

I Can Speak Squirrel: The Structural “Essence” of Japanese

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要約:

あなたはサバ、ブリ、タイがたんなる魚の種類だと思うだろうが、それらはまた世界のどこかで使われている言語の名前なのだ。それにもし私がリス語、タマ語、ダン語が話せると言ったら、あなたはどう思うだろうか。本論では、原著者たちは世界にある8,000の言語の特性をいくつか論じ、またそれが構造としてどんなふうに日本語と対照的であるかを述べる。

真の「日本語らしさ」はふつう考えられているよりも複雑である。進化、同化、変質や見当違いの民間語源は、どうしようもないくらい元の言語の多くの要素を曖昧にしている。日本語はすでに話し手の人口としては8番目に大きな言語であって、いくつかのほかの独立した言語を含み、また目に触れられないところで、ほかの外国語と結びついている。「ほんのこればかりだ」がスペインのバスク語では「こればかりだ」となることはたんなる偶然の一致だろうか。

室町時代にヨーロッパから最初の宣教師たちがきてから、「悪魔の言語」である日本語は欠陥があり、格変化などをもたないとみるような、ヨーロッパ中心主義や言語上の優越性が言語学の分野でみられた。こういう傾向を内にもって、日本人は自国語をほかに例のない珍しいことばだと思ふようになった。その結果は、国際間のコミュニケーションやほかの形の交流にとって有害であることがわかった。というのは、そういう傾向のため、日本人は心理的にみて、外国語を、確信をもって取り入れようとする態度から距離をおくようになり、また、日本語のなかに潜む文化的な複雑さが外国人にはとくに不可解だという信念をもつようになったからである。現代の言語学の指針はこのような神話を打ち消し、世界の言語の話し手たちの間に連帯感をつくりだすことである。

IKA, SABA, BULI ... FOREIGN LANGUAGE THAT DOESN'T SEEM FOREIGN

*Ika, Saba, Buli, Thai, Toro, Ebira, Kalubi, Tare, Ogori, Takari, Oseji, Baka, Waru, Geta, Yakan, Kaba, Tora, Lisu, Roba, Dani, Koke, Mochiron*²⁾...

What on earth is this list of terms? Do you know? It's a good bet that only linguists versed in the languages of the world or eccentrics with a knowledge of languages could guess right. Actually, these are all names of languages used somewhere in the world which I came across in Sanseido's *Dictionary of Linguistics*. Kalubi, for

1) Originally appearing in: Jou Hakutaro & Matsuzaki Hiroshi, *Nihongo 'Rashisa' no Gengogaku*, Kodansha (Tokyo, 1994).

2) In English: squid, mackerel, yellowtail, red snapper, tuna, shrimps, Korean barbecue, sauce, arrogance, blackmail, flattery, stupid, bad, wooden clogs, tea kettle, hippo, tiger, squirrel, donkey, tick, moss, of course...

example, is from the hilly region of Hikiruin in the Kalubi Anguron district in the state of Assam in eastern India. Yakan is still being used in the coastal regions of eastern Basilan and Zamboanga del Sur, the Philippines.

The languages of Thailand are just as jumbled. If they were lined up like sushi on a tray, nobody would be able to identify many of the regional dialects as Thai. Of course for Japanese, Thai (or *tai*) is one of those words perfect for construing amusing puns, like a story I found in the Reader's Column of a newspaper: "I've made some Thai curry. Try it," whereby an old woman holding a spoon in her mouth grumbles, "There is no *tai* (red snapper) in this." The word's meaning can be impossible to determine.

Nevertheless, in spite of such misunderstandings, what a lovely and fantastical impression it would evoke for Japanese speakers to hear someone say something like: "I can speak Lisu (squirrel)." Or, how could we ever avoid misunderstanding someone boasting: "With great difficulty, I've finally mastered Takari (blackmail)"?

In addition to these, the names of some foreign languages end in *-go*, meaning "language" in Japanese. Some of these are: Ingo, Edogo, Kanrengo, Shigo, Tamago, Dango, Wago, Gogogo, etc³⁾. The misunderstandings caused by such terms can be amusing, as even if you say them slowly and distinctly there is really no way of knowing what is being said. This was the case in a statement made by a linguist appearing on television: "there are many interesting words in Ingo (or, secret languages)." This can pose a considerable worry.

In Persian, watermelon is *hendawane* (strange, isn't it?). In Korean, "it's beautiful!" is *arundawayo* (Yes there is!). Jewel in Burmese is *yattanaa* (I did it!), and in Italian, restaurant, an eating establishment no less, is *taberna* (Don't eat it!).

In the Netherlands there is a health resort called Skebeningen (*perverted person*), and in Fiji there is an island called Eromanga (*erotic comic*) Island. When I hear the Swedish loan-word "ombudsman," meaning administrative inspection committee, I can not help associating it with the image of a watchman being carried on someone's back, blubbering like a child.

Sometimes we can laugh at the coincidence of finding words in foreign languages which have an uncanny similarity to Japanese words. Of these, some are cases of accidental *uniformity*, where the meanings are similar but not the word forms. We could start with the well-known pun on the word *kennel*, where dogs sleep, written *ken-neru* (dog-sleep) in Japanese. Others include:

- the "so" in the English "I think so" is the same as the Japanese *sou omou* (I think so);
- in English "deny" is *denai* in Japanese;
- in German, *namae* (name) is "name";
- in Russian, *wata* (cotton) is "wata";
- in Rumanian, *obaasan* (old woman, grandmother) is "baba," a derogatory form of the word;

3) In English: secret language, Tokyo dialect, related words, dead language, egg, dumpling, traditional Japanese words, afternoon words.

