THE JAPANESE PSYCHO-SOCIAL BARRIER IN LEARNING ENGLISH

By Fred J. Edamatsu

The Japanese are often heard wondering why they are inept in acquiring proficiency in speaking English. They compare their abilities with those of non-Japanese people, like the Filipinos and Chinese, for whom English is an adventive tongue, and conclude that as a whole they are inferior. Even without making an internation comparison, by assessing the situation within their national boundary—the number of years spent in learning English (six in high school and, for many, additional enrollment in classes at language schools and institutions of higher learning)—they surmise that the "oral" yield is not commensurate with the amount of time and energy invested.

It is not within the scope of this paper to investigate the veracity of this self-assessment. My purpose here is to point out the existence of a barrier that impedes the learning of English (possibly, any foreign language, but I shall remain within the confines of my teaching experience and use English for illustration). By becoming cognizant of a psycho-social trait that militates against their effort to master English, the Japanese may find a way to succeed in making English their *de facto*, not just *de jure*, second language.

Before exploring this barrier, certain psycho-linguistic postulates need to be stated.

It is widely held by semanticists that language is the expression of a mental process comprising: the perception of stimuli, the organization of the precepts within a framework of memory schemata, and the reproduction of the mental responses resulting therefrom. The learner begins (assuming with his native language) by representing in conventional verbal forms objects and basic sensations, such as "fire" and "hot". As he matures, the representations become complex, such as "happiness," which can have a separate meaning for each individual because of the innumerable referents and references embraced by that term. At this level of the learner's linguistic development, a "linguistic item is a symbol or a summary of a myth shared by a linguistic community."[1] It follows then, as the night the day that linguistic "entities studied for their meaning must be dealt with within a framework, on the one hand a framework within a language and on the other hand a framework within a culture."[2] This fact can be easily apprehended when we observe how the meaning of a linguistic item is defined by its effect on people's behavior in an environmental context; for example, "Fire!" to a crowd in a theater or to a group of soldiers readied with loaded gun.[3] Another aspect of work as devised in a specific culture is illustrated in the meaning conveyed by the verb "run" in the following statements: (1) boy/dog runs, (2) water/oil runs, (3) motor/refrigerator runs. In each group a common feature(s) is shared by the subjects: (1) "animate beings" and "legs," (2) "liquidity," (3) "operate in place" and "stationary equipment."[4] These statements are rudimentary utterances. In actuality, most utterances have a more complex surface structure in order to convey the complex meanings of the underlying structure or representation. To govern the surface structure of an utterance, rules of syntax are formulated. These rules, according to what investigations thus far reveal, recognize certain linguistic universals, determined by innate predilections of the mental process, and each language has its own set of rules, determined (by implication) by the innate predilections of the mental processes of the society.[5]

These postulates share the implication that language is used as a communication tool, and, what is an important assumption for the purpose of this discussion, to perform this manifold function, it is generated

and governed by the collective mental processes of the linguistic community that have been conventionalized into patterns. Therefore, it is inextricably interwoven with the fibers of the cultural network, and furthermore, to acquire proficiency in a language, one would have to comprehend the culture to which it is endemic, especially the mental processes. This *sine qua non* has given rise to the axiom, "In order to speak a language, you must be able to think in that language."

This axiom is more tenable if one regards any society as a whole consisting of parts of which language is one. Such an aggregative view invites invocation of the Gestalt tenet that the whole is composed of parts which are interdependent and interact; the characteristics of the whole determine the characteristics of each part; therefore, no part has an independently meaningful identity or can be indifferent to the other parts. This means that, in speaking a language, the interactions of that language and the referents of its culture can not be dismissed. Rote learning (e.g., memorization of rules of grammar, vocabulary lists), therefore, is not the best method of learning

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a language; it divorces language from its natural context, its culture. The learner should keep the language in its cultural matrix and in this context yield his mind to the thinking processes of the society that begot and fostered it. Any thinking process consists of insight and comprehension, which entail reactivation of pertinent past experiences by present experiences and which associate the attributes of present perceptions with those stored in memory. Unless the learner of a foreign language submits to these conditions, his utterances will not function correctly; he will not be able to conduct a communication-and-response cycle of chain reactions. Instead, his utterances will break the chain. Takeo Doi reports a personal incident in point in his *The Anatomy of Dependence.*[6] In his early days in America, he puzzled his American superior, who had done him a favor, by saying, "I'm sorry," since he thought it improper to say "Thank you" to a superior and moreover he wanted to express obligation, these being the typical thoughts that would cross a Japanese mind in such a situation.

