM collapsed

'Moreover, (my) heart collapsed in the latter-half of the outward (of the race) by super strong wind that blew against me.'

As the Corpus is composed of data from 1971 to 2008, not many examples are discovered. All the examples are written in 2008, and ten out of eleven are found in Yahoo Blog site.

One interesting finding is that the actual expressions were that the five of them state "kokoro-ga or-e-soo," and one "kokoro-ga or-e-kakat-ta," which both mean "(my) heart almost collapses" or "(my) heart was in the process of collapsing." People tend to use this expression when they are in a severe situation, but are trying to hang in there.

3.2 From the Data on Google News Search Engine

As of September 13, 2016, there are approximately 6,840 examples of the phrase in news articles on Google Search. Not many examples accompany adverbs, but some do as shown below:

(3) Kono-mama-de-wa kokoro-ga pokit-to ore-te-shimai...
this state-INST-TOP heart-NOM snap collapse end
'If this goes on, (my) heart would snap and collapse...'

(4) Kokoro-ga pokkiri ore-te-shimat-ta.
heart-NOM snap collapse end
'(My) heart has snapped.'

These examples show that people see the heart as something "snappable," which suggests a certain metaphor is involved.

4. What Is the Heart Made of?: From a Survey

In order to find out what image people call up for "the heart," a survey was conducted to 63 Japanese university students in July 2016, 17 of whom are female, and all in their teens and twenties.

When they were asked what image they have for the heart in general, the most popular answer (14 subjects, 22.22%) was "glass," and the runner-up was "a container" (13 subjects, 20.63%). Many subjects conceptualized the heart either something fragile/transparent (the answer "ice" might also be in this category), or a container, in which one puts something. The rest conceptualized the heart something soft and fluffy (e.g., a cloud and cotton candy, and although a soap bubble is not fluffy, its softness might count) or something round (e.g., a soap bubble and a ball). Although 12.7% of them recall an axis, they rather shed a light on a side of the meaning of "centerness" or "coreness" of an axis in this case, not "pointed" or "rod-shaped" side; so that objects (e.g., a stick and a twig) are not easily called up.

Table 1. What image they have for the heart (in general)

what they imagined	glass	con- tain- er	soap bubble	axis	ice	cloud	other	cotton candy/ flower/ wing	ball/ me- ringue/ etc. ²
%	22.22	20.63	15.87	12.70	9.52	7.94	6.35	4.76 (each)	1.59 (each)

(multiple answers are allowed)

Then the subjects were asked if they had heard an expression "kokoro-ga orer-u," in which more than 92.06% of them answered they had and 3.17% of them perhaps they had. 69.84% of the subjects said they even had used the expression before, and 15.87% said they probably had. 9.52% answered that they fully understood the expression, and 41.27% somewhat understood it. 9.52% argued that they were somewhat uncomfortable with the phrase, 1.59% very uncomfortable. 4.76% claimed they were completely convinced of the phrase, 3.17% somewhat convinced. Only 4.76% claimed that they did not understand the expression.

Having been confirmed that most subjects are familiar with the expression, they were again asked what image they have for the heart. At this stage, their answers differed. The most popular answer turned to "a stick" and "glass" (both 14 subjects, 22.22%). Though "glass" is one of the most popular answers, rod-shaped objects (e.g., a stick, a twig, an axis, and a bone) are now obviously easily called up, and other images (e.g., a soap bubble, a container and a cloud) became much more difficult to imagine. When one considers that the subjects are given the same choices as answers for these questions, this change is remarkable.