- in Arabian, *omae* (you) is “anta” (also meaning you);
- in Gualani, *ore* (me) is “ore”;
- in Hindi, *kata* (shoulder) is “kanda”;
- in Finnish, *hara* (abdomen) is “para”;
- in Italian, *takusan no* (a lot) is “tanto,” just like *tanto oagari* (eat a lot);
- in Turkish, *katai* (hard) is “kati”;
- in Basque, *honno kore bakari da* (this is all there is) is “kore bakari da”;
- in Hungarian, *shioke no tarinai* (not salty enough) is “shiotaran”; etc.

I'll stop here, though there is no end to such examples.

Comparatively Simple Japanese Syllables

The reason that Japanese and foreign languages can easily produce similar word forms is that Japanese syllables, formed by combining consonants and vowels, are of comparatively simple structure. Comparing Japanese and English, both languages having monosyllabic words constructed around vowel sounds, we can see that there are overwhelmingly fewer types of syllables in Japanese (see Figure 1).

The reason for this is that in Japanese solitary consonants which come after vowels are limited to “n” and small “tsu,” unlike English which has many types of consonant combinations. Examples of words with vowels followed by two successive consonants are quite rare and tend to play a marginal role in the language. Words ending in small “tsu,” for example, are limited to things like sound effects and inter-

Japanese		English		
絵	/e/	V	/a/	a
円	/eN/	VC	/at/	at
手	/te/	CV	/hi/	he
エーッ	/eRQ/	VCC	/ænt/	ant
本	/hoN/	CVC	/pæt/	pat
書	/sjo/	CCV	/tri/	tree
		VCCC	/æskz/	asks
コーン	/koRN/	CVCC	/pænt/	pant
順	/zjuN/	CCVC	/spæt/	spat
		VCCCC	/ʌŋklz/	uncles
		CVCCC	/tekst/	text
ギャーッ	/gjaRQ/	CCVCC	/plʌgz/	plugs
		CCCVC	/spræt/	sprat
		CVCCCC	/sæmplz/	samples
		CCVCCC	/spæŋks/	spanks
		CCCVC	/strægl/	straggle
		CCVCCCC	/træmpld/	trampled
		CCCVCCC	/stræŋgl/	strangle
		CCCVCCCC	/stæŋrgld/	strangled

Figure 1 : Comparison of Japanese and English monosyllabic words showing possible vowel (V) and consonant (C) combinations.

jections.

The reason for this is that in Japanese consonants and vowels are firmly bound together, forming syllables like *ka*, *sa*, *ta*, and *na*. For example, to words ending in a consonant, like “club” —a monosyllabic word with successive consonants—, a vowel is added to the consonant, making *kurabu*, a word with three syllables ending in a vowel. Therefore, “auto,” which ends in a vowel, turns out to be the same as “oat”, ending in a consonant, forming the nearly identical words *outomoubiru* (automobile) and *outomiiru* (oatmeal) respectively.

Again, compared to English, Japanese has fewer types of consonants and vowels. “æ,” “ɑ” and “ʌ” “all become *a* in Japanese, “ɪ” and “ɹ” are both *ra*, and “s” and “θ” become *sa*.

Therefore, syllable composition and consonant-vowel differentiation distinguishable in foreign languages break down in Japanese. The result is that Japanese words of pure Japanese origin, of Chinese origin, and of foreign origin all take on a similar structure.

BECAUSE A VEST IS WORN SHORT?

We have seen that the structure of Japanese produces many homonyms. While on one hand this can certainly be an inconvenience, on the other it has the pleasing benefit of producing a multitude of puns to play with. In addition, numerous memorization strategies have been developed employing such jokes, enabling us to enjoy the many advantages of memorizing telephone numbers, dates, pi, square roots, or the periodic table.

Such strategies also make it easy to memorize the vocabulary of foreign languages. Students faced with the chore of remembering lists of English vocabulary are thankful for the memorization rules taught by rhyming games in examination reference books such as Muto Takeo's *Techniques for Memorizing English Vocabulary through Associations* and *Techniques for Memorizing English Compounds through Association* (Seishun). Here are a few of these masterpieces :

arrest—*are sutto taihou suru* (He was arrested so easily!?)

barbarous—*baa bara su to wa zannen na* (to kill an old woman, how barbarous)

criticize—*kuri chisai zo to hihan suru* (to criticize that the chestnut is too small)

physician—*fui, jisan taore, isha o yobu* (suddenly the old man collapsed and I called the physician)

spontaneous—*suppon te ni asu no shizen na katsuryoku* (the natural vitality of a turtle which bites the hand and doesn't let go)

get to—*ge tto toosan gero haku you ni naru* (Dad gets to the point of throwing up. Blah!)

at all—*a, tooru bousouzoku wa meiwaku o kakeru koto ga mattaku wakaranai*

(Oh, that group of crazy drivers passing through doesn't realize at all the trouble it is causing).

Though one might think that it would be faster to memorize by rote rather than re-

member a sentence as long as the last example, such apparently inefficient phrases have a strong initial impact and are not easily forgotten.

