

New actions, new words

By Shigekatsu Yamauchi

Special to The Daily Yomiuri

Like any other country in the world, Japan has a good number of special New Year's events. Among these we have *dezomeshiki* for firefighters and *kakizome* for calligraphers. These events, and others like them, mark the first "performance" of the New Year.

Dezomeshiki is an old-time firefighter ritual in which firemen perform acrobatic stunts atop a ladder held upright by his colleagues. This marks their first action of the year. *Kakizome* is the first act of calligraphy of the year by its practitioners.

Whenever we do things for "the first time" we face possible difficulties. These include how to describe what one is doing. Existing vocabulary, as a rule, doesn't cover things that haven't happened before. Today, I'd like to talk about how the Japanese language copes with a completely new action that its speakers have never experienced before.

Actions such as eating, drinking, walking, running and standing have been done by humans since the dawn of mankind, even before language was born. So the verbs for describing such basic actions are quite straightforward in all languages.

As mankind becomes more civilized, however, notions for more obscure and abstract actions emerge, such as thinking, imagining, remembering and forgetting. These mental acts can still be conceptualized and defined with relative ease—and every culture recognizes these "actions."

But what happens when there is fresh contact with other cultures? New ideas and actions that did not exist previously are introduced. At this point, language is forced to cope with novel actions.

The Japanese archipelago has been inhabited for more than 10,000 years. Clearly there existed some spoken Japanese language during that time, but there was no writing system until Chinese characters were introduced around the fifth century. Given this situation, let us think for a moment why the Japanese verb *kaku* covers three different actions: "write," "draw" and "scratch."

Before there was a writing system, there was obviously no notion of "writing." However, it seems very reasonable that there must have been pictures "drawn" by people even before kanji were introduced; in other words, the concept of "drawing" did exist. Kanji indeed look like pictures, so understandably the Japanese people must have stretched the idea of "drawing" to the new notion of "writing."

So why would it be that "scratch" is also represented by *kaku*? If we stretch our imaginations further back into the mists of prehistory, it seems very reasonable that pictures were created by scratching suitable surfaces with sharp objects. While perhaps a bit unscientific, this is my guess as to why

scratching is connected with drawing.

This type of usage (stretching original meanings to cover newly introduced actions) is a frequent pattern. Another Japanese example is *utsu* ("strike") which used to be used for sending a telegram. *Utsu* suggested the action of "striking" the telegram key to send Morse code. An English example of this type of stretching of meanings is "hang up" for ending phone calls; this was the physical action for ending calls using the original apparatus.

When Japan opened its doors to the world in 1868, after more than 230 years of self-imposed isolation, new instruments, institutions and notions flooded into the country from the West. With these came new actions, such as photographing, telephoning, ironing and skiing. How did Japanese cope with these novel actions? Here we can find yet another methodology: use of what I call a "utility verb" for the action. For taking photos, the utility verb *toru* is employed, thus, *shashin o toru*. For telephoning and ironing, another utility verb, *kakeru*, is adopted: *denwa o kakeru* and *airon o kakeru*. The usage of these verbs is equivalent to that of English utility verbs like "take" and "make," as in "take a photo" and "make a phone call."

Compared to Japanese, English has an easier way out. Instead of "make a phone call" you can just as well use the noun in question as a verb, as in: "I'll telephone you tomorrow" or "I have already ironed the shirt." This is possible because English has no form restrictions for the verb word class; Japanese does. Nevertheless, Japanese has its equivalent. It is to add the most versatile verb *suru* to transform the noun into a verb; thus, "denwa suru" (to phone), as in: "Ashita kimi ni denwa suru yo."

In English you may also say, "I'll ring you." This apparently comes from the sound the phone used to make. There is a Japanese equivalent to this usage, but not for phoning. Can you guess what action a Japanese person means when saying *chin suru*? ("Chin" is onomatopoeia for the "ding" sound in English.)

The answer is "to microwave" because it "dings" when it's done. Although *obun ni kakeru* (using a utility verb with oven) is technically considered more correct, most Japanese people now say *chin suru*.

As technological advancement accelerates, new instruments and services come into the world one after another, and accordingly new actions emerge all the time, such as fax, word-process, microwave, e-mail, upload, download and videoconference.

For these newly emerging actions, it seems that languages are tired of coining entirely new words and have instead sought easier ways out. Taking advantage of its lack of form restrictions, English uses many nouns as verbs, as seen above. In turn Japanese frequently adopts new English words and changes them into verbs by adding *suru*, also as seen above.

When you are stuck with what verb to use when speaking Japanese, my suggestion is use the English verb (Pronounce it in the Japanese way, though!) and add *suru*. You should be able to get by much of the time.

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