

Japanese – A Fuzzy Language

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I had three books I wished to present as a gift to a Japanese friend. I intended to give them as is without any formal wrapping paper to cover them, but a Japanese co-worker suggested that they be wrapped together in a bundle with decorative wrapping paper. The co-worker had only a couple minutes for the job and it looked rather haphazardly done. “Just tell her you did it!” she suggested.

Japanese people always make allowances for foreigners, and especially for Americans, Canadians, and Europeans.

I replied, “Well, I don’t want to lie and say I wrapped the gift when I didn’t actually wrap it myself!” But then it dawned on me that I could tell my Japanese friend the same thing using the Japanese language and yet **not be lying!**

You may ask, “How is this possible?” It’s because the Japanese language has **no verb conjugation according to person or number** as do most Indo-European languages. Not only does Japanese not have verb conjugation, but it also drops the sentence subject (who is speaking) when it’s supposedly understood! This means I could say in Japanese, “Isoide tsutsumimashita” (was wrapped quickly) which would be interpreted that I wrapped it in a hurry when it could also mean, “he”, “she”, even “they”, wrapped it in a hurry!

Politicians in the West often make what sounds to be statements of fact and yet are not saying anything truly meaningful at all. Just think how even easier it is for a Japanese politician to be ambiguous in a language with no verb conjugation, and which also drops the sentence subject because it’s already *assumed* to be understood!

Japanese is much more specific when you put it in writing. Chinese characters are very specific in meaning. The characters at the top of the page are pronounced omikoshi, the ceremonial box the Japanese carry during the Obon festival. Many people believe the Japanese got that idea from people from Israel who migrated to Japan two centuries ago! It resembles the Ark of the Covenant!

Japan’s Christian Roots

十和田

To

wa

da

Towada in Chinese/Japanese characters

There is evidence that Christianity may have come to Japan long before the Jesuit priest, Francis Xavier reached Japan on July 27, 1549. The northern prefecture of Honshu, Aomori, contains many Christian symbols that predate Xaxier, things from the 2rd or 3rd century!

There is an area in Aomori Prefecture, Northern Honshu, called "Towada". Lake Towada is famous and the largest lake in northern Japan.

As you see, the first character is a cross. It's the Chinese character for the number 10 but nevertheless, it is a cross shape. I believe here it's meant to be the Cross of Christ!

The second character means "peace" and the third and last character means rice field. It literally means "Fields of peace by the cross of Christ." Christians in the past were numerous in this part of Japan. Not far is the town of Shingo which supposedly has the grave of Jesus Christ! True Bible believers know this cannot be so because Jesus rose to Heaven and didn't stay in the grave. But nevertheless just the fact that there are Christian symbols in the area indicates that Japanese culture may have been heavily influenced by Christianity in the first millennium. This knowledge was suppressed.

I didn't make this stuff up. I heard it directly from the Japanese people. I've lived in Japan now for nearly 40 years.

Though most Japanese do not know or read the Bible, their culture contains many principles taught in the New Testament, principles such as hard work, hospitality to strangers, generosity, humility, etc.. Some may argue that most cultures in the world can say the same. However, I think one cannot argue that Japan still has one of the lowest rates of violent crime in the world.

[Fun translating text from Japanese to English](#)

One of my jobs is doing text translations on PC from Japanese to English. I

use Google translate in the process, but only as a double check to make sure I didn't miss any phrases or words. I found Google does a fairly decent job translating Indo-European languages. I studied Russian and discovered that Google is OK to translate texts such as emails in Russian. An example from Bible text of Matthew 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

The Russian Bible says:

Блаженны миротворцы, ибо они будут наречены сынами Божиими.

Put that in Google translate and you get:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Not bad at all!

The Japanese Bible says:

[illegible]

Put that in Google translate and you get:

Build a peaceful people, and fortunately, they shall be called sons of God.

Not nearly as good as the Google translation from Russian.

