

Power of Language

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Good afternoon everyone. I'm interested in language and today I'm going to talk about my ideas concerning language.

Living in Japan, I don't have many opportunities to use English, or meet English-speaking people. So I belong to the English Speaking Society at school, and at the meetings I met new people. We have a lot of enjoyable conversations about different topics in English. The teachers, foreign students and Japanese students of different ages come together, and we all talk like friends. I am really impressed by this. I noticed this kind of open communication seldom happens when talking in Japanese, and I realized how much effect language can have on people and how much power is in a language itself.

Language changes the way I relate to other people. In English it's normal to call people by their first name, (and we can always say "you" to the person we talk to). I become less conscious of the age of people I'm talking to, which makes it easier to make friends. Japanese places emphasis on groups while English places emphasis on individuals. I can talk casually even with a teacher when I call him just "Richard" without adding "sensei."

Although English has never been a daily language for me, there are times that I'd rather express my feelings in English than in Japanese. Phrases like "I miss you" or "I love you" are very simple and short, but still powerful. In English it's easy to express emotions directly without becoming too dramatic or rude. Because we state the subject and object, it also becomes very clear whom you are talking about. I can say my opinion precisely even when I'm talking to an older person or someone I've just met.

Talking in front of many people, like this, also becomes more comfortable for me in English. Because the subject and object have to be clear in a sentence,

you have to clarify your opinion before you say something. That makes it possible for me to speak with more conviction and confidence. It's just a grammatical difference whether we emphasize the subject and object or not, but it has a large effect on the way we appear to another person.

Now let me turn to the Japanese language. In Japanese, it's possible to talk without saying the subject and without completing the whole sentence. When I say, “寂しい,” it's not clear who is missing whom. These conversations can be ambiguous sometimes, but that's definitely not a negative thing. You can enjoy your own imagination and mood, or convey thoughts and emotions without being too forward or harsh. Through the language, you can feel the culture of people who tend to hide their feelings or prefer telling their feelings indirectly. The ambiguity in Japanese makes it easier to assume a harmonious attitude, because listeners may interpret the information such as to make it more palatable.

Something else that's very characteristic of Japanese is “kanji”. The appearances are very unique, and these effect our mental image of the words. One letter of the alphabet doesn't have a meaning, but one kanji or even one part of a Kanji can have many different meanings. When I use a Japanese word, I sometimes imagine the kanji in my head. When I see something beautiful, like a traditional kimono or wood-block print, for me it's not only “nice” or “wonderful”. It can be “美しい”, “ or “輝かしい” or other words which give an impression or image influenced by their kanji. It's like the words become something visual and artistic. Because Japanese has a more visual component, it may have a more powerful non-verbal “felt” effect on its users. Some things I can express only in Japanese.

There are thousands of languages in use today. The differences may sometimes be troublesome, but learning new languages gives us new possibilities to know more about people and culture as well as a greater range of self expression and self-knowledge. When I use a different language, I still feel comfortable and I am still the same person. But the power of language gives me a chance to express myself in different ways and at the same time, encourages me to keep studying foreign languages, and love my native language even more.