The Principle of folk etymology

In classical Rakugo, comical stories, we find the *ukiyonedomi*, or old know-it-all. This is a brash and raucous old man voicing random pontifications about the etymology of this word, the etymology of that word. One after another he spouts off ludicrous-sounding explanations. "Why is an eel (*unagi*, 鰻) called an eel? Because they wriggle, making it hard for cormorants to catch them. See? The Chinese characters for cormorant (鵜—*u*) and hardship (難儀—*nangi*) combine to spell *unangi*." "The word kettle (*yakan*) got its name because on the battlefield it was worn as a helmet and when an arrow (*ya*) hit it, rang a 'kan' sound."

Stories like these are circulating in the real world as well. The etymological explanation for the word vest, for example, is that it is worn (*kiru*) short (*chotto*), and so given the name *chokki*. Though generally written in Katakana to designate it as a loanword, in used clothing stores near Kannon Shrine in Asakusa, Tokyo, it is appropriately written as [寸着], with the characters for short (一寸) and wear (着). (*2) Actually, the origin of *chokki* is the Portuguese *jaque*, which, like *jakke* from German and jacket from English, is traced back to Arabic. So in Japanese there are two or three layers taken from these several languages; though *chokki*, *jakke*, and jacket all refer to different items, all have been duly adopted. In other words, the original etymological explanation for the word *chokki*, that it derives from the written characters for wear and short, is untrue.

In linguistics, this tendency to ignore the correct historical facts and haphazardly assign whatever etymologies sound good is called folk etymology or popular etymology. Researchers rummage through classic writings looking to dig up some foundation for their theories. Claiming that "this must be the origin of such and such a word," "over time that must have been handed down and become that," or "such and such looks like such and such," this type of scholarship constitutes merely the illusion of real etymology.

Occasionally when folk etymology is employed, word forms are altered simply due to how they appear. In his book *Geography of Japanese Dialects* (Heibonsha, 1976), W.A. Grotas notes that while he was researching the word shovel (*shaberu*) in the Itoigawa region of Niigata Prefecture he came across such dialectic variations as *shabiro*, *shabori*, and *shaboru*. When he consulted one old man he was told that the shovel's blade is wide (*hiro*) and so called *shabiro*. Another answer he got was that it is used to dig (*horu*) in the ground and therefore called *shabori* or *shaboru*.

We can also see dialectic variations of the word *namekuji* (slug), namely, *namekuzu*, *namekuji*, and *namekujira*. These are all born out of the influence of peoples' associations with other words having different meanings: in the above cases, *kuzu* (rubbish), *kujiru* (pick), and *kujira* (whale) respectively. A more thorough explanation of why this last variation caught on is that slugs look like miniature whales, not to mention

that the word rhymes with *mamekujira*, or mini-whale (*1-3).

For loan-words such as :

- cholera—*korori* from “to drop dead :” *korori to shinu*
 grounder—*goro* from “rolling around :” *gorogoro korogaru*
 station—*sutensho*, *sho* meaning “place”
 parsley—*paseri* from *seri no pa*, or “the leaf of an herb”
 napkin—*nafukin* from “dishcloth :” *fukin*
 bill—*biru* from “flutter :” *birabira*

which entered Japan during the Edo (1600-1868) and Meiji (1868-1912) periods, rational explanations were provided for word forms which were changed, and some were given new meanings (*4). Like the examples below, some loan-words were ingeniously replaced with Chinese characters which were close to the original meaning and pronunciation ; such jems embody the wisdom of our ancestors.

- confeitos—金平糖 (*konpeitou*)
 capa—合羽 (*kappa*)
 club—俱樂部 (*kurabu*)
 joke—冗句 (*jouku*)
 catalog—型録 (*kataroku*)
 euthenics—優生学 (*yuuseigaku*)
 book keeping—簿記 (*boki*)

Bad puns are senseless and we shouldn't take them too seriously. When they are trying to remember words which have no meaning for them, people try to give them meaning in order to make them stick. This is the incentive to change an unknown word to a different one which is known and similar. Language change often takes this typically human path. Over a long period originally misapplied words become a part of the accepted fabric of the language, proving that for any number of reasons, we must recognize self-styled folk etymology as legitimate.

WHAT IS JAPANESE “ESSENCE”?

Above I have made several claims : that Japanese syllables are simple in structure, that there are few types of syllables, and that there are also few types of vowels and consonants. It should be noted, however, that I make these only in comparing Japanese to, for example, English.

When Nihonjinron⁴⁾ was in fashion, arguments were being made that “such and such is a characteristic of Japanese,” “such and such an expression exists because of the special character of the Japanese,” “such and such is a development unique to Japanese, and doesn't exist in foreign languages,” etc. Further examples include :

- honorific speech is a special characteristic of the Japanese language. There is no language with honorifics as difficult as those of Japanese ;
- verbs come at the end in Japanese, while in foreign languages they always come

4) A movement arguing for the cultural uniqueness and superiority of Japan and things Japanese.