Here's an example of a Japanese Paragraph I worked on today. It's the first paragraph of a friend who is sharing a strange dream she had one night:

[illegible]

Google translation says:

My father was a person who walks of life extraordinary. He has a great impact on her daughter, I grew up with him continues to be

enlightened. The person died of liver cancer. The ultimate in epic also a way to die. He seemed to deliberately refuse to endure the pain by his morphine. Many years ago, lost in sorrow and pain of cancer too late to all the world seems to love him forever. My father seemed to share the pain in her right mind to endure the pain until the end of times suffer severe pain from cancer is diagnosed.

My translation:

My father lived an extraordinary life. He had a great influence on me. I grew up enlightened with his wisdom. He died of liver cancer. His death was as extraordinary as his life was. He deliberately refused to take morphine and choose to endure pain instead. Many years ago he also lost his one and true love who died of cancer discovered too late. It seems the sadness and pain of her passing never faded from his heart. Ever since my father was diagnosed to have cancer, he seemed to share my mother's pain and endured severe pain until the very end clinging barely on to his sanity.

Reasons why a machine translator like Google has great difficulty with Japanese sentences:

- Japanese has no verb conjugation and therefore the person speaking cannot be determined by the grammar. It can only be determined by human logic based on the content.
- Japanese is a language of metaphors. Ideas are expressed differently using different words than would be used in most European languages.
- The subject of a Japanese sentence is often dropped because it is supposed to be already understood by the listener.
- Nouns have no gender and the only two pronouns with gender, kare, kanojo (he, she) are often dropped from the sentence when supposed to be understood. And these two pronouns can even be interpreted by the listener as one's boyfriend or girlfriend according to the context it is used!
- The predicate and main verb of the sentence comes at the very end of the sentence, not immediately after the subject as in English. There may be several clauses in between. A machine translation of a long sentence is often nonsensical.

Back in the mid '90s I once read an article that predicted by the year 2000, voice machine translators would be so good that a voice of a person in Tokyo speaking in Japanese on the phone would come out in English to the other party in America! I cannot foresee that ever happening when even text only translations are still very poorly done.

I often have to add words not present in the original to my translation because I know that is probably what the person meant to say. In other words, a percentage of the translation is really interpreting what the writer means.

It's only because I know the author personally that I can interpret the author's text with a good degree of accuracy, something that no machine or software no matter how sophisticated could ever do. Are my translations OK? The author seems to think so. ☐

Japanese traditional drink for the new year: Otoso

お屠蘇

Otoso, the traditional Japanese drink during new year celebration.

Every year for three days from January 1st, the Japanese drink [Otoso](#) as part of their celebration of the new year. It is made of spiced Japanese rice wine.

Most Japanese don't know the root of the meaning of the word Otoso which literally means, "something that was slaughtered and resurrected." Yes! This name literally has Christian roots! It has to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Reading from left to right as in English, the first character for O makes a word honorific, the same meaning as the o in *Ocha*, Japanese green tea.

The second character with the sound of to means a person who was slaughtered or killed.

The third character, so, has the meaning of resurrection, coming back to life. Interestingly part of this character is the character for fish. A fish symbol was used among early Christians as a secret sign to know one other. The top part of the character is used in all characters that are plants. Some people say it represents a crown of thorns. The right part of the character has the meaning of tree with a cross.

There is not a single educated Japanese person who will argue the meaning of those Chinese characters! I repeat, not a single person. It is as clear as the difference between black and white to them. Some doubters may argue the Christian roots of that word, but they will not deny those characters mean something killed / resurrected.

There are **many** things in Japanese language and culture that indicate Christianity came to Japan far earlier than most Japanese believe. They were

taught in school that Christianity first came to Japan with a Jesuit priest, Francis Xavier, who came to Japan in 1549. But evidence abounds that Christian missionaries came to Japan much earlier, from the 2nd century. This knowledge has been covered.

I hope to add to this blog from time to time more information about Christian influence in Japan that have become central to Japan culture.

Interesting facts about the Japanese Language



The character above is the Chinese/Japanese ideograph meaning love.

