

COUNTERPOINT

Half the world's people are bilingual — but how many Japanese?

By ROGER PULVERS

First of two parts

To continue or not continue? That seems to be the question facing a good 10 percent of the Japanese population. These are people grappling with the horns of an ornery dilemma.

Yes, an estimated 1 in 10 Japanese of school age and above are said to be immersing themselves in the study of the English language. Well, "immersing themselves" might not be an apt turn of phrase, seeing as the figure encompasses everyone from those who have plunged headlong into the linguistic ocean to those who sit lazily on the pier wiggling a few toes in the water.

Certainly, many Japanese people seem to think that the study of English presents particular difficulties for them that it does not present for other non-native students. In a sense, this is the obverse of the "unique Japan" syndrome: Our language is so "special" that it confronts us with uncommonly high hurdles when approaching the language of others.

There is no such thing as "English for Japanese," and the sooner this is understood by Japan's educators and educational bureaucrats, the easier will be the task of learning English for Japanese people.

In this column today and next week, I will discuss some of the difficulties connected with mastering English — difficulties, I hasten to add, that are faced by all those attempting it. Needless to say, the study of a language linguistically related to your own is certainly less tedious than the study of an unrelated one. A native speaker of a Romance or Germanic language — the mother and father of English — has an advantage in acquisition of English vocabulary and appreciation of English syntax over, say, a native speaker of

Hungarian, Korean or, for that matter, Japanese.

I brought up the metaphor of immersion in an ocean, but there is a more instructive and efficient one to illustrate the surmounting of the hardships of language learning: It is mountain climbing.

Think of a steep mountain that you are trudging up, step by laborious step. The curve of the slope is steep; the terrain below your feet is slippery. No sooner do you make some progress up this steep learning curve than you slip back down to where you were before — or even below that point! You are persuaded to purchase all sorts of equipment (books, CDs). You hire seasoned guides (tutors). But in the end, you're on your own. It's you and the mountain; and reaching the goal of fluency atop the mountain appears so distant and inaccessible that you arrive at a horrible and disheartening conclusion: "I just don't have the ability to conquer this summit."

Well, fear not. Almost anyone can speak a foreign language, perhaps not with a flawless accent, but certainly with ease and comfort. It is estimated that half of the people in the world are bilingual. Why not be one of them? As for non-native English speakers, there are hundreds of millions of them, speaking the language skilfully with every accent under the sun.

There is no such thing as unaccented English, not in Britain, not in the United States, and not in any other country. We English speakers are not only used to accents, we love them; we find them natural, intriguing, colorful, romantic and funny in a good sense.

My advice to Japanese educators is this: First, get rid of that complex about "bad" pronunciation. If you feel like laughing at an East Asian travel agent who calls England's capital "Rondon," or a French lawyer who says he is "looking up someone's arse" (when he means "heirs"), then go ahead.

After all, an American friend recently told me he is sending his little daughter to a *fuzoku* (hostess) school — and not, as is correct, a *fuzoku* (affiliated with a university) school. And then there is my Aussie mate who pronounces "day" as "die." Everything was okay until he told a Japanese company president, "*Shacho no okusan wa totemo kirai desu*" — "I despise your wife." Of course, it was his way of saying "*tottemo kirei desu*" — "She is very beautiful."

The point here is that the native speaker can usually figure out what the non-native is trying to say. A bit of goodwill and a generous sense of humor always help to get the student a considerable way up that mountain.

There may be no "English for Japanese," but there are Japanese obstacles put in the path of the aspiring speaker by educators.

By and large, language education in Japan concentrates far too heavily on the meaning of individual words. Japanese language learners are taught to ask themselves, "What does that word mean?" The emphasis is on rote memorization of words, fashioned into sentences by complex and irregular rules of syntax. This is a highly flawed approach.

The question that learners should be asking themselves is: "What is that person trying to say?"

Ah, a sophistic and trivial difference, you might say. Not at all. There is a world of difference in the two approaches. The former implies monotonous and wearying mental exercise, abstract and generally devoid of human interest. The latter focuses on the native speaker, their personality, social background, ethnicity, culture, history, religion and everything else that goes to make up a member of a nationality.

In other words, the trend in English- language education that stresses comprehension of words and sentences out of a human context, as much of today's so-called business-oriented English does, is counterproductive. It can lead students to feel that they are not up to some artificial standard or score; it can lead them to give up halfway, fall to the ground and just slide back down the mountain.

Japanese people have a tendency to turn their gaze away from people when speaking with them. In a Japanese context, this signals deference, reserve and modesty. But when learning a foreign language, it is absolutely essential to "connect" in order to take in facial expressions and all sorts of subtle body language; to appreciate the nuances of seriousness and irony lurking in the words; to understand, in short, where the person is coming from.

This is the key phrase. "Where a person is coming from" denotes both their origin and what they are trying to say. Meaning is derived from intent first, word denotation second.

Picture once again the slope of that English-learning mountain. In actuality, it is not an endless slippery slope but has along the way a large number of safe plateaus. Once you get yourself up to the next plateau, you will not fall back. Your command of the language will be on a solid footing, at least up to that point. You can justifiably feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction before you set off again to climb farther up the mountain.

That sense of accomplishment and satisfaction is not felt by many learners in Japan, and this is a source of disappointment and premature resignation. Language teachers should stand with their students on these plateaus and encourage them; they should inspire them with their knowledge of foreign customs and the fascinating idiosyncrasies of personality and culture. Such things impart a second wind to the aspiring speaker. Don't blame it on the mountain.

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