



# **SENSE OF EMPTINESS: CULTURAL COMPARISON CONCERNING NOTHINGNESS**

**Junichi Toyota (Lund/Belgrade)**  
**([Junichi.Toyota@englund.lu.se](mailto:Junichi.Toyota@englund.lu.se))**

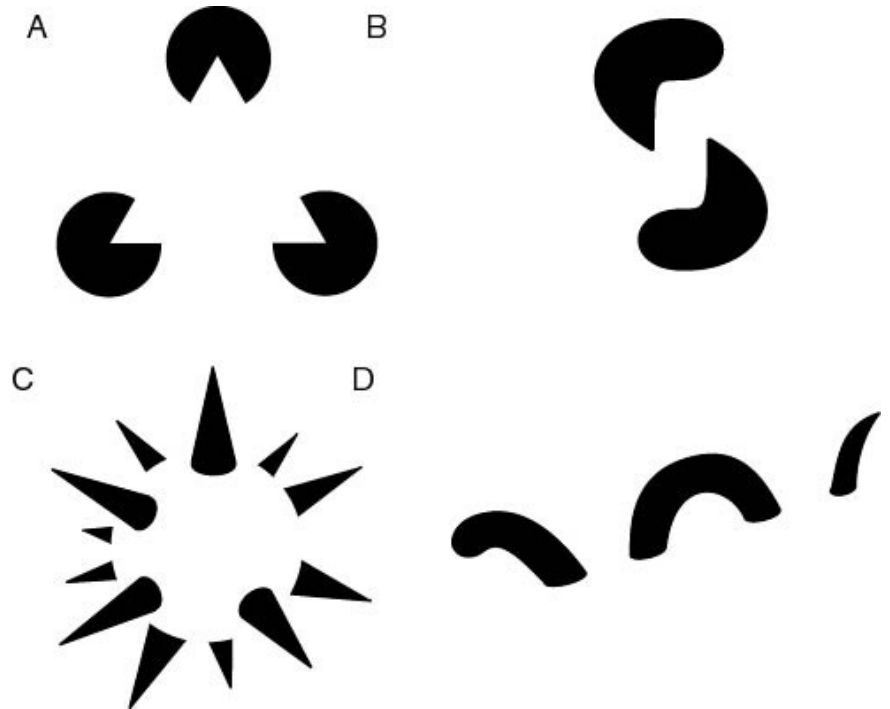
# CONTENTS

- Figure and ground in understanding emptiness.
- Various instances exhibiting differences in culture and world view.
- Some instances from linguistic structures.



# GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE

- The operational principle of the brain is holistic, parallel, and analogous.
- The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.
- Reification in the four figures on the right is often used as a simple evidence.



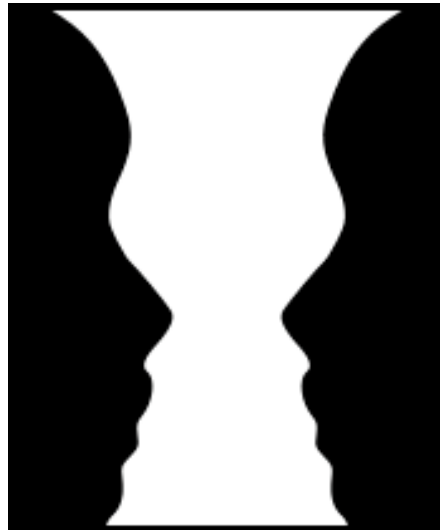
# FIGURE AND GROUND



- We also tend to see the world in a binary pair of a certain object in focus and a background in which this focused object is located.
- The former is termed **figure**/trajector and the latter, **ground**/landmark.
  - a. The vase is on the table.
  - b. The table is under the vase.



# OPTICAL ILLUSIONS AND FIGURE AND GROUND



- Optical illusions (multi-stability) often happens, where two figures can be extracted from the same picture.
- This kind of illusion is often due to the ambiguity in setting of figure and ground.



