

Why Japanese look subdued?

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It seems to be a common belief that Japanese speakers look subdued, sometimes even elusive, in comparison to English speakers, who often look active, emotional and “vivid” when they speak. Most people would agree, I think, that English speakers employ more facial expressions and gestures than Japanese speakers. If you think about how Japanese prime ministers look when they speak (former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi excepted, perhaps), compared to U.S. presidents, I think you will see what I mean.

Today, I'd like to offer an explanation of this phenomenon from the perspective of linguistics.

Many columns ago, I demonstrated how the English sentence, “I am a cat,” could be translated as many as 2,000 different ways into Japanese. Each variant describes a different cat, telling us things like its gender, age, personality, regional affiliation and social status. Even its sexual orientation, and other very personal information, can be ascertained or inferred from some of the variants.

There are a number of independent causes of this flexibility. For instance, the word for “I” differs depending on who you are, where you are from and how you want to present yourself given the situation; there are about 20 options. The part equivalent to “am” (i.e., the verb) can vary in many ways, depending on how blunt, rude, arrogant, careful, considerate, subservient or polite you want to be vis-a-vis your counterpart.

Additionally, depending on which particle is employed with “I,” the way this message is presented can vary; such variations can only be expressed in English by changing how the speaker enunciates “I am a cat,” such as stressing “I” or “AM” or “CAT.” Even with changes in intonation, the English speaker cannot, by use of language alone, convey with these three words what the various Japanese equivalents can convey. The only way the English speaker could possibly attempt to distinguish between each of the 2,000 Japanese versions would be to act the variants out, using facial expressions, gestures, intonation, accents and voices.

Further addition of sentence-particles—such as *zo* and *yo*—at the end of the sentence, would cause it to assume a certain mode, providing warnings or other notifications. Again, in English you would need to act these modes out; the alternative is to add words, like “I’m warning you” or “I’m telling you.” In Japanese these modes are created simply by adding little particles at the end of the sentence.

In another column, I discussed how Japanese packages language. Both “*atsui desu*” and “*o-atsū gozaimasu*,” for instance, translate into English as “it is hot.” The latter, however, is packaged in a polite form, and because of this it conveys the speaker’s goodwill to the counterpart in addition to the message “it is hot.”

Another example of packaged language: “*mō iku*

kara” and “*mō iku da kara*” both translate to “because we’re going now” in English. Here the latter is packaged in an emphatic form—literally “because it is that we’re going now.” Due to this specific structure the speaker’s irritation is conveyed even if the sentence is uttered calmly. Here again, English requires acting out the speaker’s irritation by showing anger, or else verbalization, as in “because we’re going, dammit!”

This last example highlights a very large difference between English and Japanese that is found in the way natives give reasons or rationales for doing things. Look at these various ways to present reasons for something in English:

- I have a cold, and I feel unwell.
- As I have a cold...
- I have a cold, so...
- I have a cold; therefore, ...
- Since I have a cold, ...
- Because I have a cold, ...
- Now that I have a cold, ...
- When I have a cold like this I ...

All of these phrases exhibit different ways of stressing or describing reasons, but they do not tell us anything about the emotional state of the speaker.

Let’s look at how Japanese might handle the same situation:

- (1) *Kaze o hiite, kibun ga yokunai.*
- (2) *Kaze o hiita no de, ...*
- (3) *Kaze o hiita tame, ...*
- (4) *Kaze o hiita kara, ...*
- (5) *Kaze o hiita n da kara, ...*
- (6) *Kaze o hiita sê de, ...*
- (7) *Kaze o hiita okage de, ...*
- (8) *Kaze o hiita mono de, ...*
- (9) *Kaze o hiita mono da kara, ...*

I believe that it is next to impossible to create true one-to-one correspondences between the English and Japanese sentence fragments listed above. More than simply offering reasons, Japanese versions (5)-(9) indicate—quite clearly I might add—the speaker’s emotional state of mind. Here are some translations that indicate the actual nuances of the Japanese fragments above:

- (5) because I’ve got a damn cold (irritated) ...
- (6) because I have a cold (reproachful) ...
- (7) thanks to me having a cold (ironic) ...
- (8) because I have a cold (apologetic) ...
- (9) because I have a cold (more apologetic) ...

Japanese seems to employ its many tools that give “reasons” for purposes of hinting at the emotional state of the speaker, which state is to be inferred by the listener. In essence saying, “because of xyz, you know how I feel [if you know what to listen for].”

Japanese employs instrumental words, typically particles, as well as structural patterns, in order to imply the speaker’s state of mind. The absence of such instruments in English forces English speakers to act things out, making them look more “vivid” and emotional when they speak.

Additionally, I believe we have now found a good explanation for why English is accent oriented.

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