

IN SEARCH OF "EN"

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On a recent visit to Japan, I was invited by a business friend to spend an evening at a Japanese Inn in Kyoto which had been in the family for over seventy years and was now being used to accommodate guests by invitation only. Needless to say, such an invitation is hard to refuse. Having been warned that the Inn was situated in a place not frequented by tourists and might be difficult to find, I arrived before the appointed hour and was left by the cab driver near the Kamo River which flows in front of the Inn. Wide concrete walkways along the banks permit one to stroll along the river for miles gazing at the picturesque mountain against which the ancient capital city of Kyoto is nestled, viewing the splendor of the cherry blossoms in early spring time, or simply gazing at the swift but shallow current of this river noted for its esthetic rather than commercial value. The waters of the Kamo River reflect many famous stories of ancient times when this area was known as "Ponto-cho", the location of many tea houses and the scene of extravagant Geisha entertainment indulged in by the nobility, affluent merchants and powerful samurai. The past learned, lived and remembered.... a legacy made possible by language.

We are so used to language in our daily lives that we take it for granted as we do the air we breathe, and yet without language

how can we converse with one another? How can a preacher preach from the pulpit and convert souls? How can a teacher teach and the learner learn? How can philosophers philosophize? Through books, letters, newspapers, telephones, electronic and other media, languages have enabled us to cope with our separation in time and space in order that we may also see into that of the distant as well as the past. As languages reflect human thoughts, they enable us to store and pass on knowledge and thought from one generation to another. Could we know of the ingenious inventions and creations endowed upon us without linguistic instructions? Without languages, our higher culture, religion, philosophies, and all marks of civilization would dissolve into nothing. Every human being would have to start from scratch. No one would go further than his own limited ability and initiatives could carry him. In other words, each succeeding generation builds on the knowledge it inherits. Language makes human progress possible.

It is said that no language has ever been found surviving outside human societies. Scientists have been able to distinguish animal sounds such as mating calls, maternal summons, cries of fear and warning. With but a few exceptions, they find that the sounds engendered by individual species vary within a limited range, much like human cries and laughter. They are instinctive, emotional and need not be taught or learned.

On the other hand, human languages are artificially compounded and they have to be learned. A spoken language includes a wide variety of sounds which have meanings and are meant to be something more than outcries.

According to Noam Chomsky, professor of linguistics at M.I.T., in his book entitled A Reflection on Language: "A human language is a system of remarkable complexity. To come to know human language would be an extraordinary intellectual achievement for a creature not specifically designed to accomplish this task. A normal child acquires this knowledge on relatively slight exposure and without specific training." From this statement can we deduce that we humans inherit some cognitive capacity for language? A serious study of language can take one deep into the realm of psychology, philosophy, linguistics and other areas.

Each language belongs to a social group of people who are attuned to its usage in order to communicate with each other. In order to communicate accurately and to have mutual understanding, the group has to agree on the sounds, symbols, signs, etc., used in representing their thoughts.

"Yufala we I wantem riparem traks, motobak, aotbotmoto, lonmowa no enkiaen narafala enjin. Plis Kontaktem mifala long

telefon nambu 3570." A recent column in the Wall Street Journal contained this strange utterance which translated from Bislama to English means - "You out there! Our shop wants to repair trucks, motorbikes, outboard motors, lawn mowers and any kind of other engine. Please contact us at telephone number 3570." The article tells about the six-year-old nation of Vanuata, formerly known as New Hebrides. On its 80 islands are 130,000 people who speak 104 distinct languages with various other local dialects. The strange form of pidgin language evolved out of the islanders' necessity to communicate with sailors engaged in trade with China of a local product called "sea-slugs", a Chinese banquet delicacy. Pidgin English, strange as it may be to the ear, is based on our English language and with some imagination, one can decipher the meaning. "Blong" is an all-purpose word in the Bislama form of Pidgin English. A broom is a "brum", and a tooth is a "tut", a toothbrush is a "brum blong tut". A helicopter? It's a "Mixmaster blong Jesus".

