

# The world is; therefore, I am

By Shigekatsu Yamauchi

Special to The Daily Yomiuri

In a previous article we saw that there are more than 2,000 ways to say, "I am a cat" in Japanese, each with a different shade of meaning. This was shown to be partly due to the many ways of saying "I." Today we will discuss some further implications of this mind-set.

If you listen carefully to English, you will notice how very frequently speakers use "I" in sentences, such as "I think...", "I'm afraid...", or "I don't want to..." In contrast, Japanese tend to use words equivalent to "I" much less frequently.

In another article about saying "I love you" in Japanese, we discussed how Japanese verbs, unlike their English equivalents, are not just words; each of them can be a perfect sentence on its own. We saw how, in principle, no subject is required to form a sentence.

But what about situations requiring self-identification? One chooses the most appropriate of the options. To make this choice one considers age, gender, relationships, business considerations, the immediate situation and the broader circumstances. In short, unless you understand the situation, you cannot position yourself in it; in a real way, you cannot quite identify who you are.

This contrasts greatly with English. In English, whether talking to your child or to the president of the United States, you can always rely on "I" to define yourself. In short, the language considers you to be you, regardless of the situation.

In my view, this English mind-set can easily lead to thinking that "I" is the first concern. You have probably met people who operate from the premise, "I have a wish" and go ahead with it no matter the consequence or situation.

Japanese people, however, tend to think of their social situation first, before taking action or doing the things they want. Their actions are responses to questions like, "Would my action affect others? If so, how? Would I look bad doing this?" These types of questions usually come to the Japanese mind before anything else. This "others-first consideration" is often so strong that many will easily abandon actions that adversely affect others. This is similar to the way that amoeba survive by carefully avoiding obstacles.

While such people may appear indecisive or meek, it is not necessarily so. With its flexibility, avoidance of direct confrontation can lead to long-lived, hardy results; witness the multibillion-year survival of the amoeba.

With a strong self and a strong will, one looks strong. Solid principles hung onto during action look reassuringly firm indeed.

At the individual level, the English-language mind-set encourages people to promote their own will. Firm conviction and stalwart support of principle is expected. In a society with many people holding firmly to their own principles, is not confrontation likely? Is this why there are far more court cases in the United States than in Japan? Similar patterns are seen in English-speaking politics. Leaders claim to uphold principles like "human rights," "democracy," "freedom," even "God's justice." Widely accepted principles are relied on for governments to take action, whatever the obstacles.

This attitude looks reliable, but also quite rigid. If an obstacle lies in the way, it must be neutralized, whatever it takes; hence, perhaps, in the end leading to war. This sounds to me like what happened when former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher decided to go to war over the Falklands; or as a description of how U.S. presidents have gone to war.

Of course, Japan has started wars, too. But World War II, for instance, came not from principle, but an economic urge promoted by military powers. The Japanese government (then and now) could not possibly take an action just on principle's sake. It might use some slogan as cover, but actions would certainly not be based on a principle. At the political level, when action is taken, the main consideration is always how the public or related parties think about it.

At the individual level as well, when a Japanese person decides to do something, they typically think of the people involved: "What would others think of me if I were to do this?" This is the underlying psychology of what anthropologist Ruth Benedict called a "shame culture." Speaking linguistically, we might say that the word for "I" cannot be determined unless the world around us, the context, is identified.

Things change over time, however. Nowadays we see many shameless acts that completely ignore others. Traditions that placed others first seem to be eroding. It even seems that we hear, in people's speech, words such as "watashi," "ore" and "boku"—"I," "I" and "I"—more frequently than before.

---

*Yamauchi is the president of International Communication Institute. After working for Sumitomo Corp. for 18 years, he completed Japanese-language teacher training at Cornell University.*