

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RR-10  
Interlude: Language - II  
(Further Developments)

28 Uguisudani-machi  
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

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Dear Dick:

One of the most arresting features of Japanese printed matter or writing is its top-to-bottom, right-to-left-read columns. For modern men, using the ubiquitous felt pen, the system is a constant annoyance, for one's hand is continuously smearing freshly written figures. (As a matter of fact, the Western left-to-right, top-to-bottom rows are now becoming more common in Japan.) The origins of the traditional manner are both clear and practical; they lie in the use of scrolls and brush calligraphy. The calligrapher, whether writing on a flat or tubular (scrolled) surface does not brace his hand directly on the surface of the paper, but rather grips the brush towards the upper end of the shaft. The considerable length of brush between hand and writing surface acts to magnify the most subtle physical inflection of the artist's hand, and to increase his responsibilities. The path of the brush as it twists, strokes, and trails across the paper can be hypnotic for an observer. Not only the direction, but the varying intensity and width of line are exquisitely subtle. It is possible that the hand-held scroll - in contrast to the inflexible desk top - offered still another dimension to the interplay of surface and brush for the traditional calligrapher. One might employ a counterpoint of plane against brush.

In any case, not only the top-to-bottom rows, parallel to the axis of the roll, is explained by the scroll convention, but also, perhaps, the right-to-left progression. Though the following is my own hypothesis, no one here has challenged its a priori appeal. A little experiment with a roll of wrapping paper will quickly demonstrate the practical ease of holding the roll in the left hand at the bottom and allowing the paper to unroll into unobstructed space under the right hand. If one tries unrolling to the left, he will find either an awkward hand position or that the paper constantly runs afoul of the supporting left arm.

As quickly as one becomes accustomed to writing in right-to-left columns, though, opening the cover of a book or magazine to the right remains "wrong" in some subterranean compart-

ment of the mind, and I find myself wondering what sorts of effects the many ambivalences of this sort have on the Japanese who write and read in so many directions. Perhaps they are not so afflicted as we in the West are with the importance of cause and effect, beginnings and endings, not so committed to the comforts of knowing where they occur. The only potentially serious aspect of the left-to-right orientation, left-hand driving, is not, of course, an oriental phenomenon, but can be disastrous for the unwary American whose natural act is to look to the left for left-to-right passing traffic and step off the curb.

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Even during our first language lessons, we were frequently bewildered by what our tutor calls the Japanese preference for "going around." The indirect way seems irresistible, and is sanctioned not only socially but linguistically. An outright denial or rejection is difficult - sometimes impossible - to express, even if one wishes to be direct as will be seen in some of the examples below. Beginning with a relatively mild case, one that has important practical value to us in shielding the few hours of private time that Tokyo involvements leave, I want to say something about "maybe."

For the English speaking person, "maybe" has a pleasant and useful duality. It exhibits a positive surface, admitting some hope, and yet carries unmistakably negative undertones. "Maybe we'll go," tends to mean that we do not intend to, but don't wish at the moment to completely negate the questioner's hopes. In analogous situations, we at first tried the "tabun ...deshoo" formula (roughly, "perhaps...I suppose") when trying to gracefully avoid some commitment. It became clear after a while, however, that misunderstandings and injured feelings were resulting. Thereafter, we switched to using the verb "...kamoshiremasen" ("it is possible that") with some improvement. The English "maybe" would seem to be perfectly suited to Japanese requirements, but apparently even it is indelicately clear. Some research into the subject revealed that there is really no equivalent to "maybe," which we characterized as being 60 to 75 percent negative in weight. Both the above Japanese terms are positive, signifying more or less definite intention to go ahead.

At the opposite extreme - vocal, but not strictly linguistic - is the sharp inhalation of air through clenched teeth. This rather moist hiss occurs unintentionally when a man is presented with a situation or problem that instinct tells him he will not be able to fulfill. If one, for example, asks a clerk for a particular item and his request is greeted by an implosive hiss, one had best remove himself quickly and try elsewhere. Directions may be given, or assurances, or services performed, but once the warning has sounded, the chances of ultimate success are small. This is, incidentally, a border case of the strong

Japanese propensity for making words, the sounds of which match the phenomena they describe. Hand gestures are only rarely used here, and so the Japanese often resort to intensifying particles, doubled roots, and onomatopoeia. These devices all denote, in the words of our tutor, "eagerness to explain." The necessity for explanation - where meaning is so carefully suppressed - thoroughly justifies their sense of urgency.

Those few hand gestures that are used can also lead to confusion for a Westerner. Our normal way of waving goodbye, the palm of the hand parallel to the ground with an up and down motion from the wrist, means "come here, please" in Japan. Another, the forefinger tip joined to the tip of the thumb in a circle, means primarily "money" to the Japanese while we we might interpret it as "OK" or "O." This confusion of conventions recently led to an extremely unfortunate misunderstanding.

