

# How 'Straight' Has Developed Its Meanings — Based on a metaphysical theory

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**Abstract.** This paper makes the development of the word 'straight' clear. Dictionaries define 'straight' as; 'without a curve or bend', 'going direct to the target', 'honest', 'in continuous succession' or 'neat'. As can be seen, 'straight' has a variety of meanings. Some connections between these meanings can be guessed but others cannot. The mechanism of how 'straight' has obtained each meaning will be explained logically in this paper. First, the most basic or central meaning of 'straight' is 'without a curve or bend'. So 'straight' modifies the verb 'stand' like the following: He stood up straight. 'Straight' has a strong conceptual connection with a standing posture. At the present time, 'straight' is the normal posture for human beings. This means 'straight' has a concept for 'normal' for human beings like the following: He grew up straight. This sentence does not mean that his posture is straight up. It means that he grew up honest. 'Straight' gives a normal image to English speakers both physically and metaphysically. Like an example above, this paper explains how 'straight' has developed its meanings through the human beings' way of thinking. And some comparisons between English expressions and Japanese ones, which is the author's mother tongue, are made in this paper as well.

## 1 Cognitive approach: A methodology for this paper

The linguistic method I have adopted here is a cognitive approach. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) mentioned that there are three major findings of cognitive science. One of them is that the mind is inherently embodied. The fact that we have our own bodies and minds is quite natural for us. Our bodies are concrete and we can see our bodies while our minds are metaphysical and cannot be seen. However, we are certain of having minds and they are understood through the filter of our bodies. Another finding of cognitive science is that thought is mostly unconscious. Our construal of outer world is unconsciously reflected in our verbal expressions. The last is that abstract concepts are largely metaphorical. Abstract things cannot be seen, so we need sources to understand them. The sources should be concrete things. Because of this, almost all abstract concepts are metaphorical.

## 2 Conceptualizations

One methodology from cognitive linguistics was adopted to unravel how 'straight' has developed its meaning. It is conceptualization. Regarding this idea, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) said the following:

The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. (p.3)

They said that we have concepts for each thing around our world, and the concepts are formed through our daily lives. And the process or result of forming concepts is called conceptualization. Some examples of conceptualizations are given.

### 2.1 Time is money

Abstractions are understood through the concrete. For example, how do we understand 'time'? We cannot see time, but we can say 'The time is coming', and we cannot touch time, but we can say 'I have some time for a lunch break.' or 'we have five minutes to leave.' In verbal expressions, English speakers handle time as if it were a concrete object. Furthermore, native English speakers have a more specific concept for time. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) founded the following:

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TIME IS MONEY, TIME IS A LIMITED RESOURCE, and TIME IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY are all metaphorical concepts. They are metaphorical since we are using our everyday experiences with money, limited resources, and valuable commodities to conceptualize time. (pp.8-9)  
They meant that time is not a mere object but has specific features similar to money, a limited resource and valuable commodity. You can see this concept of English speakers more clearly through the expressions below:

He spent a lot of time in doing his homework.  
This task costs much time.  
You should budget your time.  
She invested a lot of time in studying.  
I lost valuable time waiting for a train.  
You waste a lot of time.

Through these verbal expressions, we can get a look into an English speakers' mind. They have conceptualized time as a limited and valuable thing through everyday experiences. This conceptualization is common with native Japanese speakers too. Japanese have a proverb that *toki-wa kane-nari*, that means time is money.

## 2.2 An organization is a human being

We conceptualize not only abstract objects but also concrete ones. For example, English speakers conceptualize an organization like a company as a human being\*. See the sentences below:

She became head of the company.  
The company plans to strengthen its hand in Asia.  
I am working at the marketing arm of the company.  
Our company is on its last legs.  
The company needs new bloods.

As you can see, it is natural to treat a company as if it were a human being in English expressions. The structure of an organization is similar to that of a human being. For example, a human being can take action because its head, more precisely the brain, can make an order to each body part. This is the same as an organization. The head of an organization makes a decision and an order to each division of the organization, and it can take action.

## 2.3 Parallelism between English and Japanese

Some conceptualizations are held in common between different languages. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) said conceptualizations are tied to each culture, so some cultures have the same concept for things, but others have differences. It is up to the cultures. As mentioned above, for example, native Japanese speakers have the 'time is money' concept, and also have 'an organization is a human being' concept. This is because we sometimes have the same way of thinking as human beings even though our languages are different from each other. Other conceptualizations vary among different languages because each language has their own history, policy, culture, social system and religion. But the main target language of this paper is English, and some comparisons between English expressions and Japanese will be examined.

