

Understanding Japanese culture through a semantic analysis of *kawaii* 'cute', *itai* 'pitiful' and *ita-kawaii* 'pitifully trying to be cute'

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This paper examines three Japanese words kawaii 'cute', itai 'pitiful' and ita-kawaii 'pitifully trying to be cute'. Japanese women frequently say kawaii to show positive feelings toward objects or people. However, too much kawaii is considered undesirable. A compound word, ita-kawaii, is used to describe women who dress or wear make-up in an overly kawaii way. Especially when older women try to look kawaii, they are criticised as itai, or ita-kawaii. From a linguistic perspective, kawaii, itai, and ita-kawaii are not lexicalised in other languages. Although the kawaii phenomenon has been thoroughly discussed by many scholars, there has been no rigorous semantic analysis for the three words. In this study, the framework of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach was applied to explicate the exact meaning of kawaii, itai, and ita-kawaii. The corpus was information about the paraphernalia provided for Japanese women who are between school age and middle age. The analysis indicates that the meaning of itai and ita-kawaii is related to the social norm which criticises someone for being conceited. The kawaii and ita-kawaii syndrome reveals a Japanese cultural characteristic which enforces people not to be out of place in society.

1. Introduction

Kawaii is a frequently used word to describe attributes of young Japanese women. Roughly speaking, it portrays something which is small, delicate, and immature (McVeigh 1996, 2000; Allison 2006; Kawamura 2006; Burdelski & Matsumoto 2010). A reason for the frequent use is the clear and emphatic differences between gender roles in Japan (Shibamoto 1985; Ide 1990; Nakamura 2001; Yukawa & Saito 2004; Sugimoto 2010). These roles are reinforced by media and advertising material which advises young women on how to dress and behave *kawaii*, and encourages them to buy *kawaii* goods (Skov

& Moeran 1995). Japanese women learn the importance of being *kawaii* at an early stage in their education. School bags and stationery are designed to be *kawaii*. Japanese mothers have recipe books explaining how to prepare *kawaii* lunches for their daughter to take to school. Some high schools attract student enrolments by their uniforms being *kawaii*. Also the stylistic modification of written characters using *maru moji* 'round letters' is popular among school girls wishing to be *kawaii* in their writing (Kataoka 1997; Miller 2004). As many scholars suggest, *kawaii* is a central aspect of Japanese material and popular culture in schools and society (Kinsella 1995; McVeigh 1996, 2000; Madge 1997; Clancy 1999; Allison 2006; Kawamura 2006; Tobin 2006; Yano 2009).

However, too much *kawaii* is considered inappropriate. An adjective *itai* 'pitiful' is used among young people to criticise others who are conceited. Accordingly a compound word *ita-kawaii* 'pitifully trying to be cute' is observed in describing people who dress or wear make-up in an overly *kawaii* way. Especially when older women try to look *kawaii*, they are labelled as *ita-kawaii*.

Cross-cultural psychologists point out that one language may have a word for an emotion that is not lexicalised in other languages, and lexicons of emotions are culture-specific folk taxonomies (Wierzbicka 1992, 1994, 1999; Kitayama & Matsuda 1995; Russell & Sato 1995). Sakurai (2009) observes that *kawaii* is presently being used in western countries without translation as there is no exact equivalent expression in other languages. In fact, *kawaii* is more amplified in Japan in comparison to *cute* in English-speaking societies. While English speakers may use the word *cute* as a compliment and for other social actions, scholars suggest that in Japan *kawaii* is tied to empathy and relationships (Burdelski & Mitsuhashi 2010). Similarly, the meaning of *itai* cannot be translated simplistically. The usage of *itai* is relatively new (Haramura 2010), and the meaning has not been fully examined. However, although it implies one's negative judgment towards an overly cute person, there is no exact translation of *ita-kawaii*. The question arises as to what characteristics *kawaii* represents, and what attributes are criticised as *itai* and *ita-kawaii*. For Western scholars seeking to understand this phenomenon, direct translation of *kawaii*, *itai*, and *ita-kawaii* into English is not possible or semantically appropriate. There is a need for a semantic analysis based on its usage by Japanese speakers and writers. This is the purpose of the following paper.

2. Methodology

The corpus comprises publicly available information about paraphernalia provided for Japanese women who are between school age and middle age.

These include uniforms, bags, stationery, and advices on make-up, fashion and hair styles. The design and marketing of the paraphernalia are primarily targeted at Japanese female youth. The content of the media and advertisements expresses much of the meaning and significance of *kawaii*, *itai* and *ita-kawaii* in Japanese society.