For all Institute Fellows, I imagine, there are times when explaining the background of the ICWA and the marvellously vague manner of its operation is far more trouble than simply leaving the whole question open. As a result, we have made few attempts to explain or justify our presence in Japan. The question has recently become more awkward though. We have been strongly activist during the last few months, bending a great deal of time and effort towards starting and maintaining a series of high quality new music concerts. Needless to say, no one here can understand (nor, some of the time, can we) why two foreigners should want to do this. Those close to us have simply accepted it, retaining, I assume, personal theories and rationalizations which, perhaps for the best, will remain unknown to us. But our relations with the musicians, with the performers who have made the programs possible have been extremely complex. We have depended very much on their good will, and repeatedly tried to explain that we were receiving no pay from the American Cultural Center for our activities. Money is an all important question to the Japanese musician who is without unions and hard pressed in his attempts to keep financially afloat.

Recently, a large TV network in Tokyo made a television show from one of the CROSS TALK events (the 16-hour piano work of Erik Satie, VEXATIONS, which we presented at the Center over the New Year). Afterwards we met one of our performers at a concert and he said in parting, "You got a lot of money for that, I think." Trying to be pleasant I said, "Of course, the usual," and held up my thumb and forefinger to indicate "zero." Thinking that I meant, "Of course, money as usual," his reaction was immediate and dramatic. Only later did we uncover the fact that my gesture had meant something quite different to both of us. It was comic in a way, but produced lasting suspicion which no amount of explanation has been able to erase. It was a forcible reminder that communication is not all done with words.

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Pursuing the idea of indirectness, numerous examples suggest themselves. In most Western languages the idea of compulsion - "must, must not" - is clear and common. The Japanese equivalent is wonderfully equivocal. The straight-forward idea, "you must eat," comes out in Japanese, "Anata wa tabe nakereba ikemasen." Retranslated, this literally means "as for you, if there is not eating, there cannot be a going." The pattern is: "if there is not a verb ing then there will not be able to be a going" (or "'it' doesn't go." To compel, then, is to say quite abstractly that if something does not occur, something else will not be able to happen. It is in effect a plea. The negative is somewhat more simple. "You must not run" becomes "hashitte wa ikemasen" or literally, "as for running, it cannot go." Perhaps the somewhat simpler formulation is due to the generally protective nature of prohibition in contrast to the assertive, willful color of compulsion.

Command forms do exist in Japanese but are never used except in special cases when a parent is speaking to a child, or between very good friends on the same level. There are two forms. For "stop!" one usually would say "tomari nasai." An older form, now weak with age and passing out of use, is "tomare." Interestingly enough, the police department, eager not to offend the public but bound to use commands, employs the weak "tomare" form on street signs. "Kin en," or "smoking prohibited," has only in the last year or so begun to replace the "tabako wa goenryo kudasai," which means literally "as for tobacco, please give the honorable refraining from smoking." Finally, and most tellingly, even in the most serious peril, a Japanese speaking person will use the request form in calling for help, never a command.

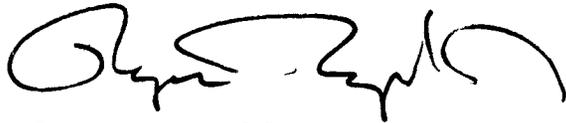
The avoidance of direct and potentially irritating statements extends as well to the use of adjectives. In preference to using a direct negative, ugly, low, expensive, bad, the Japanese prefers a modified positive, not so beautiful, not so high, not so cheap, not so good. This natural propensity for softening or deflecting even the most simple thoughts cannot fail to influence larger patterns of behaviour.

As I have mentioned in previous newsletters, there are at least two levels of politeness obtainable by extra sets of verbs. One category raises the level of the person to whom you are speaking, while the other lowers you to a level beneath the person to whom you are speaking. There are also, of course, a wealth of respectful prefixes, pronouns, and constructions. This is a primary concern for the foreigner who may be quite capable of expressing himself clearly in Japanese and yet at the same time be incapable of understanding the heavily ornamented reply. A Japanese person, even one who is quite aware of the

problems that polite language poses for the foreigner, feels compelled to use oblique structures by his own sense of decorum (and hence for his own comfort). For example, we are frequently asked "when did you come to Japan," which can be directly rendered, "Anata wa itsu Nihon ni kimashita ka." But one listens in vain for such clear queries and probably gets something like "Anata ga Nihon ni kite kara, moo dono gurai tachimashita ka," or "Anata ga Nihon ni irasshate kara, moo dono gurai tachimashita ka." The last two, identical except for the use of the polite form of "to come" (kite = irasshate) are literally "As for you, after a coming to Japan, already how much time has passed?".

Or if you ask someone if he would like to do something, his "I'd like to" may easily become "shite mitai to omotte imasu," or "there is a state of thinking, the content of which is wanting to try to do." Though there is now considerable discussion in Japan about the disproportionate amount of time that Japanese children must spend in mastering five distinct systems of reading and writing - hiragana, katakana, kanji, Roman printing, and Roman script - the linguistic strictures of politeness and circumlocution are perhaps more formidable.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Roger Reynolds", written in a cursive style.

Roger Reynolds

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