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THE NEXUS OF IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE AND THE TEACHING ENGLISH IN JAPAN

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Abstract

This essay is a collection of thoughts that have often occurred to me, with varying degrees of insistence, in my time teaching English in Japan. It focuses on a variety of topics centered on the difficulties and challenges facing Japanese students in learning English. Topics covered include the nexus of identity and language, the relationship between personality and language, meta-awareness, reading for meaning, and possibly different views of perfection held by Japanese and Western speakers. I hope to make it a consequence of what I convey that learning a new language is inseparable from living a language, and that means from living itself, with all that it entails.

Keywords: English Teaching, Language and Personality, Identity and Language.

1. Introduction

I have been teaching English to Japanese adults and children for over 10 years. It is natural that I should hope that in that amount of time I would have developed some understanding of what I was doing; nonetheless I find that I am still learning new things each day, and encountering new challenges with each student.

At least in this I should perhaps see myself in good company.

In scholarly writing it is customary for one to state a thesis and then lead forward from various observations and carefully conducted experiments, armed with an established logical apparatus designed toward proving or at least suggesting a plausible conclusion. But life is not so neatly laid out. While I feel I have developed some insight into the particulars of the case, I would be loath to try to encapsulate them in a neat and compelling conclusion. To the contrary, I would even propose that the very process of attempting to state the case in such terms involves a distortion of the actual wisdom (humble as it may be) that might be gleaned from the

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experience. Life is in one view an amalgam of fibrous and gelatinous interconnections, held together by an ineluctable gauge, often defying the space-time and light-speed limitations of the non-Euclidean manifold that forms the matrix of the human mind and spirit.

Thus, in writing an article such as this I am certainly more likely to reveal how little I know, than to even a rough extent demonstrate what little I may be on the verge of knowing. Examples of the dangers of intellectual hubris abound. Mathematicians strive for smooth, continuous, bounded, differentiable functions, but it seems that nature, and mathematics itself, is quite happy to present innumerable instances – chaos theory, asymptotics, singularity theory being well-known examples – that put the lie to that aspiration. Newtonians thought they had brought order to mechanics when Einstein said not so fast, only to be outnumbered by Bohr and Heisenberg and Schrodinger. Von Neuman joined them in putting the mathematical nail in the coffin of hidden variables, only to have Bohm and Bell claw it out 20 years later.¹ In recent years, Homotopy Type Theory has brought under one Topos-logical roof the seemingly incompatible formalist and intuitionist architectures of Hilbert and Brewer. This is the way of science – the closer we are to finding the holy grail, the sooner it is the cup that dissolves the acid within it.

Therefore I hope I will be excused for shedding some of the standard (linear) expository techniques and proceeding via wormholes and other transcendent means to take otherwise forbidden intellectual and argumentative leaps to describe something that ever eludes me but continually offers me insight and mystery, something held together by perhaps but one constant...Japan seemed inscrutable to me when I arrived here in occidental ignorance, and remains so even as its universe (that of my ignorance) expands.

2. Nexus of identity and language

“In the beginning was the word” goes the famous biblical passage, itself both instituting and announcing the ontological importance of Language to the very core of Identity. Without wishing to lapse into stereotypes, it seems common perception that members of linguistic communities often share qualities within themselves of both a cultural (exogenous) and psychological (endogenous) sort. Like attracts like. The Japanese^a have made a cottage industry of asserting a certain uniqueness of thought, and of civilization, matters which I am not wont to question. Furthermore, Japan is not unique in occasionally taking this to extremes (nishiron. America First), for the temptation is always there to mistake the comfort of our home language and the inability to escape the bounds of our own linguistic and social bonds for a kind of permanence and universality of our own particular identity. But, from my vantage point, as one who sits perched between two cultures who seem at times to both communicate intimately and hide their true nature from each other, it seems that the near (I emphasize near) inseparability of one's mode of speech from one quality of thought is both an opportunity and an obstacle to the learning of a new language.

3. Think in English

The obstacle for Japanese learning English so often appears to be they can't escape from Japanese-ness itself. The languages are divided by a gulf grammatical akin to trying to pick up a grain of rice with only one chopstick...stabbing at it usually makes a mess. It is not that either (language) is deficient, but merely that the tool has to match purpose. One chopstick is quite sufficient to grab a rice ball...and in Japan, they eat soup with chopsticks, which when first encountered by the average American requires a shift in one's understanding of what soup is. One of the most prominent of these chopsticks is the fact that English puts the verb in the middle of the sentence, whereas the verb in Japanese sits at the end. This makes direct translation much more difficult, and leads to constant exhortations on my part to

^a. Here and throughout this article, for the sake of convenience and to avoid adding even more excess verbiage (than I am already prone to), I will refer to “Japanese” merely to indicate my feeling that some Japanese people appear to possess perhaps a tendency in the direction I wish to contrast. It will go without saying (other than here) that not all or even a majority of Japanese people possess these qualities, or even that they possess them in greater quantity than might be found elsewhere, but merely that as a foreigner living here, I have found it a common experience for these qualities to be felt in a prominent way. It should also go without further note that many Japanese people are fluent in English, and are entirely free of any qualities that I may describe, again merely as a matter of convenient shorthand, as “Japanese” herein. Many Japanese whom I have expressed my observations to have concurred with them, though certainly there may be many who disagree. My statements are not about the Japanese people, per se, but about how someone coming from one place experiences being in another place. It is more a reflection on the place I came from than the place where I am. Coming from a barren land, even the single snowflake seems a blizzard.

