

Thinking about 'omou'

By Shigekatsu Yamauchi

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The Japanese verb, *omou*, is commonly translated as "think" in English, but do these two words refer to the same thing? Today I'd like to think about *omou*.

"Cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) has long been translated as *Ware omou, yue ni ware ari*. Auguste Rodin's famous sculpture *The Thinker*, on the other hand, is translated as *Kangaeru hito*. The alternative, you may be thinking, would be "*omou hito*," but this could actually mean "someone I love."

If *kangaeru* is more appropriate for "think," then cogito ergo sum would more correctly be translated as "*Ware kangaeru, yue ni ware ari*." This example exhibits the fundamental difference in conceptualizing think and *omou*. (The reason the original translation was adopted has probably as much to do with the number of *mora*, syllable-like units of Japanese, as anything else; the alternative, more accurate, translation constitutes 7-7 *mora* while the original is 5-7, a combination that sounds nicer to Japanese ears.)

Most people will agree with me when I say "think" is clearly a volitional mental act. By that I mean thinking is an action you do willfully. *Omou*, however, is not. I am pretty sure that most Japanese would agree that *omou* refers to a state of mind that occurs naturally or involuntarily, with or without your volitional control. In this respect, *omou* is closer to "feel" than "think" in English. Probably the truth is that *omou* covers parts of both "think" and "feel" in English.

Because of this, Japanese people tend to use *omou* to describe a very wide range of states of mind. Carefully listening to what Japanese say in discussions, you will probably notice use of *omou* all the time. Whether describing hope or fear, encouragement or discouragement, agreement or disagreement, *omou* may be used.

Perhaps you believe this highly unlikely ("No way!" you feel). But when considering the usage of *omou*, we can see that it is used in situations in which English speakers use other verbs, such as believe, suppose, guess, estimate, expect, predict, hope, fear, regret, suggest, recommend, propose, love, like, hate, dislike, etc. Note that all these words refer to workings of the mind.

Here is a simple example. In English you can quite casually say "I hope the weather will be fine tomorrow." In Japanese there are verbs equivalent to "hope," i.e., *nozomu* and *kibo suru*, the former indigenously Japanese, the latter Chinese in origin.

Yamauchi is president of the International Communication Institute and a Cornell University-trained Japanese-language teacher.

However, neither of these is common in normal conversation, as they both feel quite formal. How then do Japanese express these emotions in informal situations? One answer: *Ashita ii tenki da to ii to omou*, literally translating like "I think/feel it would be nice if the weather was good tomorrow."

Let me give you a few more examples. Notice that each Japanese sentence is always finished with *omou*:

■ *Sô da to omou*: "I think that is the case" meaning "I agree."

■ *Sô ja nai to omou*: "I think that's not the case" or more simply, "I disagree."

■ *Sô shita ho ga ii to omou*: "I think it would be better if you did that," a more natural translation of which would be: "I encourage you to do that."

■ *Sô suru beki da to omou*: "I think you should do that," could be rendered: "I recommend you do that."

■ *Sô shitara do ka to omou*: "I'm thinking (i.e. wondering) how it would turn out if we did that," which could be translated as "I suggest we do that."

■ *Iya da to omou*: "I think that is disagreeable," for which "I hate it" sounds far more natural in English.

■ *Ame ga furanai ka to omou*: "I'm thinking about (i.e. wondering) whether it will rain or not," which in fact may really mean "I'm afraid it may rain" or "I hope it rains," depending on the situation.

■ *X no koto o omotteiru no*: "(The truth is) I'm thinking about X," which might even mean "I'm in love with X."

There are indeed verbs that specifically mean "agree," "encourage," "recommend," "suggest," etc., in Japanese, but they are all loanwords from Chinese and sound rather formal; hence, their use is relatively limited. Also, there are indigenous Japanese verbs that mean "like," "hope," "fear," etc., but these are far less commonly used in Japanese, compared with their equivalents in English.

It is because *omou* refers to whatever thought comes to mind that it can be used so widely. In choosing words such as "agree," "recommend," "hope," etc., one consciously or unconsciously identifies one's state of mind. In contrast, use of *omou* quite possibly indicates a lack of this mental process in the speaker. The feeling or thought that comes to mind is not clearly identified and therefore is not ever articulated or even conceptualized. This is likely to allow ambiguities in discussions in Japanese.

If you think more about "thinking," however, I wonder if thinking is necessarily a volitional act. Thoughts do come to mind involuntarily, too, don't they? I think that the Japanese verb *omou* just reflects this ambiguity. What do you think? Or, should I say, how do you feel about this?