This analysis adopts the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to explicate the meaning (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, 2002, 2010, in press; Wierzbicka 1996, 2006, 2010; Peeters 2006; Goddard 2008, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). The framework is based on the assumption that fundamental human concepts are innate and therefore they should not differ from one language to another. Otherwise, speakers of different languages would not fully understand each other, being restricted to different and incommensurable conceptual systems. Assuming that languages all have irreducible semantic cores, it follows that we should be able to describe complex meanings in terms of simpler ones. That is to say, lexical semantic analysis can be made by means of an exact paraphrase composed of simpler words than the original. This method of semantic description is called reductive paraphrase. It solves the problems of circularity and terminological obscurity, which are often observed in conventional dictionaries, language textbooks and in approaches to linguistic semantics. Nearly 40 years of cross-linguistic semantic research have led Wierzbicka and colleagues to propose a set of 65 universal and culture-independent concepts such as I, YOU, KNOW, THINK, SEE, WHEN, and BECAUSE. These concepts are called “semantic primes” because they represent innate meanings that are fundamental to human thought. They are indefinable, their meanings so basic that they cannot be broken down any further.¹

Although meanings are described solely by use of semantic primes, NSM researchers recognise that some explications necessarily incorporate certain complex semantic units. These are termed “semantic molecules” which are ultimately decomposable into semantic primes (Goddard 2012a; Wierzbicka & Goddard in press). For instance, semantic explications for words like ‘sparrow’ and ‘eagle’ include ‘bird’ as a semantic molecule. The cognitive claim is that the concept of ‘sparrow’ includes and depends on the concept of ‘bird’. In this case, the relationship is taxonomic: ‘sparrows’ and ‘eagles’ are both ‘birds [m] of one kind’ (molecules are marked in explications with the notation [m]). Whether or not a given word-meaning is a semantic molecule is an empirical issue, and it is not arbitrary or a matter of convenience. The sole criterion is semantic necessity, and this can only be determined by detailed semantic analysis.

¹ See Appendix for the semantic primes in their English and Japanese version.

The NSM approach provides syntactic rules for combining primes. NSM hypothesizes that certain patterns of combined primes are found universally. For instance, given the primes SOMEONE, SOMETHING, SAY, BAD, and YOU, it is assumed that in any language one can put them together to express the meaning “Someone said something bad about you”. That is, the resulting sentences have the form of simple clauses which have equivalents in all other languages; the same is not true of language-specific, complex sentences such as participial constructions, relative clauses, or nominalizations. Using simple syntactic patterns, it is possible, within the framework of the NSM approach, to define words and identify the meanings encoded in them. The method has applications in intercultural communication, lexicography, language teaching, studies of child language acquisition, legal semantics, and other areas.

In the following section, previous explications of *kawaii* are presented and illustrated by text from the corpora. These are the subject of the analysis process. Then examples of *itai* and *ita-kawaii* demonstrate how these words are used in order to identify the meaning of each.

3. The Analysis and Results

3.1 Analysis of *kawaii*

There is agreement among scholars that originally, *kawaii* was used to describe things which are ‘small’ (Madge 1997; Allison 2006; Yomota 2006; Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 2010; Yano 2011). As Yomota (2006) says, *kawaii* is deeply rooted in Japanese traditional aesthetics which appreciates the beauty of small things. As noted in Burdelski and Mitsuhashi (2010), a renowned writer in the late 990s to early 1000s, Sei Syounagon described that ‘all small things are most adorable’ (Morris 1991: 168). Yano (2011: 26) also says ‘smallness carries significant cultural weight as a direct link to *kawaii*’. There is linguistic evidence to illustrate this point. See the following advertisement from an on-line school bag shop (Rakuten Itiba 2012a):

(1) *Ooki sugiru randoseru tte kawaikunai!! to omoimasen ka?*

‘Don’t you think that a school bag which is too big is not *kawaii*?’

As demonstrated in (1), if the size of the school bag is too big, it is not considered *kawaii* and accordingly does not attract customers.

The next point to be discussed is the emotions which *kawaii* signifies. It has been noted that *kawaii* is linked to the positive emotion of affection (McVeigh

1996; Madge 1997; Hjorth 2005; Allison 2006; Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 2010). McVeigh (1996: 291) states that *kawaii* “merges meekness, admiration, and attachment with benevolence, tenderness, and sympathy”. McVeigh also notes that to be *kawaii* “triggers a sympathetic response in another, leading to an emotional involvement and perhaps an attachment” (1996: 300-301). That is, *kawaii* needs to have a visual impact which causes a favourable emotion to the person who witnesses it. The emotion is quite strong as one often can’t help uttering ‘*kawaii*’. Consider the following advertisement for stationery aimed at students (Yamada Stationery 2012):

- (2) *Omowazu 'kawaii' to ittesimaitakunaru bungu bakari o serekuto simasita. Tentou ni narandeitemo, tokuni ninki no 'kawaii' aitemu bakari o erabimasita. Zehi, gifuto nado no sankou ni sitemitekudasai.*

‘We’ve selected the stationery which you can’t help but say ‘*kawaii*’. We’ve especially chosen the most popular *kawaii* items. Consider these products as gifts as well.’

