

## Live to communicate! 2008. 5. 20

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This is the 51st installment of the Japanese in Depth series, now in print for four years. Hopefully this is only one milestone of more to come. To mark the occasion, I'd like to consider the question "What is language?"

Superficially, of course, language is a means of communication. While it is indeed an important and major means of communication for almost all humans, it is not the only one.

Consider those who create various art forms: Composers write music, for instance. This is communication of feelings and thoughts via musical sound. Some musicians, it seems, have an easier time communicating through music than through words. Painters paint pictures, sculptors create sculptures and photographers capture images with cameras. I'm sure these media reflect their respective methods to express feelings and thoughts—in short, they are communicating.

The average person uses language all the time, both at home and at work. I think that women the world over enjoy what, from a male perspective, can seem like endless conversations with each other. And young people, in particular, appear to be addicted to using mobile phones, chatting constantly with their friends.

If we look at our daily life, language seems the most obvious widely and frequently used tool for communication. Researchers say, however, as much as 80 percent of what we communicate is actually nonverbal, i.e., gestures, eye movements, facial expressions, etc. Nevertheless, in this modern age of digital communication, language, with or without its associated nonverbal elements, probably represents our main means of communication.

As discussed last month, I'm convinced that animals also have thoughts and feelings, though they have no complex systematic "language" for expression like humans do. Considering that the primates most closely related to us demonstrate abilities with language if given special instruction (like Koko, the signing gorilla, for instance), it is, I think, indisputable that thought predates language for humans, too.

If you stop to observe the process, you will find that you can see thoughts and feelings emerging in your mind before the verbal expression of them arises. In order to share what cannot be perceived by others, we transform these thoughts and feelings into mutually comprehended sounds, so as to be understood. For the chain of sounds to make sense, the listener must be familiar with the system by which the sounds are laid out; in other words,

the listener needs to know the same language.

Even if the listener knows the same language, however, communication can never be perfect. The problem of perfect communication lies on both sides of the interaction.

First, there is a fundamental limit to expressing one's thoughts in words that is imposed by the tool of language itself. We may not be aware of this limitation, because we apply the tool we know so unconsciously, but assiduous learners of Japanese become aware, in time, that the Japanese often express different thoughts and feelings than those that can be expressed in English (for instance, politeness levels). Of course, this holds true in the opposite direction as well.

Second, speakers often cannot perfectly express their thoughts in language—this is an issue of the skill of the language user.

Third, the speaker's concept of a thing is quite subjective and can hardly be shared completely by others via whatever the means may be; sometimes the listener and the speaker, even though they share the same language, may have a different idea about what words mean.

Fourth, the listener may not hear, or may mishear, some parts of what was said, or may forget some parts of it.

Fifth, even if the listener has heard perfectly well, he or she generally cannot form exactly the same thought that the speaker had in mind, except maybe between experts using highly technical language.

So, language is in no way perfect for communication. Indeed, knowing what another person is thinking—truly understanding them—is one of the hardest tasks of human social interaction, even when language is shared. Nevertheless, we humans continue to use it; we constantly seek to be understood.

Why do we try to communicate at all? What does communication mean to us?

These are some of the most basic questions about the nature of human life. People are social animals. Like most animals, we require connection with other members of our species to prosper. As a basic observation it makes sense to recognize the urge to communicate as an essential survival mechanism.

Humans have always asked themselves, in some form, the question "What makes living worthwhile?" Apart from the physical requirements of food, water and shelter for survival, I believe that, spiritually speaking, communication is the most essential desire we have for living.

All human mental activities seem to seek expression that is to be subject to this instinctive desire to communicate with others. We want, we need, to be understood (what psychologists call "being seen"). For most of our conscious communication, language is employed, sometimes in a desperate attempt to be understood. I guess this is why language fascinates me.