## 3 Polysemy of straight

Straight has many varied definitions in some dictionaries. For example, it has 12 definitions in *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 9<sup>th</sup> edition (2015) (=OALD), 10 definitions in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* 6<sup>th</sup> edition (2014) and 6 definitions in *The New Oxford American Dictionary* Second edition (2005) in each adjective section. Each definition does not have an organic connection, but each definition does have a logical connection. Every word, including straight, must have had only one meaning when it emerged. Then, the words have developed their meanings one by one. So, to reveal the organic connections between the definitions of straight, we need to find the original meaning of the word.

### 3.1 The original meaning of straight

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\* An organization itself seems to be an abstract object, but the members or buildings of an organization can be seen physically. So I define an organization is a concrete object.

To make clear what the original meaning of straight might be, here is the entry from the *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* (2010):

**straight** [ME] The word straight is the old past form of Old English **stretch**, and originally meant ‘extended at full length’. (p423)

In fact, according to *Oxford English Dictionary* Second edition on CD-ROM Version 4.0 (2009), straight appears for the first time in a written work around 1325:

**Straight** *a, sb, and adv.*

With a strught arme he keppit the caupe on his clene sheld.

This description can be translated into modern English as ‘With a stretched arm, he kept the headpiece on his clean shield.’. These descriptions indicate that the original meaning of straight is ‘physically extended at full length’.

### 3.2 Abstract meanings of straight

Though straight originally indicated a physical state of things, it has increased in meanings and can now indicate abstract meanings. Each abstract meaning is strongly connected to the original meaning. This paper focuses on some abstract meanings of straight such as honest, clearly, continuous, and neat.

#### 3.2.1 Conceptual connection between straight and honest

Though the main purpose of this section is revealing how ‘straight’ has developed its original meaning to honest, I must mention the concept for standing posture first. This is because straight is strongly connected to standing posture. Human beings have realized tremendous evolution by taking ‘standing posture’. To take the posture let us use our hands freely and we have learned to use tools. This has made big difference from other living things. Therefore, standing posture is the most important and basic posture for human beings. It is natural that we always try to keep the posture. This way of our thinking is reflected in verbal expressions, see the 2 examples from *OALD* below:

**stand on your own (two) feet**

to be independent and able to take care of yourself:

◆ When his parents died he had to learn to stand on his own two feet.

**on your feet**

completely well or in a normal state again after an illness or a time of trouble:

◆ Sue’s back on her feet again after her operation.

◆ The new chairman hopes to get the company back on its feet within six months.

Of course, the expressions like ‘stand on your own feet’ or ‘on your feet’ can mean that someone takes a standing posture physically. But as you can see, these explanations refer to metaphysical meanings. It can be said that standing posture is a desirable posture for human beings and can also relate to the more metaphysical idea in a good condition.

When a human being takes a standing posture, the body gets straight. This fact connects straight and standing posture. Straight is physically normal for human beings, therefore it can also indicate the meaning of metaphysically normal for human beings. Look at the sentences below:

She grew up to be straight.

He is a bent cop.

He has a twisted personality.

She is a crooked business person.

The ‘straight’, ‘bent’, ‘twisted’ and ‘crooked’ in these sentences do not indicate physically state of each human being. They indicate mental situations. It is obvious that having an honest personality is normal or desirable for human beings, so straight can indicate the meaning of honest. On the contrary, not straight like bent, twisted and crooked, can indicate being dishonest.

Moreover, Japanese has the same concept as English speakers. In Japanese, *su-nao* means honest. *Su* means frankly and *nao* means straight.

#### 3.2.2 Conceptual connection between straight and clearly

Straight can also indicate the meaning of clear/clearly like shown in the sentences below:

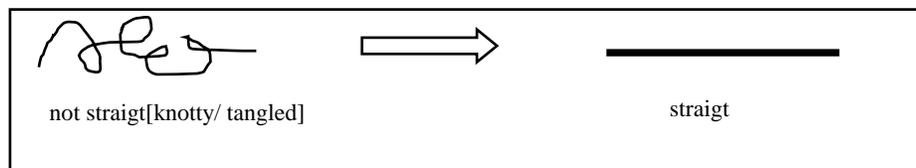
Let me just get this straight.

I’m going to ask you straight.

The connection between ‘extended at full length’, which is the original meaning of straight and clear/clearly is ambiguous. To make it clear, let me give some examples of the opposite words:

This is a knotty topic.  
 He has gotten tangled up with three women.  
 She was entangled with that man.