"think in English". Think in English!?! How is that possible, when English itself is what one has yet to think?!

4. Developing a New Personality

As a form of sound, language shares its material substrate with music; music can be imbued with language in song, and language can be imbued with music in prosody. Cultures and epochs have in their turn given rise to the great diversity of global musical styles (historical, national, and individual) that we can easily recognize, just as we recognize, even without understanding a word, that certain speech "sounds" Arabic, or Russian. This is an imperfect identification. It is in my lifetime that mastery of Classical Western Music no longer became the sole province of European performers. In fact,

Asia appears poised to become the future center of the Western classical music concert culturescape.²

Why is it so difficult, then, given the no less effort and urgency expended, that everyday Japanese still struggle with English? Language is more than just music perhaps, but I think the answer goes deeper. We believe we recognize what makes Beethoven Beethoven, regardless of the performer. Each language has its own sound. This sound is more than just mood, or emotion, but I will claim, personality, character. Thus to speak English is become a different person, to take on a different persona. And I think this is where the obstacle lies. The fluidity in identity, the lack of inhibition, and the ease of linguistic attainment that children demonstrate are of a piece, and much more difficult for adults, such as we are, to lay hold of.

5. Developing a New Personality

To make the point that this is not a merely spurious analogy, let me repeat an oft repeated trope that one key difference between Japan (and asian cultures in general) and English/Western European culture and language is that both semantically and culturally speaking, Japanese is high context and English is low context³, where contextuality is a matter of how explicit one must be to convey information.

The common view is that learning a language is a matter of mastering grammar and vocabulary, and on this level the difference in contextuality is quite evident. Context matters in any language, but in English one is required *more often* to insert grammatical/semantical elements even if they are redundant from the context. In Japanese a lone adjective has full sentential force, in English the lone adjective dies without accompaniment. Or, more broadly, in English one first looks within the sentence itself for clues to its meaning, and in speaking or writing one must provide those clues in ways that a Japanese person is happy to leave ambiguous. Or, again, to show this is not a spurious example, the mere presence of articles and count nouns, essentially absent in Japanese, shows the greater explicitness required for well-formed conversation.

6. Meta-awareness

But, as I said, I claim this runs deeper, for not only matters of semantics, but matters of meta-significance, such as cultural diversity, the way arguments are presented, collectivism and individualism, tradition and change, facial expression, and even politics are differentiated by this contextuality. And I think it is in these realms, not mastery of English qua English, that Japanese learners face their greatest difficulty, not the least because it is easy to underestimate how deep and comprehensive these seemingly gradual and subjective differences are. Moreover, our tendency to take for granted, as we all do, that these factors are not important in the plain business of learning to make a few simple sentences, something even children can do, makes it more difficult to observe and amass the necessary means and tools to combat these formidable obstacles.

In each of these areas, each profoundly important to any human's sense of place and belonging, Japanese and English are pulled apart and separated by a gulf. Take facial expression – until recently received wisdom was that facial expressions for basic emotions, like the smile that evokes happiness, were "universally" recognized;⁴ recent research has suggested that in fact, Western Caucasians and East Asians may actually recognize and express emotions differently, with Eastern Asians preferentially using

eye motions to register emotions in ways that we would express throughout our facial features.⁵ This is not to say that stereotypes of flat affect or overemotionalism often ascribed to certain nationalities are valid, but how difficult it is to change the way our face reflects what we wish to communicate. To say something meaningful and emotional without showing any affect is just as hard for an “emotional” person as it would be for a “phlegmatic” person to say something banal while exuding emotion. And yet to attempt (and often fail, alas) this feat of magic is exactly what it feels like when one incarnates into a new language role.

How does one manage to make this leap then, from one context to another? As a speaker of several languages, I have always felt that my personality changes as I use one or the other. In English I feel as though I am outgoing, gregarious and expressive, in French more romantic, but in Japanese I feel curt and gruff. At first, I must assume some of this may derive from my own internalization of prevalent stereotypes about these people. No doubt much of this is a reflection of my differing mastery or education with respect to these. However, even accounting for these, I also feel, to some extent, this reflects the way the actual phonology (production), rhythm, tempo, pitch of their linguistic music affects me, just as these would be considered as qualities of music.