# NURTURE AND FIGURE-GROUND



- The nurture can influence the setting of figure and ground.
  - a. The lake is *on* the mountain.
  - b. The lake is *in* the mountain.



# CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: FLOWER ARRANGEMENT



- The European style has a symmetrical shape, and it is complete on its own.
- The Japanese style is asymmetrical and it looks rather incomplete.



# CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: GARDENING STYLE



- The European style tends to cram the space with trees and ornamental objects.
- The Japanese (very traditional) style has several objects but the space is mainly untouched.





# CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: PORTRAIT



- A European style portrait tends to focus on a person and less on a background.
- An Asian style tries to include both a person and a background.



# SENSE OF EMPTINESS: LITERATURE

- European literature: description tends to be thorough throughout the history, and much detail is given (cf. realism).
- This must stem from a long tradition of analytical thinking in Europe, the recent influence is from the Renaissance (cf. René Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*), but the idea can date back at least to Aristotle in 4th C BC.



# JAPANESE LITERATURE

- Japanese literature seems to force readers to read between the lines, implying the sense of emptiness.
- This feature is very clear in tanka and haiku poetry.
- Poetries have restrictions concerning the style (limitations of words or syllables) and what each line evokes can be more important than what is stated in each line.
- It is often important to know the background to understand what poetries really mean.



# SILENCE OF SOUND

*Shizukesa-ya iwa-ni-shimi-iru semi-no-koe*  
silence-VOC stone-to-seep-PROG cicada-GEN-voice

'Silence prevails as cicada's songs being absorbed into a stone.' (1702 Basho Matsuo *Okuno hosomichi*)



# SILENCE FROM SOUND

*Furu-ike-ya*

old-pond-VOC

*kawazu-tobikomu*

frog-jumping

*mizu-no-oto*

water-GEN-sound

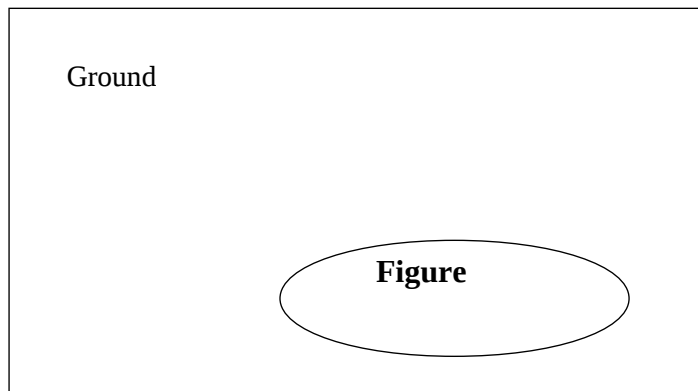
'As a frog jumps into an old pond, there is a sound of splashing water.' (1686 Basho Matsuo *Nozarashi kiko*)



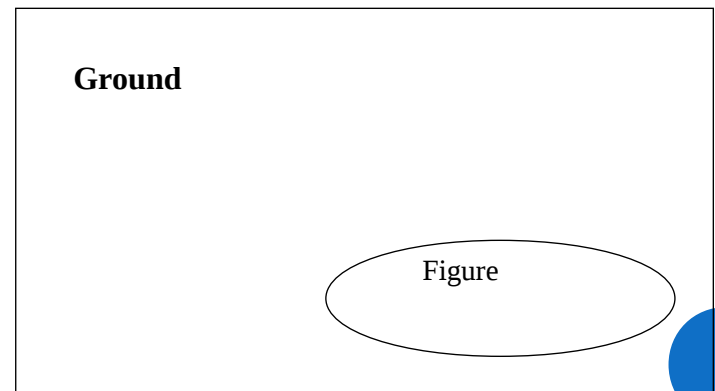
## DIFFERENCE IN TERMS OF FIGURE AND GROUND

- The European culture seems to focus more on figure, i.e. details.
- The Japanese culture, on the other hand, values ground.
- A case of the Japanese culture is a relative term, since it is nearly impossible to have focus only on ground, not on figure.