Table 2. What image they have for the heart (after they thought about the phrase "kokoro-ga orer-u")

what they imagined	stick/ glass	twig/ axis	soap bubble / bone	con- tain- er/ ice	willow twig	cotton candy	ball/ Chitose/ other	grass/ flower/ etc. ³
%	22.22 (each)	14.29 (each)	9.52 (each)	7.94 (each)	6.35 (each)	4.76	3.17 (each)	1.59 (each)

(multiple answers are allowed)

Lastly, the subjects were asked how the heart would "collapse." They most likely describe the situation "pokin" or "pokiri" (snap, crack), which is a sound of breaking a dry stick, and 52.38% of the subjects chose the word. The next word that was chosen was "pari" or "parin" (crack, clink) the sound or the mode/manner when a rice cracker or glass was broken, which 25.40% of the subjects found appropriate. "Boki," the sound or the manner of a bone breaking (crack), collects the nods of 20.63% of the subjects. This is not surprising as some subjects conceptualize the heart as a bone, and Kandori herself thought she'd break the opponent's heart instead of her bone; there surely existed a metaphor

involved when the expression was born.

"Kunya'," the word for a manner that something bends without resistance just like a soft object such as a cloth gathered the least favor, which shows that the subjects consider the heart as something solid, and one would feel some resistance when it collapses. In that sense, an object like a steel rod is surely not a good example, as it would only bend and not break when one tries to ruin it.

Table 3. How does the heart "orer-u" (break)?

what they imagined	pokin, pokiri	pari', parin	boki'	other	kunya'
%	52.38	25.40	20.63	7.94	3.17

As a whole, it is safe to say that the subjects conceptualize the heart as something solid when it comes to the phrase, and it shows when they are asked about the manner the heart collapses.

5. The Relation to Metaphor

As I have briefly discussed before, this phrase was born related to metaphor. Mori (2011) discusses the heart has many shapes as one can see it by looking at a variety of idiomatic phrases in Japanese that deal with the heart. For example, "kokoro-ga hazum-u" ('the heart bounces') conceptualize the heart as something bouncy, such as a ball. "kokoro-ga odor-u" ('the heart dances') even personifies the heart. Therefore, it is rather natural that the heart could be conceptualized in different ways. One could argue that there is room to coin a metaphoric phrase that involves the heart.

This paper has argued that the heart is conceptualized as an axis-like object. Then how does this axis operate as a metaphor? An axis could support a person to deal with their lives. It makes us stand up straight and keep our head up high, and cope with situations we all face every single day. Then what would happen if this "inner stick" or axis breaks? One would lose that support and collapse. That would be an image of "kokoro-ga orer-u," and that would lead to an image of someone "collapsing to their knees, and not being able to stand up." It involves the metaphor that imagines "a human being is a long and thin object," and "a human being is supported by an inner stick that holds us up." This core is called "the heart," that enables us to fight against difficulties, but when it is attacked repeatedly, it collapses. This image also reveals how severe our modern society is and how we feel we need support, which might be a reason why more people started to use this expression. This also explains why more books titled "or-e-nai kokoro-o tsukur-u" ('build a heart that won't collapse') have been published in recent years (cf. Nakagawa 2013). As long as we sustain this image of contemporary society and how to lead our life, it is expected that this expression will spread even more widely.

6. Conclusion

The way the phrase "kokoro-ga orer-u" is used has changed over the course of time, and the data and the survey results reveal how people conceptualize "the heart." Metaphor is involved in the expression and it also reflects how we see the society we live in and how we cope with everyday life. The heart is inside ourselves and it supports us like an axis, hence it would collapse when difficulties

overwhelm us. Expressions reflect reality, which compose their semantics in addition to their linguistic meanings.

Abbreviations

DAT: dative particle

GEN: genitive marker

INST: instrumental marker

NOM: nominative marker

TOP: topic particle

Notes

¹ The number of 2011 is estimated.

² Etc. include stick, finger, grass, willow twig, and a Chitose stick candy, a stick of candy that three-year-old and seven-year-old girls and five-year-old boys eat at their "Seven-Five-Three Festival."

³ Etc. include a steel rod, and wings.

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Data (in the order of appearances)

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Survey

The survey was conducted in July 2016. It was explicitly stated on the survey sheet that the collected data would only be used for the research, and if the subjects did not wish their data be used, they were asked to check the provided column so their data would be excluded.