JAPANESE IN DEPTH

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Language as a living culture

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It is very common to think of language as merely a means of communication. If you approach the situation with this mind-set, however, language learning becomes tedious and frustrating. This is because every language includes illogical, impractical and unnecessary rules, which must be learned painstakingly and without questioning.

To give a simple example, most European languages distinguish all nouns, including inanimate objects and abstract nouns, as masculine or feminine. A number of European languages even have a neutral gender. Yet many languages, including English and Japanese, do not assign gender to nouns, and the speakers of these languages do not apparently have communication difficulties.

It is often taken for granted that verbs conjugate (i.e., change their form depending on tense, etc.) as found in many languages, including English and Japanese. In contrast, Chinese and Vietnamese, among others I assume, do not conjugate verbs at all, no matter the context or location in time the verb's action refers to.

Most native English speakers, and some nonnatives, tend to think that English is a much simpler language than, say, Japanese, for a number of reasons. Some seem to think that proof is found in the widespread adoption of English, compared to the other languages. But surely this is not the case. English, one of several languages of a relatively small island country in Europe, is the practical global lingua franca today because of historical accident, not because the language has superior attributes.

Many Nihongo learners think Japanese is confusing because it has many exceptions to its rules, and that *joshi* (particles) have no set rules and are used arbitrarily. This idea has grown out of poor explanations of how Japanese grammar works. When European grammatical terms, which are technical tools, are applied to a completely unrelated language like Japanese, there are of necessity many awkward matches, or rather, mismatches. If you used a yardstick to measure Japanese products manufactured to the metric system, every measurement would produce odd fractions.

English natives complain about the "tedious" counting systems of Japanese, with different counters (classifiers) depending on the shape of the item.

Feminists can argue that Japanese is chauvinistic because Japanese women speak a different language from that of men. Egalitarians can maintain that Japanese is awkward because of the complex polite language that distinguishes between people. Pragmatists consider Japanese unnecessarily complicated because the same thing can be said in so many different ways. English natives who have not studied another language deeply tend to think Japanese is odd because the pronunciation of borrowed English words is distorted from the original. Borrowed words also only have one of the meanings that the original word included—typically strangely changed from the original's meaning—further demonstrating the oddness of Japanese.

Looking back over my columns to date, I have been writing all this time to show how invalid many common day-to-day perceptions on language are. While in lingo-cultural aspects Japanese is indeed complex, the language itself is intrinsically simple and regular. In fact, as I often tell my students, Japanese is a simple language for simple-minded people.

If language were only a means of communication, we could invent a simple "aritficial" language with no exceptions in its grammar, making the best use of the logical and regular inventions of languages all over the world. We could eliminate the illogicality, complexity and arbitrariness found in "natural" languages. We could even make pronunciation easy. All of these things are possible, and examples even exist, such as Esperanto and Lojban. While possible, few people seem interested in using these artificial languages. I think people delight in their mother tongues, and enjoy the complexity and arbitrariness of the rules they have mastered. This pleasure is available to nonnatives, too: My more advanced Nihongo students report how great it feels to capably read such a complex writing system, or to follow a sophisticated discussion. There is a real feeling of accomplishment from mastering the complexities found in all natural languages and the cultures they comprise.

The Daily Yomiuri has decided that it is time to make some changes to the Language Connection pages. The "Japanese in Depth" series will come to an end, and this column is its last installment. I extend sincere gratitude and thanks to all the readers who have taken time to read my humble little column over the years. Thank you very much; your comments and questions have stimulated and enriched me, and it is my sincere hope that my writings have reciprocated your kindness.

Luckily, I have been asked to fill a section in the renewed space once a month. My next series will be more tightly focused on the study of Japanese. I hope my new column will help Nihongo learners to understand deeply, and use freely, the beautiful language that has developed on this small island over more than 2,000 years.

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

NOTICE

This is the last installment of Japanese in Depth. Yamauchi will return with a new column starting on April 4.