- after the subject ;
- in Japanese you can form a sentence without a subject ; this is highly unusual ;
 - foreign languages have many vowel sounds, but Japanese has only five ;
 - Japanese also has only a few types of consonants. Japanese are about the only people who can not distinguish between “l” and “r” ;
 - there are many words like *harumeku* (become Spring-like), which express the changes of the passing seasons ;
 - like *harusame* (spring rain), *nagaame* (long rain), *hisame* (freezing rain), and *samidare* (early summer rain), there is a wealth of vocabulary related to rain ;
 - there is a detailed categorization of fishes, for example : *maguro* (tuna), *saba* (mackerel), *koi* (carp), *buri* (yellowtail) etc. ;
 - there are many dialects in Japan, to the extent that conversation becomes nearly impossible in the North and the South.

However, as research on other languages progressed, arguments such as these were gradually silenced and an approach which viewed Japanese as just one of the world’s many languages became more widely accepted. Therefore, the nature of my earlier statements does not claim Japanese uniqueness among the other languages of the world. In fact, the characteristics of Japanese are not at all unusual, and actually give it a number of commonalities with other languages.

It would seem that making such statements makes people nervous and ask whether there isn’t anything at all which makes Japanese unique. Linguist Shibata Takeshi affirms : “For a long time I have been stating at public lectures that Japanese is in no way peculiar, that it is an ordinary language. Upon hearing this everyone appears to become terribly anxious. Then I say that Japanese is a very unusual language in the world, whereupon everyone is relieved.”

It appears that there exists a tendency for people to be pleased when we make claims that “the Japanese are a strange race” or “Japanese is a strange language.” As I continue this discussion of the lack of uniqueness within the Japanese language, many readers will perhaps become disillusioned and stop reading. I ask that they be patient and bear with me a little longer.

How many languages are there in the world?

At this point I would like to conduct a simple quiz.

Q : How many languages do you think there are in the world? Strictly speaking, I don’t mean only those in use today, but also classical or dead languages, like Latin, which have fallen out of use or which only survive in historical documents. Let us say, incidentally, that there are about 170 countries in the world. So how many languages are there?

There are generally a variety of opinions in answering this question : “Well, there are 170 countries so the number of languages must be about the same, or less ;” “No, it must be ten times that, at least over 1,000 ;” “3,000, definitely!”

A : Actually, the correct answer is, regretfully, “I don’t know.”

In saying this I can only expect to get a chorus of booing and cat calls from my readers, but there is a reason for this disappointing answer.

Roughly how many languages have linguistic studies counted to date? In 1939, the American L.H. Grey came up with 2,796. In 1979, the German Meyer estimated the number between 4,200 and 5,600. Around the same time, B.F. Grimes used the number of translations of the Bible which would be necessary as a criterion for judging what was and was not a separate language; he produced the figure of 5,103. Then, according to Chino Eichi's book, *Too Many Demands on Linguistics* (Taishukan Shoten, 1986, p.206), proceeding with a nationally-backed project called "World Languages," Yartseva of Russia raised the figure to between 5,000 and 8,000. In the "Languages of the World" section of the *Dictionary of Linguistics*, printed by Sansiedo between 1987 and 1993, there are descriptions of over 8,000 languages extending over five volumes which we can rely on as being the most detailed reference.

While we can not assume that the higher guesses are more accurate, it certainly appears that the person taking a leap off the deep end by guessing 3,000 is actually on the shallow end of the various theories being advanced. But why do these estimates come out so loose and varied?

There are two reasons. First, there are many languages of native peoples of inner Africa, the jungles of the Amazon and central Australia which are yet unidentified. Every year the total increases as unreported languages are discovered and written about. The second reason is connected to the first and revolves around the problem of how languages are recognized. That is, because the number of languages changes depending on what is judged to be a dialect or a language, they become only rough estimates. Later I will explain the fluctuations of language numbers and whether, to give one example, the language of Okinawa is thought of as a dialect of Japanese or an independent language.

Returning to the original question, in light of increasing numbers of languages and research constantly uncovering new ones, arguments that Japanese possesses characteristics existing nowhere else in the world, or that it is more unique than any other language, can not be substantiated. At the very least, writers cannot state with any confidence that there are no other languages out there.

The Superstition of Japanese Uniqueness

In recent years, at colleges and elsewhere, Asian, Middle Eastern and African languages have become more accessible for study, and every year the numbers of exchange students from these countries are growing. In accordance with this trend our consciousness of foreign countries and languages is gradually changing. In spite of this there are superstitions which remain deeply-rooted in the Japanese mind. These include the notion that Japanese is more unique than any other language and therefore a laborious task for exchange students to study, and that because Japanese is one of the world's most difficult languages, foreigners cannot cope with using it. According to Takeuchi Kazuo's research of 158 college students carried out between

1983-87, scores on the following questions were surprisingly low (*5).

Question (answer True or False) :	Correct Answer	Ave. Correct Response
Japanese is a language with highly developed honorific speech.	F	9.5%
Japanese is one of the world's most difficult languages.	F	24.8%
English is constructed more logically than Japanese.	F	39.6%
There are many languages which construct sentences using the same word order as Japanese.	T	41.3%

And, in a 1991 NHK poll asking similar questions of 1,200 Tokyo residents, results showed a rather low percentage of "Disagree" responses, mirroring Takeuchi's conclusions.

Question	Agree	Disagree	Can't Say
Japanese is more difficult than other languages for foreigners to learn.	79%	11%	7%
An emotionally rich language like Japanese can not be translated.	71%	14%	11%
English is logical but Japanese is not.	31%	40%	19%

Ishino and Yasuhira of NHK interpret the number of "Disagree" response to these standardized, ideologically-based questions as reflecting the lack of progress toward internationalization in Japan (*6).

