

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RR-2
Interlude: Language - I
(Initial Contact with the Enemy)

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Dear Dick:

Facing an unfamiliar language displayed in Roman letters, armed with phrase books, pocket dictionaries, and city maps, one feels as though he has at least a sporting chance. Key words on signs and in conversation can be located in a dictionary or phrase book with a minimum of commotion, particularly if one has had the same partner through many such adventures and has developed something in the way of a procedure. Japan presents a more formidable challenge, though, for it employs three different systems of written symbols: two phonetic (hiragana and katakana) and one ideographic (Chinese characters). None of these bears the slightest resemblance to a Romanized alphabet, and thus dictionaries are of no avail. To further confuse matters, two systems of Romanizing Japanese and Sino-Japanese words are in use: the Hepburn, which is more accessible to English speaking persons, and the Kunreisiki, which was developed in the Nationalistic period before World War II. The latter lends itself better to introductory language studies for foreigners of all nationalities. In the illustration on the following page, the word for "pitch" (sound) is shown in (a) kanji, (b) hiragana, (c) katakana, and in two transcriptions, Hepburn (d), and Kunreisiki (e). To complete the picture and the confusion, the traditional forms of Japanese writing can be arranged in two configurations: running from the top to the bottom of columns that run from right to left, and in the familiar system of horizontal rows running from left to right and from the top to the bottom of the page.

One positive factor in our decision to come to Japan was the opportunity to learn something of a language we imagined to be profoundly different from the Romance and Germanic tongues. We have not been disappointed. During five weeks of frequently trying skirmishes with our teacher, we have accumulated many impressions - some frustrating and some delightful. Against this background of functional disarray, I have set down a collection of informations and observations

which form a part of the mind-stretching process we have already been through.

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シ

(c)

chōshi

(d)

ち
よ
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し

(b)

tyoosi

(e)

調
子

calligraphy by Kumiko Arata

(a)

Our initial interest in Japanese arose from the vague notion that fundamentally different ways of naming and constructing thoughts might reveal new perspectives, fresh ways of looking at familiar surroundings and events. The "linguistic-relativity hypothesis" (professional term for layman's conjecture) is by no means established, though frequently argued. Benjamin Lee Whorf has clearly defined

it in the following quote from Language, Thought, and Reality:

The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds through our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.

J. B. Carroll, in Language and Thought, cites the existence of two forms of the verb "to be" in Spanish, ser and estar, depending on whether one recognizes a state of affairs as relatively permanent or as temporary. A more subtle parallel, in Japanese, also concerns the domain of the English "to be." Desu (a contraction of de arimasu) is used in cases where identification is involved: Reynolds-san wa gaikokujin desu ("Reynolds is a foreigner"). Arimasu alone is used in expressing inanimate existence, so that hon ga arimasu states the existence of a book (hon). Literally, this statement translates into rather airy English: "there exists a book." Nothing about where or about about what. A different verb, imasu, is used for animate existence, and, again, separate forms cover the negative parallels. Negation, in Japanese, involves a complex of verb, adverb, and adjective modifications which make one cherish the simplicity of "not."

There is also an enormous superstructure of honorifics, specifiers, and relative levels of politeness by which one can indicate his view of the status of persons and the relationships between them, and which, in turn, fixes clearly the speaker's status. Different nouns, all covered by the English "father," are used to denote one's own father, someone else's, or a respected older man. The keen awareness of one's position is also reflected in the ko-so-a-do constructions. These four prefixes can be used with numerous stems to produce sets like the following: koko ("this place where I am"), soko ("that place where you are"), asoko ("that place over there out of the reach of both of us"), and doko ("which place out of all those possible?"). While

sochira is the direction towards the person you are talking to, kochira is the direction towards oneself. Hence, to be properly vague (and thereby gracious), one says not Konohito wa Iwasaki-san desu, ("This person is Mr. Iwasaki.") but rather Kochira wa Iwasaki-san desu, "In this direction is Mr. Iwasaki." The ko-so-a-do constructions force one to constantly gauge his position, for the Japanese are extremely precise about the distinctions. To request a taxi driver to stop koko is to risk being thrown from your seat as he attempts to stop on the spot where you were when you spoke.

