

# Mind-sets in language No. 38

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I was pleased, surprised, intrigued and encouraged to receive a number of reader comments in response to last month's column. The piece compared English and Japanese expressions describing psychological states.

I was surprised to note that the terms "passive voice" and "active voice" are not thoroughly understood by many English native speakers. I had mistakenly taken it for granted that "passive voice" was readily understood in the same way by natives as I understand it. In a way, this should not surprise, as English native speakers need not consciously study English grammar to use it, whereas foreign learners of English, like me, inevitably need to. So, while such concepts are common knowledge among most Japanese and other foreign learners of English, they are not necessarily so among English-language natives. In hindsight it would have been helpful to have been somewhat clearer in my use of the term.

Please briefly return to the first sentence of this article. Its form is indeed "passive voice." According to what I was taught in English class in middle school, I can convert the sentence into "active voice" this way:

*It pleased, surprised, intrigued and encouraged me to receive...*

In principle, sentences in the form "(Subject) + (Verb) + (Object)" are active voice, such as:

*John read this article.*

*John surprised me.*

Without changing meaning much, these sentences can be restated as:

*This article was read by John.*

*I was surprised by John.*

These last are in "passive voice." In English this form is often used to avoid mentioning the actual doer of an act or, as discussed last month, to show the one experiencing the psychological state ("I" in the above examples). Ironically, however, the form is also used to intentionally stress the actual doer, or stimulator, by saying "by John."

Among the various comments received, a comment which intrigued me was that natives do not feel they are using passive voice when saying "I'm pleased," "I'm surprised," "I'm excited" and so on. It seemed that some of my readers only took the words as adjectives. Quite possibly you do, too. This is quite interesting to me because we Japanese students of English also take the words as adjectives when we learn them. This is because the Japanese equivalents are all adjectives, or the like, as I discussed last month. Nevertheless, the fact is that without question or doubt, the above sentences

are all passive in form.

As a reader noted, the thesaurus lists under "pleased" the terms "happy, glad, grateful, thankful and content," all of which are genuine adjectives. (In fact, I included these words in my original draft, but they were deleted by the proofreader on the grounds that they would reduce the column's impact.) Nevertheless, the baseline remains: Japanese has no expression whatsoever that even suggests an external cause or stimulus for any state of mind. All the English sentences I laid out that used these "adjectives" were in the passive voice, which meant they described a state in which the subject was a passive participant in his own psychological experience. This is a textbook use of "passive voice."

Additionally, another comment, or perhaps complaint, that I received was that it bordered on the absurd to argue that use of the passive voice illustrates human beings existing in contrast to, if not against, nature. In my defense, it would indeed have bordered on the absurd to argue that use of the passive voice alone was the reason for that perspective. My argument was, however, that this was yet another part of a multitude of reasons tending to lead to that view. I hope I have successfully illustrated the Japanese view of humankind vis-a-vis nature as it is embedded in the language in previous articles (and I will continue to work to do so in future).

The recent reader comments were very encouraging to me because they illuminated that this column is achieving a primary goal I set out for it from the very beginning with my first article, titled "Why Study Japanese?"

Specifically, I wanted to have people look at English and its mindset from an outsider's perspective. Studying Japanese helps people "get out of English" because in significant ways Japanese and English are at opposite extremes of a continuum.

Cultural phenomena embedded in language are unconsciously participated in by native speakers. Generally, only confronting a different pattern, or mind-set, illuminates them. If *Japanese in Depth* confronts your unspoken patterns, then I am happy to have succeeded in taking you to a new place. If you feel some disorientation looking back on familiar ground—as if you had discovered a new window in your house looking out over your garden—then that is entirely natural.

Learning foreign languages is filled with disorientation, and I submit there is value in allowing yourself a bit of the same in reviewing your own.

Language is, at least in very large part, an outcome of prior, often ancient times. It contains within it the kernels of how people in nonscientific, even prehistoric days thought about and perceived their world. My goal and privilege here is, to the best of my ability, to probe and illuminate, for enjoyment and learning, these ancient differences we have received, quite by accident, from prior times.

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