‘Knotty’, ‘tangle’ and ‘entangle’ originally meant the state of a thing being like thread or string. Complicated situations or problems can be imagined like a tangle. And to undo a knot is connected to the image of solving those complicated situations, making them straight. Let me show you a visual image of this comparison below:



**Fig. 1.** Comparison between straight and not straight

As you know, things are usually more desirable when they are not knotty, tangled or entangled. And we can easily grasp the whole image of the thread when it is straight. In other words, we can see the straight clearly when it is straight but not when it is tangled. So straight can indicate the meaning of clear/clearly. And Japanese also has the same concept. In Japanese, we say *mondai-wo kaiketsu-suru*. This sentence means ‘I solve the problem.’ *Kaiketsu-suru* means to solve, but originally meant undo a knot.

### 3.2.3 Conceptual connection between straight and continuous

The fact that straight can indicate the meaning of continuous is obvious from the examples below:

He got straight A’s at the end of this year.  
 Our team won five straight games.

To make clear the image of these sentences, let me give visual images below:

Mathematics	Science	Social Studies	Visual Arts	Music
A	→ A	→ A	→ A	→ A

**Fig. 2.** Image of straight A’s

Game1	Game2	Game3	Game4	Game5
win	→ win	→ win	→ win	→ win

**Fig. 3.** Image of winning five straight games

As this image shows, to get straight A’s can be imagined as grade As stretched from the start of the report card to the end. This chain of As gives English speakers the image of straight. In the same way, a chain of wins suggests the image of straight to English speakers. So straight can have the meaning of continuous.

### 3.2.4 Conceptual connection between straight and neat

As mentioned above, straight can create the image of continuity. Moreover, straight can indicate the continuity in number. As in the example below:

I tried to fill in a straight in poker.

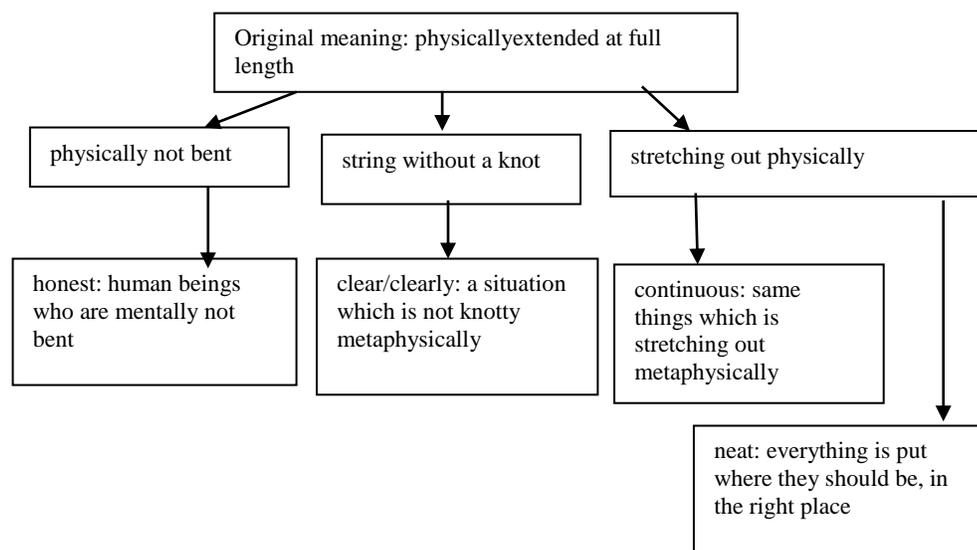
As you know, a straight is a kind of hot hand of a poker game. Five cards must be in order like from ace to 5 or from 8 to queen. In the mind of native English speakers, this continuity in number also has the same image as straight. The number seems to stretch like ace to 2, 2 to 3, 3 to 4, and then 4 to 5. This image of stretching is strongly connected to straight. In other words, straight can indicate the meaning of in order. So, it is possible that straight is used in sentences like below:

You should put the room straight.

This straight does not mean not bent. It means that everything in the room is put where it should be, in the right place. In short, the room is neat. On the contrary, we can say ‘you have put the room out of order’, when the room is not neat.

## 4 Conclusion

The original meaning of straight is ‘extended at full length.’ From there, straight has come to indicate ‘not bent’. And then, ‘not bent’ was strongly connected to the standing posture of human beings. Straight can indicate mentally not bent, or ‘honest’. Furthermore, straight can indicate the meaning of ‘clear/clearly’ when we imagine of a piece of string. Also, the image of stretching something leads native English speakers to regard straight as continuous and in order. The visual image below shows you how straight has developed its meanings:



**Fig. 4.** How straight has spread its meanings

In this way, straight has developed in meaning from its original meaning. How human beings recognize things in the world is deeply connected to our linguistic activity. I hope this paper could reveal some parts of the mechanism of the magnificently intelligent function of human beings.

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