Differences Between English and Japanese

~From the Viewpoints of Linguistics and Ways of Expression~

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The mastery of a foreign language entails looking behind linguistic descriptions and translations, and comprehending the nuance effected by specific expressions. Scholars of foreign languages who fail to examine this aspect of a language can hardly hope to master it. Thus, this report treats specific Japanese and English expressions with the aim of establishing nuance.

(I)

Biological Parent

There exist in the United States many conditions and situations which cannot be commonly seen in Japan. Take for example the high divorce rate, which is the end result of prevalent social and cultural attitudes in the United States. Presently the rate stands at 50 percent, which means that five out of ten marriages end up in divorce.

The United States is a thoroughly individualistic nation, where, after children get married and become economically independent, parents are hardly ever consulted concerning marriage problems. Typically American young couples get a divorce with little or no consideration for their parents' opinions. (There are of course exceptions.) There exists a clear-cut way of thinking generally prevalent among Americans that both parents and children have distinct goals in life. Therefore, it never occurs to young couples to continue their unhappy marriage life out of respect for their parents and relatives.

A Biological Parent, which the writer is going to make reference to in this section, means a true [real] parent or blood-related parent. The word Biological Parent does not appear in "英和辞典" or "和英辞典" published in Japan—with very few exceptions—which reveals the fact that this relatively new phrasology is an expression which came into general use no more than a decade ago.

The writer often come across this usage in the monthly magazine "Reader's Digest"—which enjoys a large circulation in the United States of America—and he takes a keen interest in obtaining information on the origin of the term Biological Parent.

The average Japanese would think that a typical American family consists of parents and their children, taking it for granted that the children were true brothers and sisters born of the same parents. But, surprisingly enough, this Japanese concept of an American family is not necessarily true. No one is without a biological family. He or she has a true or biological father and mother. However, family members in the United States do not always consists of biological...
members. They are very changeable. These kinds of families, which are nowadays in the majority in the United States, have been on the increase.

As mentioned above, the divorce rate in first marriages in the United States is up to 50 percent; moreover, three out of four divorcees get married for a second time. The divorce rate among second marriages is slightly greater than that of first marriages, causing divorcees to find spouses for a third or fourth time. To Japanese, this situation appears almost tragic.

The term *Real [True] Parent* has given way to the term *Biological Parent*. The reason for the change in "English-Japanese or Japanese-English Dictionaries" published in Japan, the writer surmises, stems from the fact that the adjective *Real [True]* is not clear enough to accurately define the complexities of American families. Take foster children for example. For them, foster parents can certainly be said to be *real [true]* parents in the strict sense of the word because they take care of everything for the foster children. The adjective *Biological*, however, disposes of any ambiguity which the adjective *Real [True]* might imply. Hence the coinage of the expression *Biological Parent*.

「スチュアーテス」in Japanese, *Flight Attendant* in English

Hackneyed words, words which lose their impact and freshness, often give way to newly coined ones. Needless to say that the Japanese language is no exception in this respect.

The Japanese word "スチュアーテス" is defined in "English-Japanese or Japanese-English Dictionaries" as *an airplane* stewardess or an air hostess. But the expression *Flight Attendant* is nowadays always used in newspapers or magazines recently published in the United States; and the word *Stewardess*, with its feminine suffix, has now passed out of use. Nowadays both male and female employees are engaged in the same kind of work on international flights. Hence, *Flight Attendant* which is used for both males and females is now, the writer assures you, in common use.

The Japanese word 「(専業)主婦」 and the English counterpart *Housewife*

In contrast to the image that the Japanese have of the Japanese expression 「(専業)主婦」, the English word *Housewife* has a negative connotation in that *Housewife* implies a woman who is confined to the "house". Alternative expressions for "housewife" are *homemaker*, *householder*, *home manager* which are non-sexist.