As shown in (2), the expression *omowazu* (‘spontaneously’, ‘involuntarily’, or ‘unconsciously’) is often used in seeing or finding *kawaii* items. *Kawaii* products automatically trigger favourable emotions in the person who sees them. Furthermore, what has been discussed in previous studies is not only the physical attraction of *kawaii* characters, but also the relationships people form with them (Allison 2006; Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 2010). The following are comments from mothers who bought a *kawaii* school bag for their daughters (Rakuten Itiba 2012a):

- (3) *Taibou no randoseru ga todoitemiru to, amari no kawaisa, sutekisa ni bikkuri!... Mata naka o akeruto kawaii gara ga waku-waku suru youna kibun o moriagetekureteimasu.*

‘When the long awaited school bag finally arrived, we were surprised that the bag was so *kawaii* and wonderful. When we opened the bag, the *kawaii* design excited us even further.’

- (4) *Itaru tokoro ni kawaii sisyuu ya haato no kurinuki ya oukan nado ga tuiteite oya no hou mo kodomo no youni uki-uki sitesimaimasita.*

'The school bag has *kawaii* embroidery, heart shaped marks and crown symbols everywhere, which even made the parents cheerful and happy like a child.'

Both mothers describe the design of the school bag as something that makes the child and the mother feel happy and excited. Obviously the thought at something *kawaii* encourages positive feelings. Burdelski and Mitsuhashi (2010: 39) also point out that preschool teachers use *kawaii* in glossing children's actions as thoughts and feelings to others in order to train empathy among children. That is, *kawaii* is linked to the positive thoughts towards things in the social world. Based on these observations, the first components of *kawaii* can be paraphrased as "this something is something small of its kind", "when people see this thing, they can't not feel something good".

However, most importantly, for something to be described as *kawaii*, the thing needs to have a character of being 'like a small child'. Madge (1997: 170) points out that *kawaii* images are associated with the notion of a child, which includes the characteristics of 'innocence', 'irresponsibility', and a non-threatening atmosphere. Alison (2006: 40) also states that "*kawaii* connotes sweetness, dependence, and gentleness – qualities they associated with comfort and warmth, and also with something loosely connected to their childhood". Thus *kawaii* is not something artificial, but it has a natural quality to be adored like an innocent child. This aspect of being like a child can be observed in the following comments from young mothers who are considering the purchase of a school bag for their daughters (Rakuten Itiba 2012a; livedoor 2012):

- (5) *Sengetu, Rakuten-nai no randoseru o iroiro miteita toki ni tamatama mite kawaiina to omoi, musume nimo gazou o misetemimasita. Suruto 'Kawaii! Kore ni sitai!' to mono-sugoku kiniitta yousu. Mitame kawaiku, demo kodomo-ppokunai.*

'The other day when I was looking at various school bags on Rakuten's website, I found this bag by chance and thought it was *kawaii*. When I showed the photo to my daughter, she said 'Kawaii! I want this!' She obviously liked it. *The bag looks kawaii, but it is not childish.*

- (6) *Mezzo-piano no randoseru wa kawaii si, sore ni kimeyouto omou n desu ga, randoseru tte 6 nen-kan tukau wake desu yone. Mezo-piano no pinku no randoseru wa teigakunen de karada mo tiisai toki wa niau to omou n desu ga, 5, 6-nen-sei ni naru to tyotto kodomo-ppoi kamosirenai desu yone...*

'Because Mezzo Piano's school bags are *kawaii*, I am going to purchase one. But school bags are used for 6 years. Mezzo Piano's pink school bag might be all right when my daughter is still in the first or second grade and is still small. However *I'm concerned that the bag will look childish when she is a student in year 5 or 6.*

In (5), the mother is pleased with the school bag since it looks *kawaii*, but is not too childish. On the other hand, in (6), the mother is concerned that the bag is too *kawaii* and therefore will look childish when her daughter has grown up. These examples support the claim that *kawaii* is associated with the notion of a small child. When people see the object, they experience uncontrollable affection towards it, which is similar to the case when they see a small adorable child. Thus the emotional state can be explained as 'when people see this thing, they can't not feel something very good, like people often can't not feel something very good when they see a small child [m]'

In addition, presumably, the person who sees a *kawaii* thing may wish to possess it and even try to touch it if possible. Stevens (2011: 2) says that "touch sets off a process of desire for knowing, and pleasure in its outcome". Unlike English *cute*, *kawaii* makes one feel like reaching out and touching it if it is allowed. The desire to touch the object can be observed in the following advertisement for stationery (Rakuten Itiba 2012b):

(7) *Kawaii! Iyasi-kei bungu 'Suingu baado'*
5mm haba syuusei-teepu koukan kaatorijji-siki
You mo nai noni sawaritai!

Kawaii! Healing stationery "Swing bird"
 Correction tape with cartridge (5mm)
You feel like touching it even when you are not using it!

As shown in (7), *kawaii* items cause the desire to touch. Alison (2006) observes that 'healing' is a commonly used word in Japan these days. She notes that *kawaii* play goods are popular as they are seen as having the power to reduce daily stress. Yano (2011: 25) also states that purchasing a *kawaii* item as a gift for a friend "addresses a national need to assert and sustain touch-based emotional ties between people". There is another example which illustrates this point. The following is the advertisement for Hello Kitty's plush toy which is popular among young girls and female students (Amazon 2012):

(8) *Yasasii iroai to tyou kawaii poozu de, konna kitty ni mitumeraretara omowazu dakisimetaku nattyau ne.*

“If Hello Kitty looks at you with this gentle colour and super *kawaii* pose, you can’t help hugging her, can you?”