7. Inside Out and Outside In

Observing for many years my students climb, swim, and dive over the differing landscapes of their mother tongue and their adopted one, I feel that Japanese is an Outside In language, where one's attention is on the outside, and one looks in, whereas English is contrarily Inside Out. Like passengers on a train, English speakers live within the textual train they construct, moving along, and glancing occasionally to the outside world for a clue as to where they are. For Japanese the outside world is always present as support, as on a boat, and one steers gently with a push here and a push there, always aware that waves may carry you. In the end, one may reach a destination, or one may drift, aimlessly aimful. I don't mean that Japanese people experience Japanese this way, but that when they speak English, in their distinctly Japanese way, it evokes this image in me as listener.

8. Reading for Meaning

One of the most predominant challenges for Japanese people when reading English out loud is learning to read for meaning. Of course, I mean more than just that they struggle interpreting the letters, words, and sentences. I read Japanese very slowly, so the first try is always unintelligible. But if I reread a passage enough, and make clear the meaning in my mind of not only each part, but of the meaning within the text of the passage, I can make a reasonable attempt at natural sounding Japanese, i.e. speaking as (I imagine) the Japanese do. The key is to remain firm in reading to convey meaning, not as repeating words. If I can reach the point where my students can understand this conceptually, almost always they reach a point where they get it. I insist they form a clear mental image of what they are reading. More than once my students, after receiving this explanation, and rereading the text have gasped in surprise at hearing themselves reading fluently. One of the interesting things that often happens in this instance is that the apparent emotionless and flatness of the typical Japanese reading suddenly gives way to a clear emotivity that seems to come from inside. I can literally hear the image they are forming in their mind. What is inside comes out. Naturally, this requires a lot of support and practice, and is not easy to repeat. But having done it once, I find students suddenly have a certain confidence they will be able to speak English.

9. A Zero Kind of Excellence

This brings me however to a further problem that often plagues Japanese speakers. Ambition. The need for perfection...to be error free.^b This bugbear is the bane of many a Japanese person's existence. They want so badly to speak perfect English – fluent, impeccable, native English, and consequently feel a sense of failure, after years of study, at not being able to do so. This leads to eloquent paradoxes of eloquence, such as, "I can't speak English," she said, in perfect English."

Now, it is true that we westerners also strive for perfection and mastery. But for us, I would claim,

^b Fear of failure seems to be a by-product of what is in other respects a fine educational system. This is a complaint many Japanese themselves will ruefully make, especially that there is an over-reliance on testing and memorization.

perfection is a matter of excellence...whereas for Japanese perfection is a kind of zero-state, neither too much or too little.^c Excellence, as I mean it here, is a product of a conception of **individual** achievement, and of standing out, being outstanding, rising above or beyond one's surroundings, a linear progression, whereas the perfection I contrast to it is a striving for just the opposite, to find "perfect" non-linear harmony with the environment, to reach a blended and invisible unblemished purity, as inscrutable as a koan. However, having this conception of perfection ingrained within one's psyche becomes the very obstacle to achieving what one desires, for English, by its structure and by its cultural roots, can only be perfected by opening up to the English "way of being".

While often embracing and adopting many aspects of foreign cultures with alacrity and *sans* hesitation, from baseball to baguettes, it is sometimes difficult for Japanese (or anyone) to do this without alteration. While adept at borrowing words, Japanese (and all of us) run up against the reality that, from calques to creoles, linguistic contact inevitably and understandably changes the meaning and flavor of fresh-cooked locutions as they begin life atop a new tongue.

Japanese students understandably worry that they lack sufficient skill to say what they mean. The answer lies not so much in borrowing but abandoning, of letting go of one's reliance on habits falsely inculcated through ages of memorization of key phrases devoid of context and meaning and music. And, likewise, those wishing to understand Japanese, the people and the language, must abandon our preconceptions and habits with regard to these.

10. Questions About a Rose by Another Name

In lieu of or by way of conclusion let me put forth some questions in the spirit of open inquiry. It is Bernstein's view that:

the form of the social relations...generates distinct linguistic forms or codes and these...transmit the culture".⁶

I would offer as a corollary that linguistic forms influence one's perception and mode of being in the world. "A rose is a rose is a rose" goes the phrase, but is a rose for me the same as the *bara* that a Japanese person experiences? The question is not so much as to whether the answer is yes or no, for I would aver that good arguments could be made in either direction, but how comfortable one feels with each of those alternatives. Can we learn to accept both possibilities being true at the same time? Adopting a new linguistic identity requires embracing a certain discomfort and dislocation...the discomfort of ignorance in the sense of not knowing and being okay that one does not know, and seeing, as we do, the freedom in that. This is a deeply personal change that takes time and involves self-reflection and awareness, but it is a change that has innumerable rewards.

^c. To be clear, exceptions abound in both directions.

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