In the 1950s, "decent" middle-class women stayed inside the house instead of going out to work, because working outside was the lot of poor and unhappy women. But the advent of the feminist movement in the late 1960s brought about drastic changes in American society, causing working women to be in the majority today. Hence *Housewife* has taken on a negative image.
(II)

Verb-centered Japanese and Noun-centered English

It is generally perceived that the Japanese language has a tendency to be verb-centered, while European and American languages are noun-centered. The writer aims to clarify the above-mentioned characteristics of the two languages in this section.

この事実の認識が問題の解決に貢献する

The above Japanese sentence is clearly noun-centered. The English translation for this is: "the recognition of this fact makes a contribution to the solution to the problem." A natural Japanese way of expressing the same sentence is これがわかると問題はずっと解決しやすくなる. This Japanese sentence is verb-centered. A noun-centered construction, needless to say, depends on nouns for its core conception, while a verb-centered sentence does not lend itself to clarification of a core concept. The concept in the verb-centered structure, which would be well-defined in the noun-centered construction, becomes ambiguous the meaning of what it is going to convey.

(a) He recovered quickly と (b) He made a quick recovery.

In sentence (a), the verb recover, which relays the principal meaning of the sentence, also determines grammatical aspects of number, person, tense, etc. But in contrast, in sentence (b), the noun recovery conveys the core meaning and the verb make relays the grammatical aspects such as number, person, tense, etc. Thus we find this burdening of individual words with specific semantic and grammatical function to be one of the characteristics of modern English.

In the type of sentence in which a noun phrase such as to make a discovery or to take a look acts as the object, the phrase is generally derived from a verb.

In (a) He can swim well と (b) He is a good swimmer sentence (b) is said to be better English than the sentence (a). The use of a noun in a sentence is of a more frequent occurrence. Again, this points to the fact that the English language is noun-centered.

Antecedent + Relative Construction

The antecedent, which is always a noun is the core of this construction, and the relative is immediately followed by a long qualifier. The usage of the relative makes it increasingly clear that the English language is noun-centered. Let the writer give readers an example sentence: we are looking for families who live near the school. In this sentence, families which functions as antecedent is the core expression. This fact is proof enough that the noun occupies the focal point of the sentence.

The English Noun is verbal

The Japanese have a tendency to think of the noun as a static element. However, in the
case of the English language which frequently uses personified expressions, the noun can be quite verbal.

Here let the writer quote a story:

Though he and Joan had been married well over a year, he was still so young-looking that people did not instinctively lay upon him hostly duties; their reluctance worked in him a corresponding hesitancy, so that often it was his wife who poured the drinks......

The Japanese meaning for the underlined reluctance is 「いや気」「嫌惡」「不承不承」, but these definitions are not explicit. What the noun reluctance conveys contextually is "instinctively trying not to lay upon him hostly duties." It often occurs in English sentences that the noun takes on the contents of the whole story mentioned earlier, which is possible because of the verbal character of English nouns. Therefore, it can be concluded that in order to exactly understand English sentences, grasping the verbal usage of nouns is an indispensable factor.

**Noun + Noun Construction**

This construction frequently occurs in Japanese sentences, too, such as 「成人教育」「日曜大工」etc. Especially characteristic of the Japanese language are expressions which arrange several proper nouns, such as ○○市福祉部高齢者対策室室長補佐. In English, however, two consecutive nouns occur quite frequently, and piling up several nouns consecutively can be found in recent American magazines or newspapers.

The writer has made it clear that Japanese, especially spoken Japanese is verb-centered and that English is noun-centered. But he must not forget to add that the Japanese language is not without the noun construction as it is based on Chinese characters used in Japanese writing. Both the verb-centered and noun-centered expressions occur in a subtle relationship in the Japanese language.