A source of often hilarious confusion is the pattern of question response. Telephone conversations in which one of us and a Japanese acquaintance are drawing on a meager arsenal of shared words sometimes degenerate into sequences not unlike the following: "no," "yes?," "no?," "yes?," ... "yes!," "no," ... "no?" This arises from another feature of Japanese language and social structure: acute sensitivity to the niceties of interpersonal relationships. One may ask a negative question, in hopes of discovering some fact which is shrouded by their habitual politeness, for example, "You're not too busy today?" The answer comes back firmly, "Yes." He is agreeing with your implied assumption - that he is not too busy - and not with the facts of the matter as we see them. The next steps in the clarification process go something like this: "You are too busy?," "No," "Oh, you're not," "Yes." Lurking behind all this (which the Japanese also find entertaining) is a dictum which we quickly found commanding: keep the possible interests and desires of others constantly in mind. The pressure of continual awareness leads in some cases to automatic social functions, for example, the serving of tea just after one enters a house, no matter what time of day, since one may be cold or dry-throated.

In addition to relationships between persons, Japanese also specifies other aspects of experience quite exactly, aspects which English lightly brushes by. There are, for instance, a dozen nouns for "rain" depending on when and how it falls. But in other cases the language seems remarkably loose. There are no articles, definite or indefinite; personal pronouns are rare; and there is generally no distinction between singular and plural. This is not to suggest that numbers are treated lightly. In addition to the usual confusion over Japanese and Chinese pronunciations (each of which have particular applications), there is the matter of counters. If one is enumerating or referring to anything relatively long and thin, it is not sufficient to say, for instance, "one pencil," or "ten pencils." A suffix is attached to the number, adding the meaning "relatively long and thin thing." Hon is the counter in question, and it is irregular like most of them. Using Chinese numbers, one pencil is "ippon enpitsu," two, "nihon enpitsu," ten pencils, "jippon enpitsu," and so on, though the numbers involved are actually ichi ("one"), ni ("two"), and jū ("ten"). One gains only temporary relief from the disclosure that the same counter is good for chimneys and even loaves of French bread. Nevertheless, as Carroll points out, all major languages include means of expressing useful distinctions "whenever it is truly critical."

On the evidence of written Chinese records, it appears that Japanese had a linguistic identity at least by the first century A.D. At that time Chinese provided a stimulus towards written language, and contributed phonetic and grammatical elements as well. The two languages, however, have totally different stems and an important distinction. In Chinese, word order illuminates word function, while in Japanese, objects and subjects are identified by means of particles. The adaptation of concrete counterparts (verbs, adjectives, nouns) presented no problems, but the particles did. The imported Chinese characters were used in three ways according to Joseph K. Yamagiwa writing in Twelve Doors to Japan: 1) original Chinese meanings with pronunciation adapted to the Japanese phonetic system, 2) symbols to stand for Japanese words with Japanese readings, and 3) as abstract symbols for Japanese sounds. The last arose from the use of characters to stand for Japanese particles. The Chinese kanji whose sound most closely matched the sound of a Japanese particle was appropriated without regard for its original meaning - phonetically, in short. But though the phonetic function of (3) gave way to hiragana and katakana, (1) and (2) produced a permanent confusion. There are often two or more pronunciations for the same character, or rather for each meaning of each character, since meaning may be multiple.

Japanese has proved flexible enough to expand its resources constantly on demand, by assimilation, and to overcome all of the weaknesses ascribed to it by critics such as Hajime Nakamura (The Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples). Witness the level of scientific and social achievement which Japan has reached since finding release during the Meiji Era from its self-imposed isolation. But because of the phonetic limitations of the core language, assimilation has not always been easy. There are only five vowels (as compared with at least 11 in English), and each of these has a wide phonetic range. The normal pattern of syllable construction is consonant-vowel (CV), and a syllable can never end with a consonant except in the case of "n" (a result of Chinese inroads). Allowing for the reduced pool of consonants, "milk" becomes miruku and "strike" becomes sutoraiku. In each case, the consonant clusters - which are rare in Japanese - have been split. The two words above are examples of direct "transcriptions" from a foreign tongue, and this sort of borrowing from Western languages began as early as the 16th century. At other times, both past and present, the language takes shelter in Chinese roots to designate new concepts or objects. A fountain pen is known as mannerhitsu, literally "10,000-year Chinese brush," an enthusiast's appraisal to say the least.

Mathematically, there are severe limitations on the number of possible Japanese syllable sounds. In English the following types of syllable structure are in use: VC, CV, CCV, CCVV, CVC, etc., all of which can be used as word stems or components. In Japanese the practical limit is fixed through the existence of only one possibility, CV. Although there are now violations of this pattern, the generalization is valid. The almost invariable

pattern - CVCVCVCV - is reinforced by other principles including an equal time allotment for each syllable. In theory, this should result in a perfectly uniform sequence of very closely related sounds, all of which are unaccented (There are two intonational levels.). Over short spans, tatemono ("building"), it produces pleasing and facile excercises, but in the longer run, the problems mount, and one is faced with a "Peter-Piper-picked-a-peck-of-pickled-peppers" nightmare. As a starter, try Tabemono ya nomimono nado mo arimasu ("There are also foods, beverages, and so on."). Remember that there are no breaks or pauses between words and no accents, theoretically. Careful listening to an example tape revealed the loop-hole. Though there are no settled or formal stress accents, such stresses are superimposed on what would otherwise be an undifferentiated stream of similar sounds, arranging them for purposes of a particular phrase, into groups of two, three, four, and five. Watashi no gakko wa ano yama no ue ni arimasu, or, "my school is on top of that hill over there," is delivered at a rapid pace by making use of the following pattern of stress groupings: WATASHI NO GA_KOO WA ANO YAMA NO UE NI ARIMASU.