I've lived in Japan about half my life or about 27 years at the time of this post. I have been called a good speaker of what is considered one of the most difficult languages to learn in the world.

Is there *anything* easy about Japanese?

Yes!

- No verb conjugation!
- No gender of nouns!
- No articles (a, the)
- Number (singular and plural) not important and barely exists!
- Not hard to learn to pronounce as there are only 48 sounds consisting of 5 vowels and 11 consonants!
- Syntax or the word order of a sentence, excepting the final verb, is totally free!

Why then is Japanese considered difficult to learn?

- The written language has 3 methods of writing: Thousands of Chinese characters called *Kanji* and 2 Japanese syllabaries of 48 characters each called *Hiragana* and *Katakana*. Japanese is therefore considered the most complex written language in the world. In order to get barely by, you need to learn all of the Hiragana and Katakana and at least a few hundred Kanji. Kanji is used for words, hiragana for verb endings and particles after nouns to denote the case of the noun, and katakana is used for foreign loan words and names.
- Most words have two roots of pronunciation, a Chinese root and a Japanese root. They are totally different sounds. So learning Japanese is almost like learning the vocabulary of 2 languages at once!



All of the 8 Kanji characters above are pronounced “*shin*” and all 8 of them are totally unrelated to each other in meaning! They are from left to right: God, advance, believe, new, true, stretch, heart, and parent. There are no tones in Japanese as there are in Chinese, and so the pronunciation of *shin* is exactly the same for all the above. Besides these, there are **many more** Kanji that are also pronounced “*shin*”! The Japanese way to pronounce the characters above are, “*kami*”, *susumu*, “*shinjiru*”, “*atarashii*”, “*makoto*”, “*nobasu*”, “*kokoro*”, and “*oya*”. Notice that the Japanese way of pronouncing a word is multi-syllabic, whereas the Chinese way is a single syllable.

- The main verb comes at the end of the sentence. This can result in the meaning of a long sentence being hard to grasp. Imagine a sentence in English like “A storm system plowed through the central Appalachians into the Eastern Seaboard with heavy rain Wednesday, causing flooding that blocked roads and drove some people from their homes” and put the words “plowed through” at the very end of the sentence.
- Particles follow nouns to denote their usage. This is often hard for foreigners to learn unless you happen to be Korean or Mongolian.
- Ideas are expressed in way that is unrelated to European languages.
- Because there is no verb conjugation according to person, the subject of a sentence can be unclear at times. And because the subject is often *assumed* to be already understood, it is frequently dropped entirely adding to the confusion and ambiguity. This is why Japanese is considered by some a “fuzzy” language. One Japanese linguist, however, says that it is not really the language that is fuzzy but the way it is used as a result of the culture.
- There are several levels of polite language to learn. These words are called “honorifics”. If you don’t learn them, you will never rise above the rank of “dumb foreigner”.

Is learning Japanese easier for some nationalities than others?

As far as I know, it is easier only for Koreans and Mongolians as their grammar is related to Japanese. It is **not** especially easy for Chinese people to learn. Though the Chinese can already read and understand the meaning of most Kanji characters, they have to learn to pronounce them the Japanese way and learn an entirely new way of expressing themselves using a totally

different grammatical sentence structure.

Is it important to learn to read Japanese?

Yes, if you really want to learn the language well. There are many homonyms in Japanese or words that sound the same but have totally different meanings. (As brought out in the 8 meanings of the word “shin”.) Unless you learn to read at least several hundred Kanji (Chinese characters used in Japanese), you cannot understand meanings of words nearly as well as a person who can read Kanji. There is only one sure way you will learn to read Kanji – take a course in a school for at least a year like I did. I just didn’t have the discipline to learn on my own. I don’t know of *any* foreigner who learned Kanji well without a formal school course.

Is it possible to write Japanese in the Roman alphabet?

Yes, possible but not practical. Japanese written in Roman characters is called *romaji*. Romaji is used primarily for foreigners to study Japanese. If General MacArthur had pushed his will to change the written language to the Roman alphabet, Japan would never have advanced to the technological nation it is today. The immense amount of homonyms in the language would have made technological papers and documents hard to understand. Whereas by using Kanji there is always a specific character available out of the thousands at hand.