In foreign language scholarship there is no existing language which everyone would agree as being especially difficult. We should realize that there are easy and hard languages to learn relative to speakers of any language. English, for example, is easy for speakers of Italian to pick up as it has a similar construction, while it is difficult for Japanese speakers. Japanese is easy for speakers of Korean, Turkish and Mongolian. This is a significant and ever-present consideration, and the demand to recognize the standpoint of other peoples is what makes linguistic scholarship challenging.

DIFFICULT LANGUAGES/EASY LANGUAGES: HOW DIFFICULT IS JAPANESE?

The Daigakushorin Kokusai Gogaku Academy conducted a survey asking both Japanese and Americans which languages they considered difficult and which they considered easy. The responses appear in its "Report on the practical use of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)" and are as follows.

Easier Languages :

For Japanese ... Indonesian, Korean, Turkish, Malay, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, and Vietnamese

For Americans ... French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Swahili, Greek, Indonesian, Hindi, and Malay

More Difficult Languages :

For Japanese ... English, French, German, Greek, Hindi, Arabic, Czech, Hungarian, Russian, Tagalog, and Thai

For Americans ... Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Arabic, Czech, Hungarian, Russian, Tagalog, Thai, Turkish, and Vietnamese

If we eliminate those languages here which are thought of as easy—Indonesian, Malay, Italian, and Portuguese—and difficult—Arabic, Czech, Hungarian, Russian, Tagalog and Thai—by both Japanese and Americans, some very interesting facts come to light. (It should be emphasized that although languages like Arabic are considered difficult by both Japanese and Americans this does not mean they are difficult for everyone else studying them.) That is, we will see that the languages are distributed into two groups complementing each other :

- A French, German, Greek, and Hindi : languages that are hard for Japanese but easy for Americans
- B Korean, Turkish, Chinese, and Vietnamese : languages that are hard for Americans but easy for Japanese

(We will not go as far as to include, respectively, English and Japanese in this distribution.)

Actually, the A group consists of Indo-European languages that have been scholastically proven to be derived from the same historical ancestry. In contrast, B group languages have not been academically proven to have the same lineage ; however, languages like Japanese, Korean and Turkish are believed to have a geneologic relationship. Affiliated languages, in short, are like sisters, and are considered easy to acquire because they have much in common in terms of grammatical structure and vocabulary.

As a result of the Norman Conquest of 1066, a large quantity of French became incorporated into English. And, in the case of Japan, it is well known that in the middle ages countless Chinese words flowed into Japan. If a Japanese speaker masters the differences in pronunciation and usage, Chinese is an easy language to learn without memorizing a lot of vocabulary.

Whether the A language group is easy or difficult depends on one's relationship with the B group. Consequently, there are no languages which are unconditionally difficult to everyone in the world.

Linguistic Eurocentrism gives birth to “the theory of Japanese uniqueness”

Despite the fact that there are no unconditionally difficult languages, the Japanese belief that Japanese is difficult and unique is thought of as having been significantly influenced by Western linguistic chauvinism. In the past, Muromachi Period (1338–1597) missionary Francis Xavier called his commentary of the Japanese language, “The Devil’s Language,” and Rodriguez’s 1608 *Grammar of Japan* included the following account,

The language of Japan is faulty in certain aspects. This is because there are defects in Japanese that do not exist in European languages: for example, nouns fail to inflect, they have no masculine, feminine, singular or plural forms, and verbs do not have singular and plural conjugations based on person.

Reading this account, we see evidence of partiality and conceit regarding European culture and language the world standard. According to Tsunoda Tasaku, a specialist in similiar-language theory, although the tendency to favor one’s own language and culture over others is a phenomenon common to all peoples (*8), the myth known as “the theory of Japanese uniqueness” has taken deep root in the Japanese psyche due to Europeans’ general criticism of different languages and cultures.

In the Pyrenees, which extend from northern Spain to southwestern France, there is a language of unknown derivation called Basque. This language’s structure is particularly difficult. In the sixteenth century a Catholic priest named Laramady wrote a book on the grammar of the Basque language and gave it the pretentious title, *Overcoming the Impossible* (*9). In Spain, there is even a legend that God made Satan study Basque for seven years as punishment for tempting Eve. And, at the Museum of the Basque People in Bayonne, southern France, at the beginning of an illustration of Basque history there is an unexpected reference to Japan: “At one time, the devil Satan was in Japan. Then he came to the land of the Basques.” (*10)

If we compare the genealogy of Basque to other European languages, there are very few common grammatical and lexical elements. This is the reason for the supposed difficulty of the Basque language, particularly from Europeans’ arbitrary point of view.

Certainly, an unfamiliar language with considerable structural differences is hard to learn, so it is understandable to want to complain about its difficulty. For Japanese, the problem is in uncritically accepting this kind of Eurocentric sense of value, and obsequiously embracing the belief that “Japanese is an extraordinary language,” or proudly swaggering, “Ain’t it strange!”. This reasoning is not adequate for the majority of Asian languages. Therefore, to eradicate this belief in Eurocentered values based on European languages, it is important to learn and have contact with many types of foreign languages other than European ones.