(III)

The Japanese Language Which Prefers Ambiguity
vs
The English Language Which Prefers Battle of Words

善処します

「善処します」which is frequently used in the Japanese political arena is an ambiguous expression refusing to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. This is characteristic of the Japanese language. In contrast, the English language entails a system of alternative choices in which a battle of words is always fought. First the writer will take up some ambiguous expressions in Japanese.
Whenever political scandals or other matters of grave concern make Japan-wide headlines in the mass media, personalities often utter the above expression apologizing to the world for what has happened. But are they in earnest expressing their regret? Or are they merely trying to pose for the world? In either case, this expression is not only one which protects their own interests, but also an ambiguous expression which does not clarify where they stand.

This expression comes not out of conscience but out of pretense that is made toward the outside world, for, as long as things go smoothly, people who shoulder the responsibility hardly ever take seriously what has happened around them, unless they come under severe criticism. Moreover, they don't make any reference to how the responsibility is to be fulfilled, even after they have made the statement "厳肃に受けとめる." This expression is also typically ambiguous.

Doctors don't issue medical statements like 向こう二週間の安静加療を要する (The patient needs a rest cure and medicinal treatment for the coming two weeks). Instead, a general way of writing a medical certificate is putting なるる at the end of the certificate. Then, if their statement is brought up in a court trial, the wording なるる exerts a subtle influence on the situation where doctors are concerned. A medical statement with the verb 要する at the end (which is a definite way of expression) is likely to make publicly known the exact length of time prescribed by the doctor for the recovery of a certain disease. In this context, it can happen that doctors are placed in a predicament from which they cannot extricate themselves. However, with the addition 認められる at the end of a medical statement, they do not have to take responsibility for the exact treatment period for diseases. Whether it will take two weeks or a month for the recovery of a disease is not a matter of medical responsibility on the part of doctors. In other words, the expression 要する implies scientific and objective diagnosis, while what doctors want to insist in the expression 要するものと認められる is that their diagnosis might be different from that of other doctors and that they do not have to take responsibility for the wording of a medical certificate. Here again the expression 認められる can be perceived to be ambiguous.

The above Japanese expression is most commonly used in a letter of invitation to a wedding ceremony. 結婚することになりました implies that the would-be-couple have come to know each other naturally; fate is going to make them man and wife, and that they would like to have their parents, relatives and friends recognize this fact. The expression なりました conveys politeness and modesty, but at the same time, it is obviously a blurred, and, therefore,
an ambiguous expression. In contrast, a direct way of saying 結婚を決めました has the connotation that the soon-to-be married couple have decided to get married of their own free will in disregard of objections raised by their parents and people concerned. This expression is not an appropriate one when used in a letter of invitation to a wedding ceremony.

In the following section, the writer will discuss the social arena of the English language where the battle of words is daily fought.

(a) She was extremely attractive と (b) I found her extremely attractive.

There exists a shade of difference in meaning between the two sentences. Sentence (a) stated as an objective fact. Sentence (b) on the other hand, is a subjective statement and, evidently, the expression of a “me” experience—regardless of what others may think. The use of subjective expressions in English communication by positively emphasizing “me” is better suited to English logic, where self-assertion is viewed as a survival skill in life—among individuals holding strongly opposed opinions. A high degree of value is put on words in this area of Western and American culture.

At kindergartens and elementary schools in the United States, there is a “show and tell” class in which children are requested to show things and give explanations about them. In this way, they can develop the skill to make a speech in public. At the high school level, students may actively participate in the activities of debate clubs in order to develop assertiveness. Also, when students are in college or university, there are “speech” courses available. These courses teach them the basics of rhetoric, that is, how to make a convincing speech. Individual students are required to demonstrate a speech in class; and the other students ask questions about the speech while the teacher plays the role of a referee or judge.

Through such exercises and activities, students in the United States are given training in the effective use of words—even in early childhood. Moreover, in a highly competitive society like the United States where a high level of informational and cultural activity is routinely performed, developing one’s skill in English expression to a high degree is an essential discipline for social success in addition to self-realization.

(to be concluded)
References