(a)



(b)



# SENSE OF EMPTINESS

- In some cultures, one does not have to express an item overtly in order to express it. This unexpressed item is understood by observers.
- This unexpressed expression is an essence of sense of emptiness.
- This is widely practiced in the Eastern cultures, and not so much in the West.



# VARIOUS ORIGINS OF EMPTINESS

- The understanding of moderation is one of the underlying concepts in Asian beliefs, such as Taoism or Confucianism, i.e. taking the best of both good and bad and take the middle (cf. *temperance* in Christianity).
- In addition, Buddhism might have influenced (e.g. religious enlightenment *satori*), i.e. their aim is to release their soul and set it free from a chain of reincarnation.





# APPLICATION OF WORLD VIEW TO LANGUAGE

- There seem to be some cognitive differences concerning the world view.
- This can be applied to different aspects of human cultures, including languages, since language can be a cultural artefact.
- Two specific grammatical features, i.e. counting and tense are analysed here.



# COUNTING SYSTEM

- There are two basic types of counting system in languages, e.g. classifier and non-classifier languages.
- Classifier languages  
They treat enumerable entities (e.g. *book*) and enumerable quanta (e.g. *water*) in much the same way.
- Non-classifier languages  
They draw a sharp distinction between entity-denoting nouns (e.g. *book*) and mass-denoting nouns (e.g. *water*).



# EXAMPLES

Tagalog (Austronesian, non-classifier)

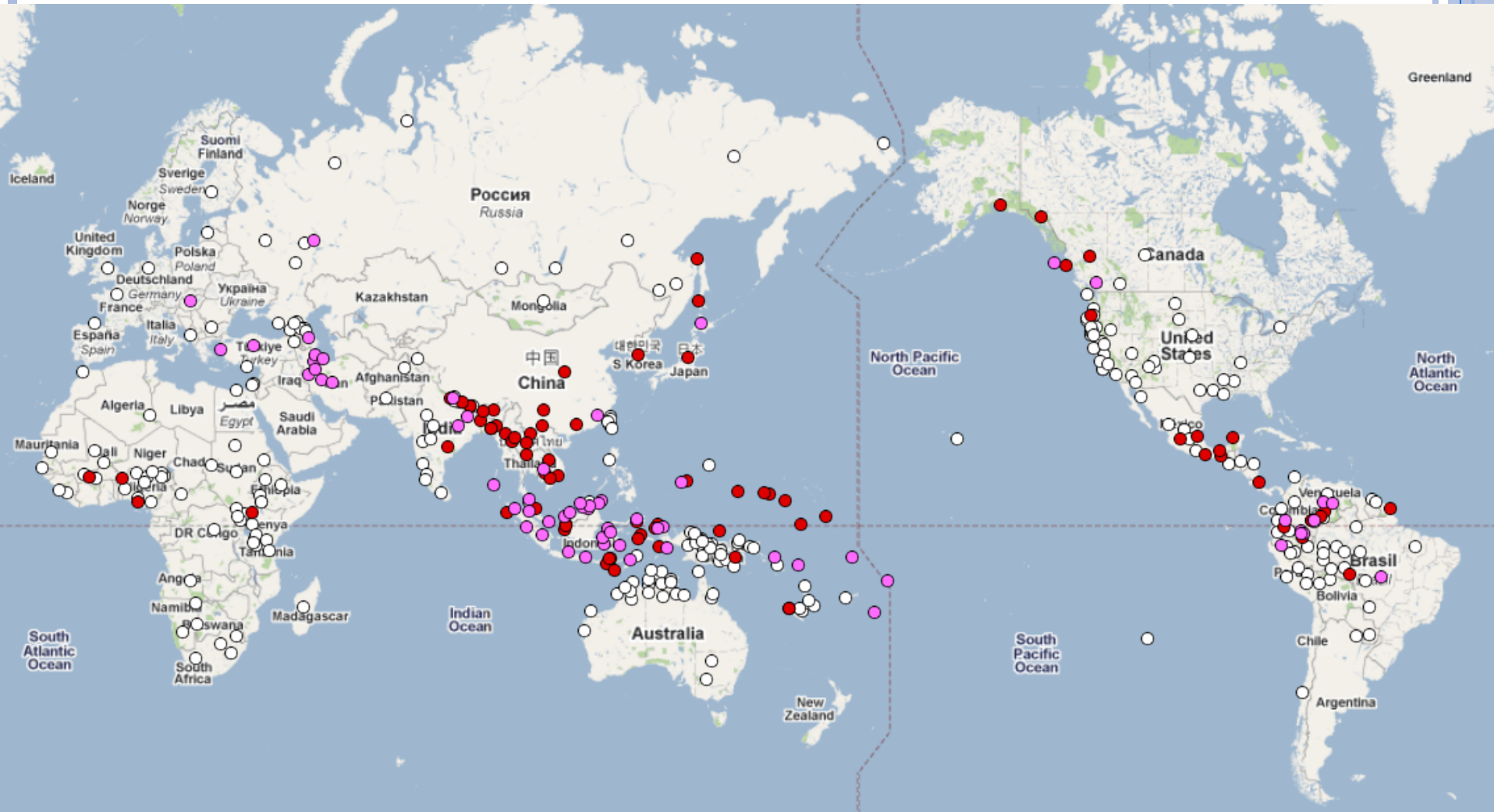
1. a. *dalawa-ng aklat*  
two-LIG book  
'two books.'
- b. *dalawa-ng puswelo-ng tsaah*  
two-LIG cup-LIG tea  
'two cups of tea.'