In the southern part of France, in an area described as the Dordogne Valley, discoveries were made recently of several prehistoric caves containing drawings of animals clearly visible and identifiable to the modern eye as some species or ancestral strains of the horse, buffalo or deer, most of them running or leaping. It is highly unlikely that our prehistoric friend would have called the animals a horse or a buffalo or a deer if indeed

he had any linguistic sound representing these animals at all. However, he had no doubt that the paintings on the wall of the cave were of four-legged creatures of a certain description which he had seen and visualized in his mind. Although we may not know his purpose or what circumstances would have led this prehistoric man to draw on the wall of a cave, the significance of the drawing is that it represented a visual communication of an idea, and in this respect, was perhaps a form of language in and of itself. He did not need to attach a brass plate below his drawing, explaining in words what it represented or give it some title, as in our modern art galleries.

Most of us cannot recall the exact moment when we became aware of language. Somehow, our parents managed to lead us into the world of linguistics. In my own case, being brought into this world by Japanese parents, the first and only language to reach my ear was the Japanese language, and my exposure to another language was not until later when friends would speak English to me or when I entered school. We manage to pick up the conventional language used in our own existing social structure.

Today, we have words to describe things, pictures, ideas, feelings and emotions. According to S.I. Hayakawa -- "the task of writing an English dictionary begins by reading vast amounts of literature of the period or subject that the dictionary is to

cover. As the editors read, they copy on cards every interesting or rare word; every unusual or peculiar occurrence of a common word; a large number of common words in their ordinary use; and also the sentences in which each of these words appear. That is to say, the context of each word is collected along with the word itself. As the cards are collected, they are alphabetized and sorted. When the sorting is completed, there will be for each word anywhere from two or three to several hundred illustrative quotations, each on its card. To define a word then, the dictionary editor places before him the stack of cards illustrating that word; each of the cards represents an actual use of the word by a writer of some literary or historical importance. He reads the cards carefully, discards some, rereads the rest, and divides up the stack according to what he thinks are the several senses of the word. Finally, he writes his definitions, following the hard and fast rule that each definition must be based on what the quotations in front of him reveal about the meaning of the word. The editor cannot be influenced by what he thinks a given word ought to mean. He must work according to the cards or not at all." (This explanation was written many years ago prior to today's more sophisticated method of data gathering and sorting through the use of computers, but the evaluative process still remains the same).

The writing of an English dictionary is therefore not a task of setting up authoritative statements about the "true" meaning of

words, but a task of recording to the best of one's ability what various words have meant to authors in the distant or immediate past.

A foreign language may sound like strange noises to us, for we cannot understand it. Yet, it is a language to the speaker. When we compare English to the Chinese language, we should be reminded that both languages developed in the absence of each other. On occasion I am asked such questions as "how do you say Jack in Japanese?", the underlying assumption being that English is the basic language from which all other languages evolved. This assumption, however, is erroneous. Japanese language and characters are based on Chinese models, not English. To illustrate this point, a recent media release put out by an international translation service informed us that Super Bowl XX was to be broadcast in the Peoples' Republic of China. "In cooperation with the National Football League, T.L.I. International Corporation is producing a Chinese-language version of Super Bowl XX for broadcast in the Peoples' Republic of China. This is the first time the Super Bowl will be seen in China". As encouraged as I am about this attempt at promoting inter-cultural understanding, I am overcome by curiosity as to the comprehensiveness of the translation as the rules of the game are explained and the play-by-play calls are made. How do you explain in Chinese that a 305 pound kitchen appliance has just plunged through the line for a touchdown?