W. A. Grotas in his lecture entitled, “There is nothing peculiar about Japanese”

(Japanese from the Outside, Japanese from the Inside, 1985), evokes the law of inverse proportions when he refers to Musashino Shoin's words, "The less you know about foreign languages, the more you would think that Japanese is peculiar." According to Grotas, what are commonly called, "the special characteristics of Japanese," the existence of both Chinese and Japanese readings of characters and the complicated structure of honorifics, for example, are phenomena which are commonly seen in other languages.

In recent years, Kakuta Taishi, supplying many examples from Australian aboriginal languages, has been attacking "the theory of Japanese uniqueness" as unfounded and insisting that we reconsider English-centeredness and the Western cult, the reason being that although English tends to be thought of as representative and a standard language, it is, in fact, singular (*8).

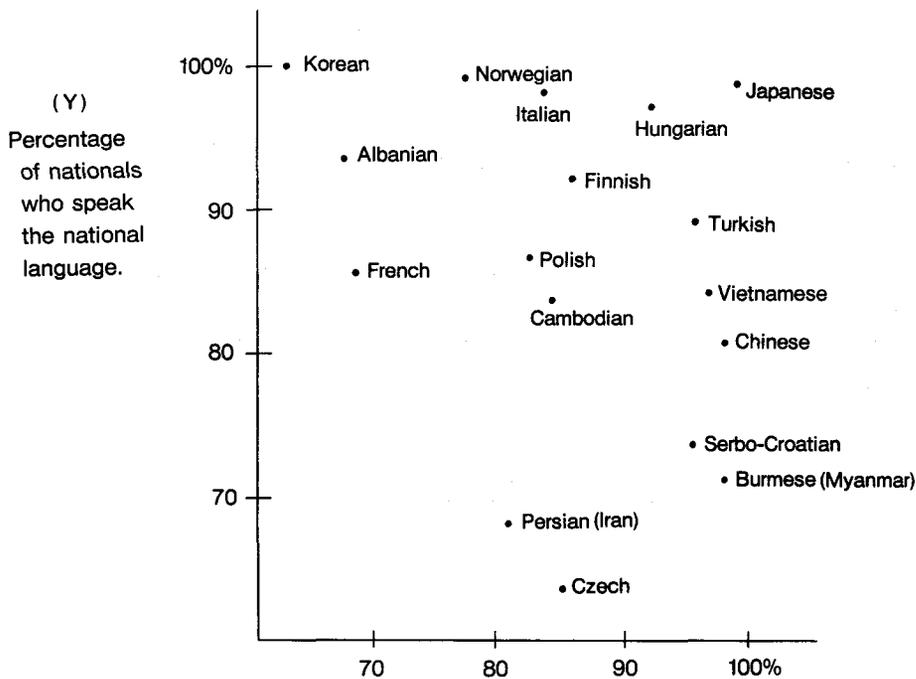
WHAT IS GENUINE "JAPANESE ESSENCE"?

If we compare Japanese to every other language in the world, what could be seen as truly unique about it? Based on what I have said so far there is only one possible response: nothing. However, what can be said about Japan is that, in contrast to many other countries, there is a strong correlation between its citizens and Japanese language speakers. This safeguards against the temptation to generalize that Japan is a nation of one people, one language, because even within Japan various languages are present. Some examples are: the language of the Ryukyus (900,000 speakers), the Ainu language (very few speakers), Korean (570,000 speakers), and Chinese (60,000 speakers). Actually, some even suggest the Ryukyu language should be divided into three separate languages. In addition, there are approximately one and a half to two million Japanese immigrants overseas in places like Hawaii, the continental United States and Brazil.

In any case, from the perspective of the over 123 million Japanese nationals, this one percent is a rather small number -- not that this minority should be ignored. In Figure 2, the vertical (Y) axis measures the percentage of people in the country who are speakers of the national language and the horizontal (X) axis represents the percentage of speakers of that language who are citizens of the country. For a language to have both rates nearing one hundred percent is extremely rare, making Japan's location in the upper right area of the chart something of an exception.

Simply, the high percentage of language speakers who are citizens indicates that there are very few people outside of Japan who speak Japanese. Furthermore, the high percentage of people in the country who are speakers of the national language means there are very few people in Japan who are not.

Accordingly, Korean (from the Republic of Korea) takes a position close to the Y axis. It has a low X value for the reason that Korean speakers also live in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, China, Japan and Russia. In contrast, Czech is placed close to the X axis because several languages were spoken in Czechoslovakia at the time this data was compiled in 1968. The presence of many Hungarian and



(X)Percentage of national language speakers who are nationals.

Figure 2: Language and Citizenship

Slovakian speakers, for example, results in a relatively low percentage of Czech speakers in the population.

Four languages are spoken in Switzerland: German, French, Italian, and Rhaeto, a Romance language. In India the complexity of the linguistic situation is apparent in the fact that there are fifteen official languages and in the results of a national census indicating that approximately 1,600 languages are spoken. And, in the case of Papua New Guinea, there are at least eight hundred Papua languages crowded into a population of only three million.

Meanwhile, English, French and Spanish are widely used and are becoming the official languages of many countries. In Figure 2, these kinds of languages are close to the vertical axis. So, how is the world's linguistic situation best characterized: as many languages existing with'n nations, scattered among nations, or both?

