

Precise Japanese offers 2,000 shades of *I Am a Cat*

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One of the most famous modern Japanese novels is *我輩は猫である* (*Wagahai wa neko de aru*) written by Soseki Natsume (the figure seen on the ¥1,000 banknote). The book is so well known, it has been translated into English, with the title *I Am a Cat*.

Well, this is certainly a correct translation, but Japanese who see this translated title feel a bit frustrated, because it simply does not convey the entire meaning of the original title. Other than the fact that the speaker is a cat, the title gives us no more information. For example, from the phrase, "I am a cat," can you tell if the cat is male or female? What is its approximate age? Can you tell what its personality (or perhaps I should say "catality" or "felineity") is like?

Suppose there were a novel titled *I Am a Cat*, in the United States or Britain. How many options do you think I would have in translating this title into Japanese? Ten? Fifty? A hundred? A thousand? Wrong! I could translate "I am a cat" into Japanese in more than 2,000 different ways! I'm not kidding; let me prove it.

First, to indicate the speaker "I," I have a good number of options, depending on the gender, age, locality, personality, class, profession, position, social status, education level and other traits of the speaker. They include: わたし (*watashi*), わたくし (*watakushi*), ぼく (*boku*), おれ (*ore*), てまえ (*temae*), うち (*uchi*), わて (*wate*), わし (*washi*), おいら (*oira*), 朕 (*chin*), 我輩 (*wagahai*), and 我 (*ware*). Unlike in English, where the speaker is always signified by the word "I," no matter who may be speaking to whom, Japanese choose the most appropriate word, depending on how the speaker wants to present himself or herself in a given situation. There are at least 20 words which can be used to signify someone in the first person.

Next, after selecting the appropriate word for "I," I have to choose a phrase particle. In this particular case, I have three options: は (*wa*); が (*ga*); or no phrase particle at all. Suppose I were to have selected わたし (*watashi*) for "I." I would then have three choices: わたし (*watashi*), わたしは (*watashi wa*), or わたしが (*watashi ga*), each giving slightly different nuances in the way the "I" is presented. Since these three options apply

to each of the 20 words, I now have $20 \times 3 = 60$ options.

The difference between these three options is the sort of difference you might make by stressing different words in the phrase, "I am a cat." For example, "I am a cat," as opposed to "I *am* a cat," or even "I am a *cat*," although these do not necessarily correspond to each of the Japanese options.

Translating "cat" is straightforward: 猫 (*neko*), with no need to clarify its gender, kind and other information.

Our next choice is how to translate "am." I have at least nine choices, depending on how politely or bluntly; strongly or softly; modestly or arrogantly; modern or old-fashioned, I want to express the word. They are だ (*da*), です (*desu*), である (*dearu*), でございます (*degozaimasu*), であります (*dearimasu*), ござる (*degozaru*), や (*ya*), なり (*nari*), and the option not to use any of these. This creates $60 \times 9 = 540$ options.

Finally, at the end of a sentence, the Japanese language adds what are called sentence particles. These add a specific nuance to the entire sentence. In this particular case our options include: よ (*yo*), to give new information; ぞ (*zo*), as a warning; or, わ (*wa*), to give the statement a feminine quality or the feel of Kansai dialect. As I have an option not to use any of the sentence particles as well, I have four options altogether. This gives me $540 \times 4 = 2,160$ options! (Though some combinations of these sentence particles are also possible, I will not include them at this time.)

Although some of the 2,160 combinations are rather odd, like a supposedly soft-spoken woman speaking in a rough manner, theoretically you do have up to so many ways to say "I am a cat." And by hearing each different combination, a native Japanese would be able to tell immediately, for example, whether the cat is a gentle lady cat introducing herself (*Watakushi neko de gozaimasu wa*), a conceited male cat warning people that he is the cat (*Ore ga neko da zo*), an emperor declaring that he is in fact a cat (*Chin wa neko nari*), a young gay revealing that he is a cat (*Boku wa neko yo*), or an elderly person from Kansai saying that she/he is a cat (*Wate wa neko ya*).

In comparison, you might realize how imprecise the English statement "I am a cat" is. It only expresses that the speaker is a cat and no more.

Many comment that English is the straightforward and precise language and that Japanese is vague and obscure. I disagree with this statement. Every language can be straightforward and precise in its own way, and every language can also be vague and obscure in its own way.

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