

Man and nature—a Japanese view

By Shigekatsu Yamauchi

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A very common mistake which you have probably heard, is for novice Japanese students of English to misuse word pairs like interesting-interested, or bored-boring. For example, "I am interesting in going shopping." Let's take a look at the Japanese mindset that gives rise to this mistake, which looks so obvious to native speakers of English.

The Japanese adjective, *omoshiroi*, is commonly translated as "interesting" or "enjoyable" but *omoshiroi* can also be used in reference to the person who finds something interesting, that is, someone who feels interested in that something. In other words, *omoshiroi* may cover both "interesting" and "interested." By the same token, another adjective, *tanoshii*, can describe both the thing that is entertaining and the mindset of the person doing the enjoying. Hence, you will hear people say: "(*Boku*) *kono hon omoshiroi*" (I find this book interesting) or "(*Watashi*) *pati tanoshikatta*" (I enjoyed the party).

Whether *omoshiroi* or *tanoshii*, the situation is referred to as being interesting and enjoyable. In the English-language mindset, it is taken for granted that the situation involves a stimulus (i.e., the thing that is entertaining) and one who is stimulated (i.e., the person enjoying). And these two, the thing and the person, are clearly distinguished and separate.

In contrast, the Japanese-language mindset does not see this distinction as clearly. Both the stimulus and the person are blended together, describing a state (enjoyable).

This difference creates misuse in other areas as well. Let's look at one very germane to students of Japanese. One of the first verbs learned when studying Japanese is *wakaru*, commonly translated as "understand." *Jon-san (wa) nihongo ga wakaru* is generally translated as "John understands Japanese." In this English equivalent, "Japanese" is the object of the verb "understand." Referring to the original, we see the particle *ga* (commonly described as the "subject indicator": *nihongo ga wakaru*). So, can one say, in Japanese, *nihongo o wakaru*? Most emphatically, "No!" It is not possible to say this despite the particle *o* being commonly explained as the "object indicator." But why? Isn't *nihongo* the "object" of *wakaru*?

Here we arrive at a split between Japanese and English that can only be described as metaphysical. There is a difference in mindset between the two languages in conceptualizing the idea "understanding." The English verb "understand" is based on an idea that understanding is a volitional work-

ing of one's mind; this is why it takes an object. (In our example, "Japanese" is the object.) On the other hand, the Japanese verb *wakaru* refers to a state where things are well-organized and comprehensible. In the example above, both *Jon-san* and *nihongo* are the matters involved in that well-organized state. We might call *Jon-san* the primary matter, and *nihongo* the secondary matter, in this example. The person and the thing are not clearly distinguished, certainly not in terms of the subject-object relationship. (Some linguists term *Jon*, in our example, the primary affect and *nihongo* the secondary affect.)

Even today, despite longstanding and clear understanding of Japanese grammar by linguists, most Japanese textbooks describe *wakaru* as an "exceptional" verb which uses the particle *ga* to mark its object! This, in my opinion, is a very poor, lazy explanation. It hides what is really going on—something which is difficult to understand only because of its foreign-ness, not because of some inherent incomprehensibility of Japanese.

As long as one is "stuck" in the English mindset, the Japanese approach seems odd and cumbersome. Personally, I believe this difference is deeply rooted in how Japanese view mankind's relationship with nature. In the Japanese perception, humans are, quite naturally I feel, taken as mere parts of nature. They are not isolated from it or treated as specially selected unique beings. Viewed from here, the Western view looks quite people-centric.

This difference in perspective can be found in things big and small. Take, for example, gardens. Japanese gardens seek to re-create natural scenes, which Japanese regard as of supreme beauty. Western gardens, as exemplified, say, at Versailles, seek to demonstrate geometric (i.e., manmade) beauty, as a display of human intelligence. From the Japanese point of view, this seems like showing off.

Certainly, the Western people-centric mindset has driven much of our modern world's development of science and technology. Much science and technology come from the idea of humans conquering nature in the name of "development." Japan has internalized much of this Western worldview. There's no doubting that the country's modern amenities and comforts are a product of this mindset.

But have we gone too far and become arrogant vis-a-vis nature? Perhaps the tide is turning and humans will start to think of themselves more as "mere" parts of nature. The widespread perception that humans have accelerated global warming, and that this will generally have negative consequences, seems to signal a sea change in perception regarding our relation to nature. Might this lead to the death of man's presumptuousness and people-centeredness?

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