All sound minds may unanimously agree that, if Japanese tongues are to speak English, their minds must transmigrate to an English milieu; but this deed is easier assented to than executed. For it is very difficult for most Japanese to think like a foreigner. While few, I venture to say none would deny that ethnic identity is a global trait, it is especially keen in a Japanese Edwin O. Reischauer, whose intimate knowledge of Japan and its people is widely acclaimed, holds the opinion, borne of "intuitive and personal" source, that the feeling "of being unique. . . is sharper for them than for most people who participate in international life."[7] A Japanese is invariably conscious of the fact that he is a Japanese, not a *gaijin,* that foreigners are *gaijin,* not Japanese. Ichiro Kawasaki, in describing Japanese homogeneity, explains that "the individual Japanese identifies himself more intensely with the nation than does the Westerner."[8] For instance, a European may travel with a passport issued by a foreign authority; a Japanese would not entertain such an idea. "He feels everything related to a foreigner is something quite alien to him." Apparently, it is intolerable for a Japanese to permit himself to be identified or regarded as a foreigner. Such ethnic introversion would make it difficult, possibly nigh impossible, for him to think like a foreigner, let alone muster the desire to.

This ethnic isolation is deeply ingrained as proven by psycho-linguistic manifestations. In the Japanese lexicon things of foreign origin are frequently distinguished from their Japanese counterparts by the recruitment of nouns of foreign origin while vernacular words are assigned to native things (however, the latter may be imports of long, long ago from a foreign source). Rice served in a foreign-style meal is called *raisu* (from "rice") and is not served in a Japanese rice bowl, but, if served in a Japanese-style meal, it would be called

gohan and served in a traditional rice bowl, even though the two may be cooked exactly alike and even in the same pot. Talking about bowls–a traditional Japanese bowl is called *donburi* (usually ceramic) but a foreign-type bowl (the use of plastic or glass material will often betray its alienism) is called *boru* (from "bowl"). Many non-Japanese people are not aware of such a foreign-versus-domestic nomenclature until they come in contact with the Japanese language.

One will wonder, "Why this high degree of ethnic identity?" The explanation must begin with a declaration of the intense group consciousness that lies at the foundation of Japanese society. Chie Nakane in her monumental analysis of Japanese society describes the basic structure that is faithfully adopted in the major types of group formations which the Japanese organize and through which individuals must function. [9] It is infeasible to summarize the relevant passages on the character and behavioral patterns of the Japanese that are shaped by the framework of the society, but it needs mentioning that the individual functions only as a member of and in concert with a group. The family unit with its hierarchical configuration forms the nucleus; all other groups–villages, schools, political bodies, social and professional associations, economic institutions, the nation–are structured analogously; that is, each member belongs to a stratum according to his role, the strata are tiered vertically to diagram the hierarchy, and the complementarity of the respective functions of the strata serves as a cohesive agent for the entire group. Individual autonomy is suppressed, and loyalty is emphasized, for solidarity is of paramount importance to the survival of the group. An inevitable derivative of such an orientation to group commitment in all phases of life is the consciousness of "we" as contradistinguished from "others".

One will wonder next, "Don't and can't individuals resist this herding?" James Clark Moloney provides the answer, which attests to the effectiveness of Japanese education. Every aspect of it disindividualizes, for individualism is an evil that breeds conflict and hence is inimical to group harmony. To set disindividualization afoot,

> ...at birth a person is expected to become nothing at all *(mimpi)*. He is directed to respect authority *(kanzan)*. He is trained to obligate himself obsequiously to the father *(ko)* or to any father or parent substitute *(oya bun)*. . .

Dare he flee to the domain of a maverick, ostracism will immobolize the self-willed soul . . . and thus coerce him back to the fold where a life of conformity awaits him.