The advertisement refers to the spontaneous desire to touch. However, it is not a straight and direct emotion of ‘I want my hands to touch this’, but rather it is a wish to extend one’s hand and experience how it feels. Madge (1997: 165) also argues that *kawaii* has a nuance of pathos, which conveys “the meaning not only of desirability but also regrettable unavailability”. The cognitive scenario which *kawaii* triggers can be explained as ‘when people see something like this, they think like this: this is something very good, I want it to be mine’, ‘at the same time, they can think like this: if I touch this thing with my hands [m], I can feel something good because of this, I want this’.

Another significant characteristic of *kawaii* lies in its delicacy. For a thing to be described as *kawaii*, it has to be small and childlike, and thus it cannot be hard or tough. The typical *kawaii* item is usually soft, round, or a pastel colour; such as pink (Madge 1997: 158, 169). Madge (1997: 169) says that one of the archetypal characteristics of *kawaii* good is roundness, which “has no corners and therefore does not arouse anger but instead keeps the peace”. Although a *kawaii* thing does not necessarily have to be soft, round or pink in colour, it certainly has a quality of gentleness, weakness or “powerlessness” (McVeigh 1996: 296). This is presumably the reason why *kawaii* products are healing Japan and have enormous popularity. The following is an advertisement for children’s reading glasses (Paris Miki 2012):

(9) *O-ko-sama demo kawaikunakutya iya! Demo, kowarenikui fureemu ga hosii! Sonna oyako no ‘hosii!’ o kanaeru fureemu touzyou!*

Some parents say “even though the reading glasses are for our child, they should be *kawaii*. But we need a frame which is not easily broken!”

To fulfil these parents’ needs, we’ve just produced a new frame!’

As suggested in (9), *kawaii* has a quality of being soft and fragile. In other words, *kawaii* has a feature of being easily broken or disfigured if someone is not careful, or overuses the item. This feature can be explained as ‘if I touch it with my hands [m] at many times, something bad can happen to it because of this, I don’t want this’.

Finally, for things to be called *kawaii*, they should be unique and different from other items or products. Kawamura (2006) points out that when young Japanese girls see something that is *kawaii*, there is an immediate reaction and the *kawaii* products sell well. Obviously *kawaii* items stand out. This is the reason why some high schools advertise their *kawaii* uniform. Consider the following example from a Japanese Catholic high school website (Institut St. Dominique Lycée 2012):

(10) *Ninki no seifuku: 'Mainiti mi ni tukeru mono dakara, yappari kawaii hou ga ii!'*

Zyuhinsa ni kuwaete, kawairasisa nimo kodawatta seifuku desu. Dominiko-sei dake dewanaku, hoka no gakkou no seito kara mo 'kawaii!' to dai-ninki! Aru zassi dewa 'kawaii seifuku zenkoku besuto 100' ni toriagerareta hodo desu.

Popular uniform: As we wear the uniform every day, it is better to be *kawaii!*

In addition to elegance, this uniform has made no compromise with its *kawaii* design. The uniform is very popular among not only our St. Dominique students, but also among other school students who describe our uniform as '*kawaii!*' One magazine states that our uniform even ranked within the top 100 of the most *kawaii* uniform nationally.

That is, *kawaii* should be something which is unusual and special. It has a characteristic which is different from other ordinary objects or things. Otherwise it does not appeal to high school students or other buyers. This aspect can be paraphrased as 'many other things of this kind are not like this'. Viewed in this light, the complete meaning of *kawaii* can be portrayed as follows:²

This something is *kawaii*.

- (a) this something is something small of its kind
- (b) when people see this thing, they can't not feel something very good,

² In Goddard and Wierzbicka (in press), 'children' is defined as follows:

CHILDREN

- (a) people of one kind
- (b) all people are people of this kind for some time
- (c) when someone is someone of this kind, it is like this:
- (d) this someone's body is small
- (e) this someone can do some things, this someone can't do many other things
- (f) because of this, if other people don't do good things for this someone at many times, bad things can happen to this someone

like people often can't not feel something very good when they see a small child [m]

(c) at many times when people see something like this, they think like this:

“this is something very good, I want it to be mine”

(d) at the same time, they can think like this:

“if I touch this thing with my hands [m], I can feel something good

because of it, I want this

if I touch it with my hands [m] many times, something bad can happen to it

because of this, I don't want this”

(e) many other things of this kind are not like this

Component (a) shows the external feature of *kawaii*. Component (b) indicates the strong positive feelings which a *kawaii* item evokes. The emotion resembles one which people experience when they see a small innocent child. Component (c) expresses one's desire to possess the *kawaii* object. Component (d) means that the *kawaii* item causes one the desire to touch it, even though it has a characteristic of being fragile. Component (e) shows that *kawaii* is something unusual and special.