Japanese (Classifier)

2. a. *hon ni-satu*  
book two-CLF  
'two books'
- b. *hana ni-hon*  
flower two-CLF  
'two flowers'
- c. *mizu ni-hai*  
two two-CLF  
'two glasses of water'

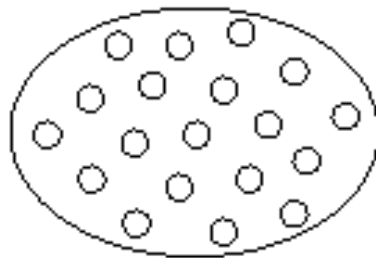


# COUNTING SYSTEMS IN THE WORLD (GIL 2008)

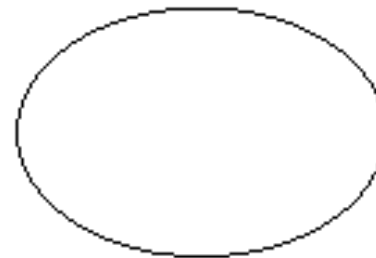


# CULTURE AND COUNTING

- The western view focuses on substances (i.e. figure) that makes up a larger object (i.e. ground).
- The eastern view does not pay attention to substances (i.e. figure), but a larger object (i.e. ground) is more or less identical with a substance.



a. Western view



b. Eastern view

Schematic representation of Western and Eastern view on counting



# TENSE SYSTEM IN WORLD LANGUAGES

- Tense can be classified mainly into two types:
  - ❖ **Past v. non-past**  
(English *I was* v. *I am*)
  - ❖ **Past v. Present v. Future**  
(French *je fus* v. *je suis* v. *je serai*)
- Forms expressed with auxiliary verbs are at an intermediate stage and they are not considered as a proper tense here.
- Other rare systems include: **no tense** (Sino-Tibetan languages); **Future v. Non-future** (Papuan languages)



# FUTURE TENSE AS A DIVIDING FEATURE

(DAHL AND VELUPILLAI 2008)

- The presence or absence of the future tense is an important criterion in considering the tense system in the world languages.



# CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF FEAR AND AFTERLIFE

- Fear can be an important criterion in organising a worldview, especially in conjunction with how death can be treated.
- Ability to influence future, presence/absence of fear and reincarnation can yield the following patterns in different beliefs in major religions of the world.

