

Ambiguity in all languages

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It is commonly believed that Japanese is vague and imprecise language while English is clear and precise. But I wonder if this is really true.

The conclusion I have reached after years of teaching and studying is that all languages are basically vague and imprecise, but that each language has its own ways of making things less vague and more precise when need be.

Suppose you are in your office and a colleague says, "I'll be away till Wednesday next week," would you expect him to be in the office on Wednesday or on Thursday? If you are an English native, you would probably expect him to be back on Wednesday, wouldn't you?

The Japanese equivalent would be: *Raishu no suiyobi made imasen*. Hearing this, most Japanese would think the person would be absent for a period including Wednesday, or in other words that he would be back in the office Thursday.

In these two instances both languages are precise but mean different things even though they appear to be saying the same thing.

Whether English or Japanese, there are always ambiguities in some respects. This is exactly why contracts, for instance, are written as they are: lengthy and complex diction used to avoid all ambiguities. Ironically, because of length and complexity, things tend to become even more difficult to comprehend and ambiguous!

I'm sure some lawyers would not want to think so, but it is a common perception, whether in Japan or elsewhere, that the language in which contracts are written, especially on the reverse side of insurance policies and the like, is so difficult to understand that people couldn't care less most of the time.

One of the common arguments used to support the idea that English is more precise than Japanese is that Japanese sentences do not require a subject while English sentences always do. On the face of it, that argument seems reasonable, but let's look more closely.

In English, even if it is contextually obvious who the subject is, the language demands that the subject be mentioned. Hence the pronouns I, we, she, it, etc., are employed. But does this really clear up ambiguity? In most cases in which pronouns are employed, it is obvious who the subject is. This is exactly why Japanese doesn't require the subject to be mentioned and why pronouns are less commonly used in the language. If the situation calls for it, the subject is mentioned in Japanese, too. The presence of a subject does not necessarily consti-

tute clarity and precision.

In fact, the presence of pronouns can create more ambiguity than it clears up.

How about these sentences: "They went out to see friends and they had a good time." Who does the second "they" refer to?

"On a summer's day the restaurant served a hamburger. It was hot."

Of the three possibilities, what does "it" refer to?

In a previous article I discussed how there are more than 2,000 ways to say "I am a cat" in Japanese. In this particular respect, the English "I am a cat" is relatively ambiguous and imprecise compared to the more descriptive and precise alternatives in Japanese. Hearing "I am a cat," one cannot tell whether the cat is male or female, conceited or modest, old or young, etc.

Of course, there are examples of expressions that are more ambiguous in Japanese than in English. For example, the expressions used when describing a world time difference. In English you might say, "Tokyo is nine hours ahead of London." This is quite straightforward, allowing no confusion. However, the same thing cannot be said in Japanese without confusion. The Japanese equivalent "*Tokyo wa London yori ku-jikan mae desu*" can be taken as either Tokyo is nine hours ahead of or behind London. This happens because *mae* means "before" both in location (before = in front = ahead) and in time (before = an earlier time = behind); hence, ahead (location) or behind (time).

Another difference in precision is seen when expressing someone else's feelings. In English it is quite natural to say, "John wants to come back to Japan" and you would not feel strange, having heard this. Its literal Japanese equivalent is: *John-san wa Nihon ni kaeritai desu*. While the sentence is grammatically valid, psychologically this is not acceptable. A Japanese native who has heard this sentence would feel it to be very presumptuous and would be very uncomfortable about using it. They might end up saying, "How can you tell when you are not John?"

The agreeable Japanese sentences would include: *John-san wa Nihon ni kaeritagatte imasu*. and *John-san wa Nihon ni kaeritai n desu*.

The former would literally translate "John gives the impression he wants to come to Japan," and the latter, "It's that John wants to come to Japan (and that's why he looks the way he does)."

If you think about it, it would be rather arrogant to say, "John wants to come to Japan" if you are not John. In this particular respect, English seems quite insensitive and imprecise. From this example alone I would certainly not draw the conclusion that Japanese is more considerate to others than English, but it indeed indicates one aspect of sensitivity toward others and it supports my general conclusion that English can be just as vague and imprecise as any other language.