3.2 Analysis of *itai*

Next is the examination of *itai*. *Itai* is an adjective in Japanese, and is often defined in an ordinary dictionary as 'be painful', 'be sore' and 'hurt' (Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary 2003). Although *itai* is still being used to indicate that someone is in pain, the meaning has shifted and another usage is frequently observed in fashion magazines, television programs, advertisements, and general internet sites. People currently use *itai* to describe and evaluate someone's action, behaviour, manner, or fashion (Dutcher 2009; Haramura 2010). The new usage seems to have originated from an adjective *ita-ita-sii*, which means 'pitiful' or 'pathetic' (Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary 2003). Although it is not clear how the new usage started to spread among the general public, *itai* is an established word. For example, a conduct manual book commonly used advises Japanese business people 'not to be *itai*' (Haramura 2010).³

³ Importantly, the new usage of *itai* can be syntactically distinguished from the original usage. The original usage has a grammatical constraint, and the subject should be the first person. The new usage does not have the same syntactic constraint. Also, the new usage can freely modify a noun, such as a person, fashion, behaviour, or conduct.

First, the meaning of *itai* is associated with someone's action or behaviour. Consider the following examples (Nanapi 2012; Yomiuri Shimbun 2012):

(11) *Dansei ga 'itai' to omou josei no o-hitori-sama koudou 10-sen*

Josei no syakai-sinsyutu ni tomonai, dokusin-josei ga izen to kurabete hitoride koudousiyasuku narimasita ne. 'O-hitori-sama' to yobareru koto mo ooku narimasita. Sikasi tyotto mattekudasai. Hitoride koudousuru koto jitai wa mondai ga nakutemo, tanin kara mitara 'itai' to omowareru koto mo ooku arimasu.

Ten solo outings of women which men think 'itai'

With women's social progress, it is getting easier for single women to act individually. These women are often called 'one customer'. But hang on a minute. Although there is no problem with acting individually, there are many cases where other people consider this 'itai'.

(12) *Arasaa ga katyuusya-tte itai desu ka?*

'Would it be *itai* if a thirty year old woman wears a hairband?'

In (11), *itai* is used in making a judgement about women's solo outings, such as having dinner at an expensive restaurant without company. In (12), a woman in her thirties is concerned whether she looks *itai* if she wears a hairband at her friend's wedding reception. These examples illustrate that *itai* is an adjective which refers to someone's conduct. Thus the first component is 'this someone does some things (to parts of his/her body)'.

Next to be examined is the reason why a certain action or behaviour is portrayed *itai*. *Itai* is used when the person in question is certain that his or her fashion, manner or action looks fine or favourable. In short, the person is conceited. For instance (Yomiuri Online 2009):

(13) Q: *Kireidenai hanayome wa itai desu ka?*

A1: *Takusan no o-yome-sama o mitekimasita ga itiban 'itai' no wa 'jisyou, kirei' no hanayome-sama desu.*

A2: *Tinamini, itai hanayome wa 'sekai de itiban utukusii no wa watasi' teki oora-zenkai no kata dewanaidesyou ka?*

Q: 'Do you think a bride who is not beautiful is *itai*?'

A1: 'I have seen many brides, but the most *itai* bride is the one who calls herself beautiful.'

A2: 'By the way, I think an *itai* bride is the one who has an aura that conveys 'I am the most beautiful bride in the world'. Don't you think so?'

In (13), a woman who is getting married in several months is anxious about her wedding. She believes that she is not beautiful as a bride and asks opinions from the general public on an internet site. She received responses which said that an *itai* bride is the one who admires her own beauty. In sum, *itai* signifies someone that has a strong sense of self-importance. Another example is (Gow! Magazine 2012):

(14) *Dokusin ga nagai to, jibun no 'itasa' ni ki ga tukinikui mono desu. Tokuni wakai koro ni moteta josei wa, madamada 'iketeru jibun' da to omotte kantigaina koudou o siteiru koto ga yoku arimasu.*

If you have been unmarried for a long time, it is difficult to notice your degree of being '*itai*'. This applies especially to those women who were popular among men when they were young. These women often take wrong conducts with the assumption that they are still cool.

In (14), *itai* is used to describe someone who believes that her demeanor or façade still looks pleasant or appropriate. That is to say, the person presumes that she will be evaluated positively by other people. This aspect of being conceited can be explained as 'this someone thinks like this: "if I do these things, when people see me, they can feel something good, they can think something good about me because of this, I want this"'.