Speech is permeated by a sense of rapid, underlying pulse which is articulated by groupings in two's, three's, four's, and five's, and by the occasional gaps produced by silent vowels and "doubled consonants." The pauses do not generally correspond to word divisions, of course. These aural features present certain obvious problems for the poet and dramatist - since rhyming is trivially simple, and pulse relentless - but they do provide an enormous range of potentially useful ambiguity. The exaggerated and stunningly sustained enunciation of actors in classical narration or drama dissipates the anticipated aural problem completely. For his part, the Japanese poet generally ignores rhyme and concentrates on numerical patterns of syllables and ambiguity. We have been told that it is difficult for the Japanese to grasp the flavor of rhyme at all, apart from sustained demonstrations in readings by a speaker native to the language in question. As for ambiguity, it is frequently possible to read even the surface facts or narrative of a Japanese poem in more than one way, long before venturing into the subsurface implications.

Far from being poor in conceptual structure, as some have charged, the Japanese language demands and supports, by its surface of circumlocution, a complex web of awareness and consideration (Although this is not to say that it is well suited to logic as we think of it.). Psychologists have suggested that committing a thought too quickly to writing delays its full development. If the same holds true for spoken formulations, unuttered distinctions (necessarily made) should foster more thorough reflection. It is common to omit the subject from a sentence (particularly if it is human), although various clues such as honorifics are sometimes given. Confusion is increasing now, as the egalitarian outlook strikes down the use of honorifics; but

our teacher, Mr. Gen Iwasaki, assures us that in such classic tales as The Tale of Genji three or four pages frequently pass without a stated subject. One keeps score by honorifics alone.

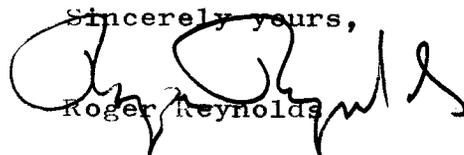
The suppression of direct reference is complemented by the language's tendency to promote inclusiveness. The particle mo contains the idea of the English "also" and "and" and more. If one lists a series of objects joined by a series of mo's, the implication is more than "there are also A, B, C, and D," becoming something like "there is also A which is included along with B which is also an integral part of the whole which includes also C ..., " and so forth. It is perhaps far-fetched to see in this a tacit emphasis on the condition of belonging, the reinforcing of inclusiveness, but the construction does smack of emotionalism when compared to the logistical, dispassionate English string.

The deliberate, tenacious vagueness of spoken and written language may not indicate a lack of precision in thought, but it does trouble communications. The recently consummated treaty between Japan and South Korea was written in English to ward off misunderstanding. Korean is, incidentally, the closest to Japanese linguistically, and the thread of relationships winds, surprisingly, across Mongolia, into Turkey, through Hungary, and finally to Finland. Many of the structural features mentioned above are common to these languages, though actual word cognates are few.

There seems to be a good deal of disagreement as to how seriously the linguistic-relativity theory should be taken, though some writers have taken it - or been taken by it - very far indeed. Nakamura marshals what amounts to an indictment of the Japanese social and intellectual structure on the basis of language. Though critics are anxious to puncture his claims, and those of other linguists, it is not easy to do so. One's ability to label small gradations of a condition does not mean that one can perceive finer distinctions than another person whose language supplies no specific labels for each such gradation. The Japanese are as wet in the rain as we, though twelve nouns may make it a more specific experience for them. But names and constructions may certainly allow one to explain conditions more easily to others, and hence to discuss and conceptualize about them more readily.

I don't doubt that "ideas," and structures of them, exist apart from word labels and grammars. The experience of new languages - if not of life and art - constantly strikes sparks in the mind, the glow from which cannot be readily circumscribed or projected. Whether language does or does not create a unique world view for its adherents, one thing seems certain: its fund of means does direct the speaker's attention to one or another facet of his experience. Theoretically, we may all be able to see the same events in our surroundings, but personality, environment, health, preoccupations, and language strongly influence which things we will pay attention to.

Sincerely yours,



Roger Reynolds