The foregoing explanation seems to ascribe the remarkable degree of conformity to Procrustean measures. Such an inference ignores a psychological phenomenon that pervades Japanese society. It is called *amae*[11]. There is no English equivalent for this term; it may be roughly defined as a relationship of dependence between a self-indulgent party and an indulgent party, the former depending on the good will of the latter. *Amae* is a great motivating force, as implied in Doi's explanations of various actions and reactions in Japanese behavior which are proliferations of *amae*. One can not miss the further implication that dependence induces people to stay put; people conform to the expectations and demands of those on whose good will they depend. The closed fellowship is thus self-perpetuated.

Unable to hatch out from his ethnic shell, the Japanese learner can not take wings to that English clime where his tongue can do its thing. Unblessed by the ties that bind, he has difficulty in shaping his perceptions into the linguistic patterns that are incorporated in the English language. As Reta Gilbert stressed in her lecture on communication, language originates in perception in that it states "how we perceive" reality.[12] This "how," one might add, is the interpretation of reality and is visible in the thought patterns adopted in each language. The Japanese learner must, prior to mastering English, perform the task of perceiving in accordance with "English" conventions. To undergo this psycho-metamorphosis involves a formidable restructuring of his mental and emotional orientation.

The major hurdles are the far-reaching

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incongruities in concepts, attitudes, and values between the Japanese culture and Western culture. An appropriate illustration is Ruth Benedict's famous comparison of the means used by the Japanese and American societies to discipline moral conduct.[13] She refers to the former as a shame culture and the latter as a guilt culture in accordance with the preponderance given to the one or the other. In the Japanese society self-respect is sought by circumspect behavior. Shame is avoided by not giving cause for censure. External sanction plays an indispensable role. Antithetically, in the American society self-respect is sought by adherence to absolute standards of conduct. Guilt is avoided by not giving the conscience cause to accuse External sanction plays no role. The emphasis adopted by the two societies to imbue virtue are antipodal. Shame is a group affair, guilt is an individual affair. When expressing in English concepts, attitudes, and values of shame, guilt and morality, a Japanese has to grasp the Western versions that are alien to his mores.

Takeo Doi's descriptions of the forms of *amae* in Japanese thought and behavior likewise indicate the snafu the Japanese may encounter in putting their thoughts in English. For instance, *suneru,* which he likens to "to be sulky," is defined as a state of mind resulting from the denial of *amae.* It:

> occurs when one is not allowed to be straightforwardly self-indulgent, yet the attitude comprises in itself a certain degree of that same self-indulgence.[14]

This is an instance in which the Japanese would have to understand how an English speaker would perceive the particular situation to describe it.

Benedict's discussion summons to recall Hajime Nakamura's comments about the traditional thinking process of the Japanese.[15] Benedict indicates that self-respect is principle-oriented in American society but social-oriented in Japanese society. This dichotomy illustrates the sum and substance of Nakamura's paper that Japanese thinking, unlike Western patterns of thought, is more conscious of human relationships than of abstractions. For instance, with respect to self-respect, interpersonal propriety supersedes impersonal principles. A person's relationship to other persons is of greater importance than his recognition of universal truths. Nakamura attributes this outlook to an empiric predilection for immediate experience over metaphysical theory, particular phenomena over universals.[16] The Japanese do not think in terms of systematic thought; this requires logic. They prefer emotion and intuition, the experience of the moment. And their language was shaped to serve this predilection. For instance, number is not explicitly stated in Japanese sentences because the thought of the sentences pays more recognition to human relationships, which implicitly indicate the singular and plural. The individual, whether classified as first or second or third person, does not exist separately but is entangled in a relationship with others; number is implied by relationship. However, by the same token of relationship, first and second person pronouns make clear distinctions between singular and plural morphologically, reflecting circumspect awareness of the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. In the choice of personal pronouns one must be highly attentive not only to the number but also to social rank and degree of familiarity. Nakamura goes on to point out that in the Japanese language there are no distinctions between persons and numbers in verbs, between singular and plural and genders in nouns. There are no articles, and the subject is frequently omitted. He ascribes these features to the Japanese propensity for vagueness emotionalism, intuitiveness, aestheticism, and, conversely, their non-logical thinking, their inattentiveness to precise expression of the various aspects of the universe.