Next, *itai* connotes the observer's embarrassment as the conceited person's conduct can trigger other people's criticism. Recall the case where a woman in her thirties is concerned about wearing a hairband to her friend's wedding. She seeks advice on the internet (Yomiuri Shimbun 2012):

(15) *Arasaa ga katsuusya tte itai desu ka?*

Raigetū, yūjin no kekkon-paatii ga arimasu. Zyūnbi de depaato ni itta toki, nannokinasini sukosi doressiina katsuusya o sityakusitemita nodesu ga...Igaito niau koto ga hanmeisimasita. Tada, katsuusya ga yurusareru no wa motto wakai nenrei made, to omotteita node, hagesiku tyuutyositeimasu. Yūjin ni haji o kakaseru koto wa saketai node, go-jogen o onegaisimasu. Watasi wa 29sai kikon, goku heikintekina yousi desu.

'Would it be *itai* if a thirty year old woman wears a hairband?'

I'm going to attend my friend's wedding reception next month. When I went to a department store the other day, I found a beautiful hairband and I thought it would suit me. But I think only young women are allowed to wear a hairband, and now I am hesitant to wear it. I really don't want to

embarrass my friend. Can anyone give me some advice? I'm a 29 year old married woman with an average look.

In (15), the woman believes that a hairband suits only young women. She says she does not want to wear it if it embarrasses her friend. *Itai* implies that the fashion or manner is not appropriate and thus it can humiliate others. The following example further illustrates this point (Mikle 2012):

(16) *'Wakai hito sika niawanai aitemu ya koode'*
'Nenrei towazu daizyobuna aitemu'

Kono tigai ga wakaru otona wa kousya no aitemu o umaku kodesasete waka-waka-sisa o kiwadaseru koto ga dekimasu ga, tanzyunni itumademo wakai to omotteiru hito wa zensya sika me o mukenai node, honnin wa iketeru o omotteru desyou ga, daisansya kara mireba hazukasii hito = itai hito to uturu nowa sizenna koto desu.

'Clothing items or their combinations which suit only young people', or
 'Clothing items or their combinations which suit any age'

Adults who can distinguish these two types of clothing can coordinate their clothing well. They look young. However, those people who simply assume that they are still young look for the items which suit only young people. They think they look cool, but naturally, they are embarrassing, that is, *itai* from other people's point of view.

In (16), *hazukasii* 'embarrassing' is rephrased by *itai*. The observer feels discomfort as *itai* people assume that their demeanours look stylish. On the contrary, their actions or behaviours look ridiculous. Accordingly their presumption can invite negative assessments from other people. The observer's embarrassment can be paraphrased as 'when other people see this someone, they can know that this someone thinks like this', 'at the same time, they don't think something good about this someone because of this'.

Moreover, *itai* includes one's emotion. When *itai* is used, the observer naturally feels something negative as illustrated below (Yomiuri Shimbun 2010):

(17) *'Itai hito' wa hito o fukai ni si, 'waka-wakasii hito' wa hito o ii kimoti ni sasetekuremasu.*

An '*itai* person' makes others uncomfortable, and a 'youthful person' makes others feel good.

As shown in (17), *itai* has an attribute which makes other people feel uneasy. An *itai* manner or behaviour is inappropriate, and consequently, the person in question causes discomfort to the observer. This feature can be explained as

‘when other people see this someone, they can feel something bad because of this’.

In addition, the unfavourable evaluation and emotion is caused by an *itai* person’s inability to perceive or recognise the situation. This is a characteristic of being *itai*. Consider the following examples (Nikkan Thread Guide 2005; Syogakukan Inc 2011):

- (18) *Gutaiteki ni donna hito ga kuuki yomenai hito? Mosikuwa itai hito?*
Anata no kijun o osietekudasai.

Describe a person who can’t recognise a situation. In other words, an *itai* person. Tell us about your criteria.

- (19) *‘Itai onna’ ni kyoutuusiteiru no wa, jibun ga ‘itai onna’ dearu koto o jikakusiteinai to iu koto ga ageraremasu. Anata wa, daizyobu desu ka?*

‘The commonality between ‘*itai* women’ is that they are not aware of being an ‘*itai* woman’. Are you all right?

In (18), *itai* is used as a synonym of *kuuki yomenai hito* ‘a person who can’t recognize a situation’. Example (19) also states that one of the characteristics of an *itai* woman is the lack of awareness about her improper action or manner. The examples indicate that *itai* implies that someone is not conscious of other people’s negative evaluation. This attribute can be paraphrased as ‘this someone does not know this’.

Finally, *itai* includes one’s opinion that the conduct or demeanour should be avoided. *Itai* has such negative connotations, and therefore, people are very concerned about whether or not they look *itai*. Consider next (Asahi Interactive Inc. 2010; Seesaa Inc. 2010):

- (20) *Dare datte tanin ni ‘itai hito’ to hyousaretakunai.*

Nobody wants to be labelled as an ‘*itai* person’

- (21) *‘Itai hito’ to omowareru no wa kowai mono desu ga, soredemo jibun o umaku PR-sinakute wa ikenai toki mo aru mono desu.*

It’s scary to be considered an *itai* person. However there are times when we need to promote ourselves properly.

As illustrated in these examples, *itai* is an undesirable attribute which one should not possess. This aspect can be interpreted as ‘it is not good if someone is like this’. Based on these observations, the full meaning of *itai* can be explicated as follows:

This someone is *itai*.