	Fatalism (fear absent)	Influenceable (fear present)
End of an old life	Paganism	Christianity, Islam
Beginning of a new life	(Tibetan) Buddhism	Hinduism





# AIM OF LIFE AND FEAR

- Aim of life can vary from one religion to another, and it can be roughly divided into two types, i.e. future existence and release of soul.
- Release of soul represents the lack of future tense when combined with fatalism.
- Motion verbs come into use when secularisation takes place in a culture and they are newer.

---

	Fatalism (fear absent)	Influenceable (fear present)
Future existence	Paganism (obligation-based)	Christianity, Islam (desire-based)
Release of soul	Tibetan Buddhism (no future tense)	Hinduism (desire-based)

---



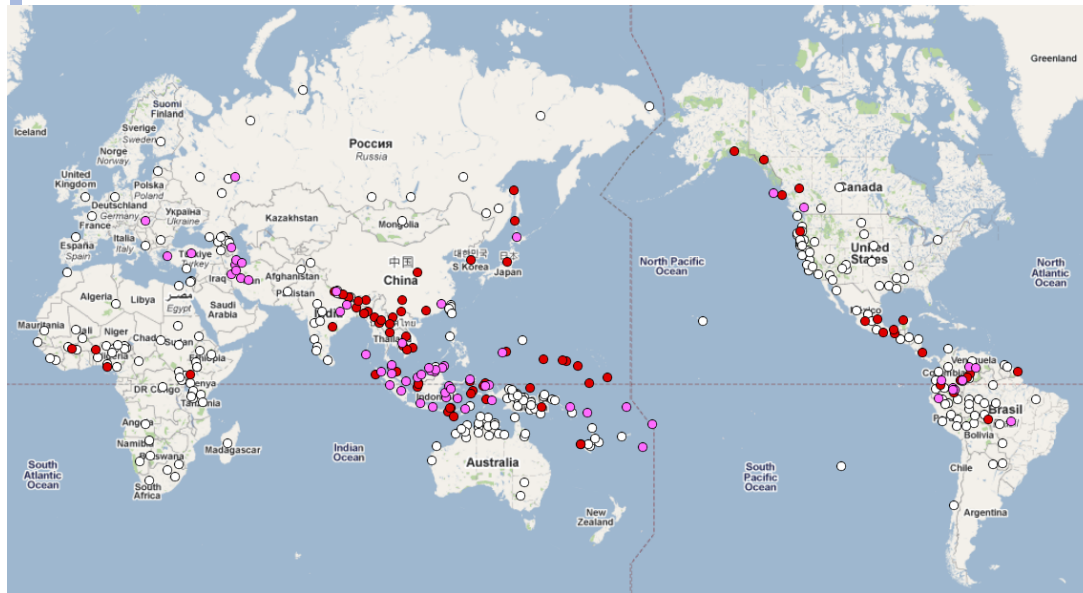
# AIM OF LIFE AND EMPTINESS

- Release of soul in the Asian religions (as a part of reincarnation) means that it becomes non-existent, i.e. nothingness, i.e. the Asian religions can make people ready for the understanding of emptiness.
- Fear seems to be a strong influence, but release of soul is one necessary condition for not having the future tense.
- Since the aim is to become nothing in Asia, they are not afraid of facing death. The lack of fear naturally does not encourage people to discuss future specifically.
- The firm appreciation of nothingness in culture also allows speakers to treat death differently from people in the West.



# GEOGRAPHIC PECULIARITIES

- In both counting and future tense, Asia shows different characteristics in comparison with the rest of the world.



# SENSE OF EMPTINESS AS CULTURAL ARTEFACT

- Sense of emptiness can be a cultural artefact underlying various human behaviours in Asia.
- There may be other overriding factors (such as fear in the case of future tense), but sense of emptiness is still pervasive in different aspects of the Asian cultures.



# CONCLUSION

- Sense of emptiness plays an important role in cultural differences between Asia and the rest of the world.
- Sense of emptiness can be found in various cultural artefacts, including languages.
- Self-awareness of emptiness can alter the world view, and this view may spread to the West due to the recent interests in the meditation and the Buddhist world view.