Languages, of course, have attained increasing importance in promoting global understanding and in enriching our daily lives. With the expansion of world commerce and the development of speed and technology in communication, we are made increasingly aware of the benefits of languages in transmitting our thoughts and information. Distance and time are not boundaries as we jet across continents and oceans for meetings, transmit copies of documents through facsimile machines instantaneously across thousands of miles, engage in live teleconference with participants throughout the world. The increase in international commerce has brought forth many multinational joint ventures and cooperative efforts of one kind or another, bringing many people from different nations, cultural and racial backgrounds in touch with one another. As a consequence, there has been a proliferation of consultants in languages and experts of all kinds in international trade, marketing, exporting, communications, etc. telling people about a particular country, how to market your product or services and other technical aspects of doing business here or abroad. A large number of language schools and translation services have been spawned because of the increasing international need.

The expansion in international commerce and cross-cultural intercourse has had its effect on our languages.---some changes

salutary, others, not so. One case of recent development is the word "sushi", commonplace in our American vocabulary today, whereas it was relatively unknown 20 years ago. There are many other Japanese words which have been seen or heard in advertisements here such as "sukoshi" (little), "futon" (quilt blanket), or "hoki" (broom). The language adoption in the other direction is even more dramatic in numbers and in the way many English words have become part of the Japanese vocabulary. Of course, in such a case there is no equivalent character to represent the English word in Japanese and the phonetic alphabet called "hiragana" is used to merely parrot the sound such as - the word for television would be "te le bi". Many humorous incidents related to language can be recited by others, but permit me to recount a couple of stories having to do with the adoption of words from another language.

A few summers ago, I was playing golf in a foursome with three Japanese gentlemen. As we approached the tee I heard them use the expression "dra-con" which I had never heard before. So I asked one of them what the word meant in English. He replied that it designated the "longest drive" hole. Satisfied with the answer but still puzzled by the word "dra-con" and assuming that it was derived from a Japanese word, I enquired how the word was written in Chinese character. His response was a half-derisive

laughter followed by an explanation that "dra-con" was a contraction of our English - - "Driving Contest". My tee shot on that hole ended out of bounds!

Several years ago, my wife and I visited Spain. After spending some time sightseeing in Madrid and Toledo, we rented a car to tour the beautiful countryside and to visit some of the historic towns. On the way north towards the Basque country, we reached a little town where we stopped for some refreshments and a walk around a scenic park. At some point in our walk, I received an urgent call from nature. Having studied Spanish in high school, I confidently walked up to a park caretaker, and inquired in what I considered to be impeccable Spanish "where is the toilet?". Either he was hard of hearing or he did not understand Spanish impeccably spoken. Finally, I abandoned the use of verbal language in favor of body language accompanied by a look of desperation, whereupon the gentleman's face lit up, and pointing to a small building, he uttered the most welcome words -- " Ahh-Pees!". It was a relief to know that the English language, in even the most colloquial sense, had succeeded in reaching this remote part of Spain. We may rejoice in the fact that great progress has been made in the assimilation of different languages throughout the world, yet if the function of language is to permit the transmission of thought from one person

to another, the effect of such assimilation may not be all together salutary.

Ineptness in speaking or understanding a foreign language can, of course, be a barrier to communication. Somehow we can often overcome this deficiency by sheer perserverance or by the use of imagination where language precision is not critical. Where precision is vital, however, language problems can be a cause of serious tragedy. A recent 20/20 T.V. program featured a government report on air safety, a report covering an 8 year study of 40 airports in the U.S. which uncovered 200 incidents of problems in communication between the controller and the pilot due to language differences:

1) In December, 1984, at the Los Angeles Airport, a foreign pilot disregarded instructions and landed his plane directly in the path of another plane which was about to take off -- language problem was the cause cited.

2) February, 1981, in New York City, - an Argentine 707 making a landing approach toward Kennedy was heading on a path directly in line with the World Trade Center Building - 1700 feet tall. The controller saw that it was at about 1500 feet and immediately directed the pilot to turn sharply, 90 seconds short of disaster -- language was the problem cited.