- (a) this someone does some things (to parts of his/her body) because this someone thinks like this:
 “if I do these things, when people see me, they can feel something good, they can think something good about me because of this, I want this”
- (b) when other people see this someone, they can know that this someone thinks like this
 at the same time, they don’t think something good about this someone because of this
 they can feel something bad because of this
- (c) this someone does not know this
 it is not good if someone is like this

Component (a) states that *itai* refers to someone’s conduct, or action which he or she assumes is well received by others. Component (b) indicates that *itai* causes negative reactions in other people as the *itai* person in question is conceited. Component (c) shows that the *itai* person is not aware of being negatively evaluated. Therefore, *itai* is an attribute which should be avoided.

3.3 Analysis of *ita-kawaii*

The final section presents an analysis of *ita-kawaii*. As mentioned in the Introduction, too much *kawaii* is considered undesirable. A compound word *ita-kawaii* is used to describe women who attempt to look *kawaii* inappropriately. The expression is observed especially when older women dress or wear make-up in a *kawaii* way. For instance (News Alert 2011):

(22) *40-dai josi no ‘ita-kawaii do’ o tyekku. ‘Mini-suka o haku’ ‘Pattun mae-gami’*

Josei deareba, ikutu ni nattemo wakaku miraretai to omou darou si, syokuba no douryou kara ‘kirei’ ‘kawaii’ to omowarereba uresii ni tiginai. Tada, sono kimoti ga tuyosugiru to, syuui kara ‘ita-ita-sii’ to omowaretesimau kamo. Aru josei-zasshi niwa, sonnna josei ni naranai tame no tyekku-risuto ga keisaisareteita. ‘Kawaii’ o mezasu wakadukuri ga, mosimo syuui kara ‘ita-ita-sii’ to omowareteiru to sitara.... Sonna fuan o idaku hito niwa ‘anata no ita-kawaii do wa?’ no tyekku risuto o osusumesitai.’

Let’s check the degree of being ‘*ita-kawaii*’ for women in their forties. For instance, ‘wearing short skirts’, or ‘having straight bangs’

If you are a woman, you may probably wish to look young, and you must be happy if your colleagues think you are beautiful or *kawaii*. However, if your wish is too strong, you may look 'pitiful'. One woman's magazine has a check list not to become such a woman. Suppose that you look 'pitiful' while you try to be *kawaii*..... If you are concerned about this, I recommend you check the following list which measures 'the degree of being *ita-kawaii*'.

As illustrated in (22), *ita-kawaii* describes someone who assumes that her fashion, hairstyle, or behaviour is *kawaii*, while the observer does not perceive the same. Similar to *itai*, *ita-kawaii* is an attribute which should be avoided. Thus older women are advised not to be *ita-kawaii*, but *adult-kawaii* (Yahoo Japan Corporation 2012):

(23) *Sono waka-dukuri hea*
'Ita-kawaii' kara 'otona-kawaii' e!

You are trying a hairstyle to make yourself look younger
 Let's transform from '*ita-kawaii*' to '*adult-kawaii*'!

In (23), *ita-kawaii* is used in contrast to the expression '*adult-kawaii*'. Because *kawaii* has a quality of being child-like, it is not appropriate for older women to follow a *kawaii* fashion or demeanour. *Ita-kawaii* implies a woman's effort to look *kawaii*, which is in fact embarrassing from another person's perspective. Viewed in this light, the meaning of *ita-kawaii* can be explained as follows:

This someone is *ita-kawaii*.

- (a) this someone does some things (to parts of his/her body) because this someone thinks like this:
 "if I do these things, when other people see me, they can think about me '*this is someone kawaii*', I want this"
- (b) when other people see this someone, they can know that this someone thinks like this
 at the same time, they don't think something good about this someone because of this
 they can feel something bad because of this
- (c) this someone does not know this
 it is not good to be someone like this

Component (a) is an observation that someone tries to look *kawaii*. Component (b) indicates the observer's embarrassment. Component (c) means

that the person is not aware of their conduct being inappropriate. Consequently *ita-kawaii* refers to the observer's negative evaluation towards the person.

4. Conclusion and future directions

The proposed explications are useful for capturing the precise meaning of *kawaii*, *itai* and *ita-kawaii* when used by Japanese people. These expressions reveal a Japanese cultural characteristic which enforces people not to be out of place in society. Namely, a constant expectation to follow appropriate behaviours, manners or fashions. Non-compliance with this expectation can lead to public ridicule.

This analysis has implications for other *kawaii* related concepts which are new and unique to Japanese youth culture. As illustrated in the analysis of *ita-kawaii*, older women are advised to be *otona-kawaii* 'adult cute'. Women's magazines are replete with suggestions on how to look *otona-kawaii* in fashion, hair-style, and cosmetics. Japanese women are expected to look mature, while at the same time retaining a child-like innocence. The *kawaii* related term includes dichotomous features in its meaning. It is natural for young Japanese speakers to create and use a word which involves two opposing characteristics. This is another aspect of Japanese youth culture which needs further rigorous analysis.