For someone who has evolved from such a linguistic background, would it matter whether one says "three books" or "three book?" What need is there for

the morpheme "s?" It's redundant. The argument that logical thinking prescribes a plural noun to represent a plural subject would lack cogency to a mind not attuned to the logical way. "Three" denotes plurality patently to avoid questions and confusion; singularity need not enter the mind. Likewise, if the sentence is continued to "three books weigh," the absence or presence of the morpheme "s" in the verb is of no consequence because the significance of the verb is predication of a physical property of the subject, the plurality of which is clearly stated. The precision, the agreement of entities in a complex of number, gender, and person, and the rigidity of analytical and logical expression in English impose on the Japanese learner a strenuous workout.

Chie Nakane points out another problem area. The Japanese language, in her description, appears like a tool of a shape and use different from those of English. "Behavior and language are intimately interwoven in Japan."[17] Since, as stated earlier, the Japanese are ever aware of their relative ranks, even in their daily affairs, this awareness is omnipresent in their communication. The most obvious expression of it is in the use of honorifics. Certain expressions are used when addressing a superior, and these are subdivided to indicate the degree of superiority. They are never used when speaking to an inferior, for whom a separate set of expressions are designated, and this set also has subsets. English can not provide equivalents, for English is tailored for egalitarianism. When speaking English, the Japanese must think democratically. This is not easy. Democracy, characterized by horizontal interrelationships, is antithetical to the vertical configuration of Japanese inter-relationships discussed previously; so the Japanese reject its view of equality.[18] This rejection was demonstrated after World War II when democracy was declared an established fact in Japan. However, the term does not have the meaning it has in America from where it was imported. To the Japanese, it means harmony and consensus of the group, the group still maintaining its time-honored rank stratification. Therefore, to speak English, in other words, to speak to equals or in an equal-like manner, requires a psychological reorientation which the Japanese mentality resists.

For the Japanese learner the awareness of his psycho-social handicaps and the determination to overcome them are necessary. For the English teacher, assisting his pupil to think like an English speaker is necessary; he must not only teach the language but also remodel the mind. Both must be aware of the fact (just as James Clark Moloney realizes that occidental psychoanalysis, which is prescribed for patients in a society where the individual is emphasized, can not serve the Japanese society which de-emphasizes the individual)[19] that the English language will not serve Japanese patterns of perception. The Japanese, in speaking English, must redesign his patterns.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Karl Vossler, *Geist und Kulture in der Sprache* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1925), as quoted in Winfred P. Lehman, *Descriptive Linguistics* (N.Y.: Random House, 1972), p. 200.

[2]*Ibid.*

[3]Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935).

[4]Herbert Rubinstein, "Directions in Semantic Research," in *Seminar on Computational Linguistics,* ed. A.W. Pratt *et. al.* (Washington, D.C.: Public Health Service Publication, No. 1716, 1966), p. 201.

[5]Herbert H. and Eve V. Clark, *Psychology and Language* (N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 545 ff.

[6]Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence,* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1973), pp. 11-12.

[7] Edwin O. Reischaur, *The Japanese* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1977), p. 401.

[8]Ichiro Kawasaki, *Japan Unmasked* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1969), pp. 151-52, 158.

[9]Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

[10]James Clark Moloney, *Understanding the Japanese Mind* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1954), Ch. 1, *Passim.*

[11]Doi, pp. 11-12.

[12]Reta Gilbert, "Cross-Cultural Communication," lecture delivered at the meeting of the Kanto Association of Language Teachers, Tokyo, January 8, 1978.

[13]Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1954), pp. 219-27.

[14]Doi, p. 29.

[15]Hajime Nakamura, "Consciousness of the Individual and the Universal Among the Japanese," in *The Japanese Mind,* ed. Charles A. Moore, (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1967), pp. 179-200.

[16]The role of "immediate experience" in Japanese culture and its origin in Buddhism form the subject of Hideo Kishimoto's essay, "Some Japanese Cultural Traits and Religions," in *The Japanese Mind,* ed. Charles A. Moore (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1967), pp. 111-19.

[17]Nakane, pp. 31-35.

[18]*Ibid.,* pp. 148-53.

[19]Moloney, Ch. 1, *passim.*