

No language 'better' than others

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As we head into the end of the year 2005, it seems appropriate to reflect a bit on "Japanese in Depth." My very first article, dated April 20, 2004, titled "Why Study Japanese?" was basically dedicated to discussing the purposes of studying Japanese.

The obvious major reason is to acquire the skills required to communicate with Japanese people for practical purposes, such as to obtain necessary information, ranging from the location of the bathroom to academic knowledge; or, to express necessary information, ranging from plain requests to intellectual arguments.

The other reason is not normally discussed much, but in my view is equally, if not more, important. That reason is to better know your own language and its point of view. Because Japanese is completely different from most students' native tongues it is easy to get a totally new perspective on your native language. This is comparable to how one comes to see one's own country more objectively after returning to it from some time away.

For these reasons, over the last year and three quarters, I have tried to be informative (and also entertaining) in my comments for Japanese-language learners and those interested in viewing English from a different perspective. In doing so, I obviously have to compare the two languages, or sometimes refer to other languages to make relevant points.

Making these comparisons, I usually have to say that one language is more regular, logical or simple, compared with some other, with respect to that particular point. At times, some readers have interpreted me to be implying that Japanese is superior to English. It is my belief that languages are what they are: There is no superiority or inferiority in them.

It seems absurd to me that recognizing differences between languages could be interpreted as a condemnation of one or the other. Obviously, not every language sees the world the same way—indeed, that any two would share any particular viewpoint seems only coincidence to me. The vast majority of students, and readers of mine, probably share my conviction that every language (like every culture) is fascinating and intriguing in its own way.

Let's review some of the aspects of language I have discussed so far:

1. Regularity

In terms of writing, Japanese is quite complex and irregular. This, however, derives from the fact that it is written using kanji, which are from a completely different language. In terms of grammar, Japanese sticks quite strictly to its rules, and therefore is regular and straightforward in that regard.

2. Pronunciation

Japanese is composed of far fewer sound elements than English, and is therefore relatively easy to pronounce. One of its important characteristics is pitch-orientation, i.e. high or low tone, while English is stress-oriented. The other and more important aspect of proper pronunciation of Japanese is the number of *mora*, effectively the "beat" of Japanese; mistakes here can lead to hilarious misunderstandings.

3. Complex or precise?

Japanese does not observe the "first person, second person, third person" rule, which many languages do. This fact, coupled with Japanese particles and polite forms, gives rise to more than 2,000 shades in meaning when translating "I Am a Cat" into Japanese. Is this precision or complexity?

4. Japanese greetings

In examining Japanese greetings, we notice some consistent patterns of mind-set. One is to try to communicate without saying the most important words. This is acutely contrastive to English, which never omits the core.

5. Polite package

A pattern seen in Japanese greetings is that a rather blunt-looking statement, like "it is early," becomes a nice thoughtful greeting by virtue of being wrapped in a polite form, i.e. *ohayō gozaimasu*. This tendency to place importance on form is found throughout Japanese culture and society.

6. Subject and object

English and many other languages require, at minimum, a subject and a verb to form a sentence. Depending on the type of verb, an object might also be part of that minimum requirement. This tends to lead people to assume that there should always be a subject (and object) in all sentences in all languages. Japanese and some other languages do not follow this convention.

7. Tools to gauge distance from counterparts

Conversation basically occurs between a speaker and a listener, so we must consider the psychology of how the speaker handles the relationship with the listener. Languages have different tools for this purpose. While many languages have two different words for "you," English has only "you," and uses names and titles to display distance. Japanese has no particular word for "you" but the so-called *desu/masu* style functions to maintain distance. For this reason it may be called "distal style."

8. Number and gender neutrality

While English is very particular about number (singular or plural) and gender (he or she), Japanese is not. This enables Japanese to avoid worrying about the kinds of linguistic gymnastics often seen in contemporary number- and gender-neutral English statements.

The above is only part of what I have discussed so far, and there is more to come in the future. Whenever I point out an aspect of English or Japanese, it is never my intention to say—nor my belief—that one language is superior to the other. In my opinion all languages are vague, obscure, difficult, hard to know, and yet very intriguing, just like humans. After all, language is a reflection of humans themselves.

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