Language problems! Are they so simple to explain away? S.I. Hayakawa in speaking of language as symbolism states: "Of all forms of symbolism, language is the most highly developed, most subtle and most complicated ... The habitual confusion of symbols with things symbolized, whether on the part of individuals or societies, is serious enough at all levels of culture to provide a perennial human problem. But with the rise of modern communications systems, the problem of confusing verbal symbols with realities assumes peculiar urgency." Rarely do we find a better example of confusion of symbols than in examining one important aspect of an Asian culture and how it can lead to misunderstanding.

Dr. Takeo Doi, a professor at Tokyo University, in his work entitled "Amae no Kōzō", (translated into English as "Amae - the anatomy of dependence") describes an episode in which he visited an acquaintance. After chatting awhile, the American host said "If you are hungry, I have some ice cream." Doi replied automatically, "I'm not hungry, thank you", with a vague expectation of being urged again to have something to eat. But the host simply said, "Oh, I see" and dropped the subject, leaving Doi somewhat disappointed and at a loss. This unexpected occurrence led Doi to reflect that had the other person been Japanese, he probably would not have asked someone whom he was

meeting for the first time whether or not he was hungry, but would have shown his hospitality by simply setting out something to eat. Such incidents led Doi to feel that the Americans, unlike the Japanese, generally do not consider or try to anticipate others' wishes and feelings.

The author continues on to say that in comparison to people who have no specific word for the phenomenon of "Amae", the Japanese have developed the psychology of amae in every aspect of life. They have created many words expressing variations upon it, so much so that we can speak of the Japanese society as the "world of Amae". "Tanomu" is a word whose meaning is between "to ask" and "to rely on"; to entrust our personal matter to another with the expectation of his acting in one's behalf. The verb "sumanai" (or sumimasen), which the Japanese use often, has attracted the interest of foreigners because it is used to express both apology (excuse me) and gratitude (thank you), contexts that appear at first to be quite different.

Etymologically, this word is the negative form of the verb sumu: to end, conclude, finish. One excuses oneself (sumanai) for not having finished or completed something one should have done. One says "sumanai" to acknowledge a kindness because he conjectures that performing the kindness must have put the other person to some degree of trouble. Why are the Japanese not content to merely express thanks instead of apologizing for the

inconvenience to which they imagine they have placed other person? The reason is that they are afraid that if they do not apologize, the other person will take this as indicating ingratitude and so will lose the other person's goodwill. Saying "sumanai" expresses the psychology of not wanting to lose another's goodwill in the future and of wishing to continue indefinitely to depend (amae) on him. One can easily see that words such as; "giri" (duty), "ninjo" (human feeling), "tsumi" (guilt), and "haji" (shame) can have extraordinary significance in the world of Amae, and thought patterns inherent in this culture can not be truly understood by others.

In our episode, the American host's offer (" If you are hungry, I have some ice cream") was a straightforward statement and his words were meant to convey just that meaning. His share of the blame for the misunderstanding lay in his lack of knowledge about the culture of his guest and in not realizing that in Japanese society, certain words may have certain implications beyond their literal meaning. On the other hand, Dr. Doi did not understand his host's sincerity in offering the ice cream. His cultural de-emphasis on frankness as well as his own sense of amae, contributed to the confusion and misunderstanding.

In Japanese, the word "En" is most simply defined as connection or relationship. It would not occur to many of us that a person with a native language different from English may not even think the same thoughts as an English speaking person. Many years ago, the concept of one universal language called "Esperanto" was introduced to the world. Not hearing of its success after so many years, we can only speculate on its fate. Perhaps the English language itself has supplanted "Esperanto" as the universal language. Is it possible that proponents of the movement discovered that there exists some unsurmountable barriers in bridging the gap between words and thought when one deals with people of different social structures? Whether or not a perfect universal language is ever attainable is irrelevant. Our search for "En" goes on without it.

And so those men of Hindustan,
Disputed loud and long;
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong.
Though each was partly in the right
And all were in the wrong.

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I mean,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other means,
And prate about an elephant
Not one of them has seen

(from "The Blind Men and the
Elephant" by John Godfrey Saxe)

END