

'Love' in the Japanese way

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About 20 years ago when I was a manager for a Japanese trading company in London, I remember joining a business lunch with some British executives. One of them was curious about the Japanese language and asked me a question:

"What is the Japanese language like, Mr. Yamauchi? I mean, how would you say 'I love you' in Japanese, for instance?"

My first response was:

"Well, we would not say such a thing because it is something we should feel intuitively rather than express verbally. Once we say it, it sounds rather cheap."

He was not very convinced by my answer:

"Come on, Mr. Yamauchi. I'm sure there must be occasions where you'd need to say that. What would you say in Japanese?"

I gave in and said:

"Well, when push comes to shove, you might say: *aishitemasu*."

He was pleased and asked me further:

"All right. Now, please tell me which part of *aishitemasu* means 'I,' which part 'love,' and which part 'you.'"

Asked this, I was at a loss. Feeling I had no alternative, I said:

"Well, *aishitemasu* does not contain any words equivalent to 'I' or 'you.'"

He was very puzzled by my answer, but as I was not yet a teacher of Japanese, I could not explain properly beyond this.

However, now I can.

His puzzlement comes from the conviction that there must be a subject to construct a sentence. This error is virtually unavoidable to Westerners, because English and most European languages all believe in the necessity of a subject to make a sentence. Moreover, these languages also say that if the verb in a sentence is transitive, there must be an object, too. However, these are by no means universal rules shared by all languages.

Forget which language you use for a second, and just think of the situation in which "I love you" might be said. Generally, just you and your partner are present. Given such a situation, why do you have to say "I love you?" Aren't the subject and object redundant?

While an English verb is just a word and cannot constitute a sentence unless there is a subject (even in imperatives like "Eat!" or "Go!," the subject "you" is deemed to be implied and omitted), a Japanese verb constitutes a valid, perfect and proper sentence on its own. Unless the situation calls for designating who the subject is and what the object is, words to describe these things are not uttered; similarly, additional information such as when, where, how, to what degree or why are not included unless there is a reason to do so. For whatever

reason, English treats the subject (and the object if the verb used is transitive) as special and indispensable. Japanese, on the other hand, treats all information equally—i.e. things are said only when that information is thought to be necessary.

Let's relate this back to "I love you." If the situation calls for it, there are, of course, ways to indicate "I" and "you" in Japanese as well. So, we could say, *watashi wa anata o aishiteimasu*. But we would need a special situation to make this appropriate. For example, a group of boys sit on one side with a group of girls on the other, and someone asks who loves whom. In such a highly unlikely situation, there would be a need for the speaker to say *watashi wa anata o aishiteimasu*. A literal translation for this would be: "(As far as I'm concerned) I (choose to) love you (among the others, and I am not responsible for who else loves who else)."

Japanese is a language in which a sentence is formed by either a verb on its own, an adjective on its own, or a noun followed by *da*. A word equivalent to an English subject is not necessary. This rule applies not only to the spoken language, but is found in writing as well. One of Japan's Nobel Prize-winners, author Yasunari Kawabata, started his famous *Yukiguni* (Snow Country) by writing: *Kunizakai no nagai tonneru o nukeru to yukiguni deatta*. In this, the very first sentence of a famous book, there is no subject! We have a verb, *nukeru*, which means "pass through," but the sentence does not tell us what passes through. Later, we find out that it is in fact a train, but the real meat of the sentence is in the last two words, which translate to: "(it) was the snow country." Here again, there is no subject. To make a close translation of the original into English, I must avoid using the subject.

For instance: "Upon passing through the tunnel of the country border, it was snow country."

Probably this English sounds a little odd to native English speakers. In that case, you could restate the sentence in this way:

"When the train passed through the tunnel of the border, there was snow country."

Or: "Passing through the long tunnel at the border led to snow country." (I don't have room here to cover why I chose to use "led to.")

Edward G. Seidensticker's well-known translation of the book has a more traditional English subject for this sentence:

"The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country."

Talking about subjects some more, think about English statements like "you never know." Here, although you use "you" as the subject, it could reasonably be replaced by other pronouns. So:

- You never know.
- We never know.
- One never knows.
- They never know.
- People never know.

Despite completely different word choices for the subject, these all mean virtually the same thing. Here again, an illustration that very often, mentioning the subject is redundant. And yet English demands it, and Japanese simply does not.