

Why study Japanese?

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Anyone having a go at learning Japanese must have done so for a reason. I feel safe in saying it was primarily for practical reasons, like asking where the bathroom is; getting along well with your Japanese in-laws; getting a better job; conducting business in Japan; making Japanese friends; enrolling in a Japanese university; or reading manga.

However, there is another important reason for studying Japanese, one which is often overlooked or neglected.

First, let me pose a question:

You have heard, no doubt, that Sir Isaac Newton discovered the universal law of gravity by watching an apple fall from a tree. But how could this be? Surely this phenomenon was not newly observed by him—it must have been previously observed by many other people. Which brings me to my question: Why did he, and not someone else, discover the law?

My big brother told me Newton's story when I was a schoolboy. Subsequently, I have always wondered about this question. At the time I thought maybe I was just too stupid to understand the significance of the story. But even so, the question constantly bothered me.

I asked many adults about it as I grew up here. Later, when I lived in Britain, I posed the same question to the British as well. The answers were much the same as those I got in Japan, such as:

■ This is just a metaphorical story that teaches you that a very commonplace occurrence could lead to a world-changing, great discovery.

■ This story is to illustrate what a genius Sir Isaac Newton was.

Somehow, these answers did not convince me. Something was missing in the logic. The apple's fall did NOT logically lead to the discovery of universal gravitation, no matter how I thought it through.

Then, one day, I had a revelation.

As long as your point of view is several meters away from the apple tree, it is impossible to really see the workings of gravity in the scene. Imagine yourself watching the same phenomenon from somewhere far out in space—from the moon, for instance. Would apples in Britain, the United States, Australia, Japan and other countries all seem to be "falling down"? You can place a globe in front of you to help illustrate the phenomenon. The Australian apple would "fall up," unless you were to flip the globe upside down. Even a child could see that the apple was pulled by the Earth.

I am pretty sure that Isaac Newton set his point

of view somewhere farther out in space when he saw the apple fall off the tree. His greatness lies not only in his instinct, but also in that he was able to control his point of view to objectively view what he saw from a wider perspective.

The lesson I take from this is that by controlling one's points of view, anybody can readily see deeper truths.

Now, let us come back to our original theme, and discuss another important reason for studying Japanese.

People say, and you would probably agree, that you can see your own country better and more objectively when you are out of that country. This is a result of the above effect: It is what we gain by assuming a wider, objective perspective. It should come as no surprise that this same effect takes place when we study languages.

Language is a natural and historical product nurtured among, and cultured by, the people who speak it: It contains their culture and is a record of their mind-sets, their points of view. Their perspectives on life, the world, living, values and other topics are woven deeply into their language.

In important ways, English and Japanese are two extreme ends of a continuum of points of view: One assumes directness, while the other, indirectness. The Japanese language is comprised of a number of mind-sets which are hardly present in English or rarely encouraged by English speakers. It contains certain points of view which are beyond the experience of ordinary English natives—in fact, they may hardly believe that such points of view could even exist. By studying Japanese correctly, you will get a new perspective on English and get to know more about it. In the process, I fully expect you will realize things you have taken for granted.

Expanding your horizons like this is a very important aspect of learning a foreign language. Thanks to the great difference between English and Japanese—arguably greater than between any other two living languages—Japanese may be the best choice for those wanting to rediscover English, especially if you are a native.

Typically, when Japanese people study English, they are not taught the importance of understanding the English-language mind-set, nor are they made aware of it, unfortunately. Rather, this critical element is disregarded completely. It is regrettable that such a great opportunity to expand one's horizons is being lost and wasted.

I will write the articles in this monthly column with an eye to addressing various Japanese mind-sets woven into the language. I will of course explain the mechanisms of the language, too. It is my hope that these short articles will help you better understand your own language and the way of thinking ingrained in it, while at the same time deepen your understanding of the Japanese language and its points of view.