Are there different dialects of Japanese?

Yes! Tokyo and Sapporo are considered the main 2 centers of the standard national language but all other areas have their own accents and even different words. The Osaka accent is one of the most recognizable. Once at an airport in Paris France I heard 2 Japanese girls speaking and I could tell they were from Osaka. You should have seen the look of surprise on their faces to hear me, a stranger, tell them so! The Tsugaru area of Aomori is considered to be one of the most different dialects of all the dialects of Japan. It is not necessary to learn the local dialect. Most missionaries don’t learn them, only their kids who go to school have picked them up.

Will learning Japanese make it easier for me to learn Chinese later?

Yes! Well, somewhat easier. If you learn to read Kanji, you will be able to already read many signs in either Taiwan, Hong Kong or China even if you never study Chinese. You will be able to communicate basic ideas with the Chinese people just by using Kanji. Most the meanings of the Chinese characters that Japan shares with China are the same.

Some weaknesses of the Japanese language

- Considered a “fuzzy” language. The Japanese people don’t like to be blunt or rude. Consequently, they hesitate to express opinions in a strong and clear manner. Politicians like to use this to their advantage!
- Very few words of affection or endearment as in all European languages!

Most Japanese either cannot or will not say “I love you” to their loved ones. These words do exist in Japanese, but are not part of daily vocabulary.

- No such thing as rhyming poetry!
- It takes about twice as long to say something as compared to English. English song lyrics have to be cut in half when translated into Japanese in order to keep the same rhythm.

One strength of the Japanese written language

The cool thing about using Chinese ideograph characters called Kanji is that the meaning of words becomes clear as a bell. There is no need for an etymology dictionary of Japanese words that are written in Kanji. This includes names of people as well. Most first names in any language have meanings that are often forgotten in time and can only be learned through special dictionaries, but nobody in Japan can ever forget the meaning of a Kanji. For example, how many people would know that my name, James, comes from the Hebrew name Jacob which means “deceiver”? But there is no Japanese person who does not know the meaning of famous Ichiro Suzuki’s name. It means “first man” The names of towns and cities, rivers and mountains can also be translated to English or any other language. Of course this applies to the Chinese language as well.

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10 things you didn't know about

Japanese

Some fun facts about the language spoken in the
Land of the Rising Sun.



Japanese has many dialects. They're grouped into **Kyoto-Osaka** dialects and **Tokyo** dialects. Mutual intelligibility varies.



9th

MOST SPOKEN
LANGUAGE

The majority of the speakers are in Japan or in the Japanese diaspora.

The origins of the language are unknown, since its earliest written records show a fully-formed system.

88 weeks

According to the US Department of State, that's how much it would take for an English-speaker to learn Japanese.



HONORIFICS: suffixes that express the relationship the speaker and person in question have.

-san: most commonly used, similar to "sir" or "ma'am".



-chan: An endearing female honorific, used for children of both genders.



-sama: A respectful way to address someone.



3 WRITING SYSTEMS

HIRAGANA: syllabic, phonetic and used for native words, conjugations and particles.

KATAKANA: used for loanwords.

KANJI: imported from China in the 6th Century AD. Thousands of letters, of which approximately 2000 are most commonly used.



WORD ORDER IN JAPANESE

1

SUBJECT

2

OBJECT

3

VERB

MIMETICS = words that resemble the source of the sound it represents.



むしゃり (Mushari)
[Taking a big bite]



ぼーぼー (Bo-Bo-)
[fire burning]

THE FASTEST LANGUAGE..

The average native Japanese speaker produces

7.84

 Syllables per Second

The number for English is 6.19 syllables per second.

...BUT DOESN'T SAY MUCH

A 2010 study concluded that, among the major languages **Japanese conveys the least amount of information per syllable.**



This illustration is courtesy of [Day Translations Inc.](#)