Japanese Ranks Eighth among the World's Great Languages

National boundaries and language boundaries overlap in small countries such as Monaco, the Vatican, and Iceland. However, this phenomenon is unusual in the case of a language, like Japanese, which has over one hundred million speakers.

As I have stated, there are between five and eight thousand languages in the world; however, as their speakers dwindle, more than half of them are expected to die out by the end of this century. Michael E. Klaus, the director of the Alaskan

Indigenous Language Research Center, separates the world's languages into three categories: (1) languages destined to be eradicated, (2) languages in danger of being eradicated, and (3) secure languages. Although there is an estimated three hundred secure languages having over one million speakers, this is only five to ten percent of the world's total number. The number of languages destined to be eradicated and in danger of being eradicated together exceed ninety percent, and this number will only increase (*11).

There are only about twenty languages in the world which have populations in excess of fifty million speakers, and these people already exceed half the world's population. Japanese, of course, is one of them. "The World Language Edition" of Sanseido's *Dictionary of Linguistics* supplies the following data on the world's language populations. However, because numbers vary depending on the source, significantly effecting ranking, alternate data is given in parentheses. The top ten are as follows:

1. Chinese ... 1 billion speakers (910 million)
2. English ... 350 million speakers (200 million)
3. Hindi ... 260 million speakers (170 million)
4. Spanish ... 140-200 million speakers (150 million)
5. Russian ... 160 million speakers (170 million)
6. Arabic ... 150 million speakers (80 million)
7. Bengali ... 150 million speakers (76 million)
8. Japan ... 120 million speakers
9. German ... 110 million speakers (95 million)
10. Portuguese ... more than 100 million (76 million)

At number eight, Japanese is without doubt one of the world's great languages.

THE SECRET OF "THE LAST CLASS:" **THE FINE LINE BETWEEN LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS**

The population of Chinese speakers is one billion, but many of the dialects in China are so mutually incomprehensible that it is hard to think of them as the same "Chinese." Speakers of the seven major dialects—Mandarin, Wu, Yue (Cantonese), Southern Min etc.—are barely understood by one another. For example, a speaker of Mandarin listening to the Cantonese dialect can scarcely guess at what is being said. However, due to its written characters Chinese is commonly considered to be one language.

The language tally can change substantially depending on the method of interpretation. The process is complicated by a myriad of concepts—political, ethnic, religious, and cultural—involved in determining languages and dialects. For example, the structure of Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian, is remarkably similar, allowing the speakers of each to generally understand one another. Figure 3 shows the results of a 1973 comprehension level study in which people read and listened to identical passages

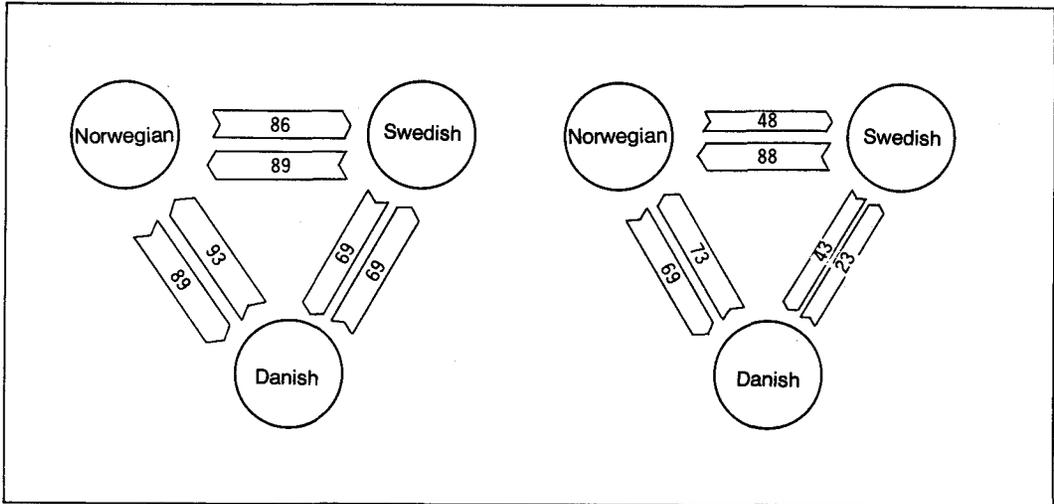


Figure 3: Mutual comprehension among Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians

Arrows indicate comprehension levels when people read and listened to identical passages translated into the three languages. Their widths correspond to the degree of understanding. Oivind Maurd (1976) *Written Language on the Left, Spoken Language on the Right*

translated into the three languages (*12). The reading scores in particular were very high. In fact, mutual comprehension was so effortless that the three might really be called dialects, but as they represent three separate countries are considered to be independent languages.

India's Hindi and Urdu, Belgium's Flemish and Dutch, Laos' Laotian and Thai are only as different as the Tokyo and Osaka dialects. Even the former Yugoslavia's Croatian and Serbian are often interpreted as separate languages, but this assessment seems to be founded on ethnic and Roman Catholic versus Eastern Orthodox religious rivalry. There are some pronunciation variances and different alphabets are used—Croatian uses the Latin alphabet while Serbian uses the Russian Cyrillic—yet they are closer to being the same language than they are to being dialects.

Things would not go smoothly at all if speakers from Aomori and Kagoshima tried to converse using their own particular local dialects, in spite of the fact that education and mass communication are spreading a common language throughout Japan.