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Appendix

Table 1.1: Semantic primes (English exponents and Japanese exponents), grouped into related categories

English exponents	Japanese exponents	Semantic group
I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING ~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	WATASI, ANATA, DAREKA, NANIKA~MONO~KOTO, HITOBITO, KARADA	Substantives
KIND, PART	SYURUI, BUBUN	Relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	KORE, ONAZI, HOKA	Determiners
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW	HITO~ITI, FUTA~NI, IKUTUKA, ZENBU, TAKUSAN, SUKOSI	Quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	YOI, WARUI	Evaluators
BIG, SMALL	OOKII, TISAI	Descriptors
THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	OMOU~KANGAERU, SIRU, TAI~ HOSII~NOZOMU, TAKUNAI~ HOSIKUNAI~NOZOMANAI, KANJIRU, MIRU, KIKU	Mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	IU, KOTOBA, HONTOU	Speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH	SURU, OKORU~OKIRU, UGOKU, SAWARU	Actions, events, movement, contact
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	(DOKOKA NI) IRU, ARU, (DAREKA/NANIKA) DEARU	Location, existence, specification,
HAVE (SOMETHING) ~BE (SOMEONE'S)	(NANIKA) O MOTU~ (DAREKA NO MONO) DEARU	possession,
LIVE, DIE	IKIRU, SINU	Life and death
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	ITU~TOKI, IMA, MAE ATO, NAGAI AIDA, MIJIKAI AIDA, SIBARAKU NO AIDA, SUGUNI	Time
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE	DOKO~TOKORO, KOKO, UE, SITA, TOOI, TIKAI, MEN, NAKA	Space
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	NAI, TABUN, DEKIRU, KARA, MOSI (BA)	Logical concepts
VERY, MORE	SUGOKU, MOTTO	Intensifier, augmentor
LIKE~AS~WAY	YOU~DOU~YOUNI	Similarity

Primes exist as the meanings of lexical units (not at the level of lexemes). Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes. They can be formally complex. They can have combinatorial variants or “allolexes” (indicated with ~). Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties (Goddard 2012b: 1048).

Japanese version of explication for *kawaii*, *itai* and *ita-kawaii*

Kono mono wa kawaii (This something is *kawaii*).

- (a) *kono mono wa kono syurui no nanika tiisai mono da*
- (b) *hitobito ga kono mono o miru toki, hitobito wa ii kimoti ni naranai koto wa nai,*
hitobito ga tiisai kodomo o miru toki ii kimoti ni naranai koto wa nai youni
- (c) *nandomo hitobito ga kono youna mono o miru toki, hitobito wa kono youni kangaeru:*
“kore wa nanika totemo ii mono da, jibun no mono ni sitai”
- (d) *onaji toki ni, hitobito wa kono youni kangaeru:*
“mosi kono mono o watasi no te de nandomo sawareba, watasi wa sono tameni nanika ii kimoti ni naru kamosirenai
mosi watasi no te de sore o nandomo sawareba, kono tameni sore ni nanika warui koto ga okoru kamosirenai, watasi wa sore o nozomanai
- (e) *kono syurui no hoka no takusan no mono wa kono you dewanai*

Kono dareka wa itai (This someone is itai).

- (a) *kono dareka wa (kare/kanojo no karada no bubun ni) ikutuka no koto o suru nazenara kono dareka wa kono youni kangaeru kara:*
“mosi watasi ga korera no koto o sureba, hito ga watasi o miru toki, karera wa nanika ii kimoti ni naru koto ga dekiru, karera wa kono tameni watasi nituite nanika ii koto o kangaeru, watasi wa kore ga hosii”
- (b) *hoka no hitobito ga kono dareka o miru toki, karera wa kono dareka ga kono youni kangaeteiru koto o siru koto ga dekiru*
onaji toki ni, karera wa kono tameni kono dareka nituite nanika ii koto o kangaenai karera wa kono tameni nanika warui koto o kanjiru kamosirenai
- (c) *kono dareka wa kono koto o siranai*
kono youna dareka ni naru koto wa ii koto dewanai

Kono dareka wa ita-kawaii (This someone is ita-kawaii).

- (a) *kono dareka wa (kare/kanojo no karada no bubun ni) ikutuka no koto o suru nazenara kono dareka wa kono youni kangaeru kara:*
‘mosi watasi ga korera no koto o sureba, hoka no hito ga watasi o miru toki, karera wa watasi nituite “kore ha dareka kawaii” to omou kamosirenai, watasi wa kore ga hosii’
- (b) *hoka no hitobito ga kono dareka o miru toki, karera wa kono dareka ga kono youni kangaeteiru koto o siru koto ga dekiru*
onaji toki ni, karera wa kono tameni kono dareka nituite nanika ii koto o kangaenai
karera wa kono tameni nanika warui koto o kanjiru kamosirenai
- (c) *kono dareka wa kono koto o siranai*
kono youna dareka ni naru koto wa ii koto dewanai