Politically, Okinawa is part of Japan. Historically, however, the Ryukyu Kingdom succeeded in building an independent culture. Therefore, interpretations are divided between classifying the Ryukyu language as a dialect of Japanese or as a separate language.

National Language/Native Language

Typically, Japanese do not think it is unusual for language boundaries and national boundaries to be identical. However, as already mentioned, for them to be congruent is actually very rare, especially among countries sharing boundaries with other nations.

The Last Class was an illustrated book I read in junior high school. In the story, a teacher leaves a classroom, having written "Vive La France" on the blackboard. The setting was Alsace, which had been ceded to Germany in the war.

German is the region's primary language and seventy percent of the residents speak it but I was struck by the sadness of people deprived of their mother country's language. (Tanaka Katsuhiko, *Words and Nations*).

Language is a strange thing. What is sad is that it was only the French teacher, not the students, who had his language snatched away. The students' German became the mother country's language the next day.

The relationship of language, people, and national borders is very complicated. As the world map has changed, this has stood out in bold relief in places like Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. (December 30, 1991, Hizuke Yomiuri Shimbun Chokan, Henshu Techo)

As people who remember world history will likely recall, Alsace is an area between Germany and France that has repeatedly changed hands. Territorial expansion or cession occurs without respect for language. It is startling to think of political lines being drawn that are not consistent with language borders.

In Japan, national language is the term widely used to refer to a mother tongue, the first language acquired after birth. However, most linguists use native language without any reference to a nation. After all, babies do not learn "the national language of the mother country," promulgated on a national level; they simply listen to the words spoken by their family. "National" consequently becomes superfluous.

In this instance, national language signifies that which is determined by citizenship. For example, a Japanese person who spends their early childhood in America and is more proficient in English than Japanese will have Japanese as a national language but English as a native language.

Also, to be even more annoying, it is not correct to call a bilingual or trilingual person "a speaker of two national languages" or "an expert in three national languages." Covering the celebration of the Imperial Prince's marriage, the media recently reported that "Miss Masako Owada is fluent in three national languages: English, German, and French." While saying so might work in this case, persons fluent in Cantonese and Mandarin do not speak two national languages. Because they are not, strictly speaking, speakers of two national languages, one should use the expression "speakers of two languages." Even I have inadvertently asked exchange students who come from countries where many languages are spoken, "How many national languages do you speak?", when I should ask, academically speaking, "how many languages" they speak.

To give another example, suppose there are people, born and raised in Kyoto, having a Kyoto dialect for a mother tongue and who fluently speak the Tokyo dialect. When they speak the Tokyo dialect, they think in the Kyoto dialect and sometimes even in the Tokyo dialect. In this case, there is no problem calling them biligual.

It is impossible to think about what is a dialect and what is a language without a general idea of nations, political boundaries and regions. Nevertheless, it is only by considering speakers apart from nations that we may call some of them magnificent bilinguals.

Notes

- 1a. Oda Masayoshi, *Shock and Trick* (Kodansha, 1983), 173.
 - 1b. Kindaichi, Haruhiko, *Nihongo Shimpan*, vol. 1, (Iwanami Shoten, 1988), 51.
 2. Satake, Hideo, *Gengo Seikatsu no Me*, (Chikuma Shobo, 1989), 575.
 3. Inoue, Fumio, "The Day After "Two Days After Tomorrow"", (*Gengo* vol. 17, no. 5, Taishukan Shoten, 1988), 60.
 4. Umegaki, Minoru, *Nihon Gairaigo no Kenshu*, (Kenkyusha, 1963), 116.
 5. Takeuchi, Kazuo, "*Bogo kara mita Tagengo to Tagengo kara mita Bogo*," (*Kokubungaku Kaishaku to Kansho* [interpretation and appreciation] vol. 53, no. 1, Shibundo, 1988), 9.
 6. Ishino, Hiroshi & Yasuhira Minako, "*Kokusaika Jidai no Nihongo: Shuto Kenserō Chosa*," (NNK Hoso to Chosa, vol. 41, no. 8, 1991), 6.
 7. "*Da Kabo*", no. 288, (Magajin Hausu, 1993).
 8. Tsunoda, Tasaku, "*Nihongo to Nihon Bunka ni tsuite no Oboekaki*," *Nihongokagu*, vol. 2, no. 3, (Meiji Shoin, 1992), 23.
 9. Kindaichi, Harumiko, *Nihongo no Tokushitsu*, (Nihon Hoso Kyokai, 1991), 209.
 10. Ikegami, Yoshihiko, "*Nihongo to Nihongoron: Sono Kyozo to Jitsuzo, 1*," *Gengo*, vol. 21, no. 10, (Taishukan Shoten, 1992), 20.
 11. Minora Nobukatsu, "*Gengo Zetsumetsu no Kiki Mokuzen ni Seru*," *Gengo*, vol. 22, no. 8, (Taishukan Shoten, 1993), 12.
 12. Shimomiya, Tadao, "*Hokuojin wa dono hodo Rikai Shiaeru ka*," *Gengo*, vol. 9, no. 4, (Taishukan Shoten, 1980), 118.
- Figure 2. Hayashi Oki, *Zusetsu Nihongo*, (Kadokawa Shoten, 1982), 18.

(Puck Brecher 講師)

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