

# Speaking Our Language: Why Do Some Expats Never Learn Japanese?



Unseen Japan Follow

Jun 24 · 9 min read ★



How a casual tweet promoting an author's new book about Japan blew up into a discussion of Western privilege and Orientalism. (Picture: Yasu / PIXTA(ピクスタ))

*By Krys Suzuki*

“If you can’t speak our language, go back to your country!”

You hear this sentiment often in modern-day America. It’s one of the most heart-breaking things any non-native speaker can hear when speaking their own tongue in a new land they have decided to call home, and one of the most unwelcoming things one can say. Sadly, it is a fact of our current day that such prejudices still exist, and people with such viewpoints still feel justified spewing such negativity.

But what about when the shoe’s on the other foot? What about when a native English speaker visits a different country, and can’t speak a word of the native language?

## When in Rome...

It started with a promotional tweet sharing the latest written work by a prominent author on Japanese culture, Pico Iyer. A native-English speaking man of Indian descent born and raised in Oxford, Iyer lives in Japan while holding citizenship in the US.



**New York Times Books**

@nytimesbooks

Although he has lived in Japan for 25 years, Pico Iyer doesn’t choose to learn more than a smattering of Japanese because he

says needs mystery and “a sense of open space in life, something to offset the sense of the familiar.” [nyti.ms/2XxPy51](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/23/travel/japan-life-pico-iyer.html)

### Pico Iyer Reflects on a Quarter-Century of Life in Japan

In “Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells,” the noted journalist finds wisdom in the rituals and routines he shares with his Japanese [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)

293 10:47 PM - Apr 23, 2019

[278 people are talking about this](#)

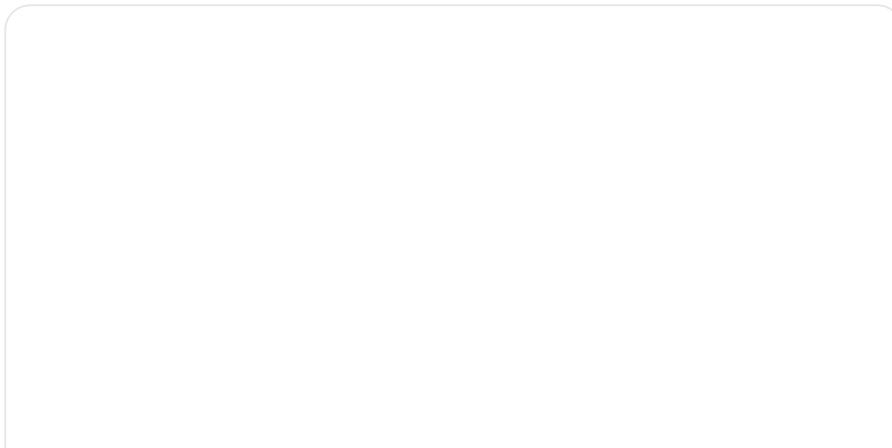
The tweet basically applauds Iyer for his accomplishment of living in Japan for over 30 years...despite not learning so much as a lick of useful vocabulary. Iyer reportedly gets by almost entirely relying on his wife, who left her previous husband to be with him, and with whom he has lived (as a tourist) for the majority of those years. Apparently, the “speak our language if you want to live here” rule doesn’t apply to him, or any other English speaker, when they choose to reside in any country other than their own.

Commenters blew up on Iyer in disgust:



**New York Times Books** @nytimesbooks · Apr 23, 2019

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**Jan Wong**  
@WriterWong

Journalist w/ a Japanese wife who lives in Japan for 25 years — and refuses to learn Japanese. Imagine reverse - journalist in US/Canada who refused to learn English to keep the "mystery" alive.

1,360 12:32 AM - Apr 24, 2019

[214 people are talking about this](#)

Iyer claims he never had any intention to settle in Japan permanently, seek employment, or contribute to society in any way. According to him, living in Japan just “happened” as a result of meeting his wife, which he calls a “love story” rather than a planned life event. Apparently, this allows him a free pass to not learn the language. In fact, Iyer doesn’t even possess a resident spouse visa, preferring to continue living as a tourist 6 months out of the year, and traveling the other half of the year.

While one can certainly argue that neither Iyer nor anyone else is obligated to learn the language, Iyer’s life choices and life style have illuminated a deeper issue amongst foreigners residing in Japan who refuse to learn Japanese — a much more common occurrence than one might think.

Japan has become a major tourist destination over the last decade or so, inviting in not only travelers, but more long-term visitors from abroad seeking education, employment, and sometimes a complete lifestyle change. Naturally, with so many different cultures suddenly pouring into a notoriously homogeneous society, issues regarding the language barrier are

sure to arise. Yet while it is understandable that tourists, travelers, and other short-term visitors are highly unlikely to be able to speak or understand the native language, one would expect a bit more from those seeking to settle down more permanently.

So how is it that so many Western expats and long-term residents of Japan are still unable to speak or understand Japanese? And is it really that big of a problem? Or is there something deeper to this seeming inability, and in some cases complete unwillingness, to learn the native language of the country you choose to settle?

### **(JP) Link: What You Should Know Before Telling Foreigners Who Can't Speak Japanese To 'Go Home'**

<p>「日本語ができない外国人は出ていけ」と言う前に知っ... 大学卒業後ドイツにわたり、就活の失敗などを経て、大学卒業後... gendai.ismedia.jp</p>		
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## **Ignorance Is Bliss... Or Is It?**

So, do you really need to learn Japanese in order to live in Japan? Or is learning the language simply a matter of convenience or personal choice?

The Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State ranks Japanese as one of the most difficult languages to learn for native English speakers. It requires an extreme amount of dedication to learn, let alone master, which narrows down the number of people willing to go to that length to only a very serious few. This group usually consists of people for whom Japanese is a required skill set for their job (such as a translator), those who plan to live there long-term, and those who are sincerely interested in learning it for personal reasons. And because it is such a difficult language, there are increasingly more jobs available to foreigners that do not require mastery, with some positions that require no Japanese knowledge at all.

Surprisingly, there is an increasing number of expats who outright refuse to learn the language, claiming that such ignorance to the language enhances the experience of travel and appreciation for life in a different culture. They even encourage other expats to do the same in online blogs. One English-speaking expat summarized their reasons for not learning Japanese:

1. Most students give up after a year: because it is such a difficult and time-consuming language to learn, many students give up after a year of studies. If they can't be bothered to learn it, why should you?
2. Little return for the effort: Learning Japanese is not an

absolute necessity to work or survival. Why spend five years mastering a language if you only plan to stay there for two? If you really want to learn it, take into account how long you plan to stay and only study as much as you feel you need.

3. No opportunities to use Japanese anyway: according to this view, Japanese people expect foreigners to speak English. The writer likens the idea of Westerners speaking Japanese in Japan to a magician who goes to a magic show but doesn't perform any tricks. The audience wants (and expects) to see the magician's skills, and Japanese people expect foreign visitors to speak English.

### **(JP) Link: Foreigners in Japan Speak: Why It's Better to NOT Learn Japanese**

日本に住む外国人が語る！日本語を"学ばない"ほうがい...

日本のアニメやマンガが海外で人気になるにつれ、日本語を学び...

[www.madameriri.com](http://www.madameriri.com)

## **Asian Fetishism, Orientalism, and the Expat Bubble**

It's one thing if you already know that your time in Japan will be limited. But that way of thinking becomes an issue when adopted by long-term residents.

Your job may not require it, but why not make the effort to learn the language basics anyway, if only to make daily life smoother for you and your coworkers? Why not learn some common phrases to seem more approachable and make small talk with your neighbors? Why not learn some shopping and travel phrases to take the pressure off your Japanese spouse from having to hold your hand everywhere? It should be common sense to make a minimal effort to learn the local language of a foreign country if you have some intention to stay.

Yet so many Western expats become spoiled and desensitized by their spotlight in the “expat bubble,” the term given to the phenomenon of English-speaking Westerners who cling to groups of their own, and avoid any attempt at blending into the culture they choose to inject themselves into. They accept and embrace their role as the “token foreigner.” They enjoy the attention given to them as the out-of-place, overly bold and energetic Westerner who needs say no more than two or three basic words in an exaggeratedly butchered accent (“Konnichiwa!” “Arigato!”) to be showered in recognition and praise. They feel like a celebrity, and bask in the attention. And they are excluded from the rigid societal and cultural norms of Japanese society with their “get-out-of-jail-free” tourist pass.

Why learn the language when there is so much praise to soak up by doing the opposite?

This crude view is the very essence of the issue of Asian fetishism and Orientalism. It screams, “Hey, Japanese people, look at me, I’m an English speaking foreigner!” It establishes Westerners as seemingly “better than” their Japanese hosts in that they recognize and take full advantage of the knowing that they will still be treated as royalty for no reason other than the fact that they are English-speaking and (typically) white.

## The Japanese Perspective

Many foreign visitors seem to believe that this is in fact the way Japanese people view them. That Japanese people love Western culture, and will take any opportunity to use English. But is that view really shared by all Japanese people?

There is a widely known criticism of Japanese people switching to English when spoken to by a non-Japanese person, even when that person speaks Japanese first. Apparently, this is an all-too-real phenomenon experienced by many foreigners in Japan, both tourists and residents alike. There have even been parodies and social experiments made highlighting this, such as the following viral video from several years back.

But we're speaking Japanese! 日本語喋ってるんだけど



If Japanese people want foreigners to make the effort to learn their language so badly, then why do they avoid responding in Japanese when a foreigner does attempt to speak it? Could this be another reason that discourages some English speakers from bothering to learn the language?

A professor of English literature at Showa Women's University, Shigehiko Toyama, chalks it up to a latent racism: "The majority of Japanese feel that foreigners are foreigners and Japanese are Japanese. There are obvious distinctions. Foreigners who speak fluently blur those distinctions and that makes the Japanese feel uneasy." A Japanese newscaster, Hiroshima Kume, further commented, "It's better if foreigners speak broken Japanese, right?" While the former was an observation, and the latter can be perceived as a joke, it nonetheless revealed a very real truth about an "us-versus-them" mentality — an outdated belief that Japan has been "contaminated or polluted" by foreigners.

**(JP) Link: Why Are Japanese People Uncomfortable When Foreigners Speak Japanese?**

どうして外国人と日本語で話  
すと日本人は違和感を覚え...

気持ち悪いと感じることはあまり  
ないんじゃないかなあ、と願い...

hinative.com

This creates a dilemma between both parties. Some Japanese people get nervous when they have to use English, yet feel uncomfortable when foreigners speak their language. On the other hand, foreigners who try to speak Japanese end up getting shot down and forced to speak English anyway, so they give up on trying and bask in the attention of being the token “dumb foreigner.” So what’s to be done?

The fact is, Japanese citizens living in Japan have less obligation to acquiesce to us and our language than we do to theirs. And for many Japanese speakers, there’s a sense of relief when the burden of knowing English is taken off their shoulders.

By contrast, when a foreign visitor shows complete disregard for learning at least the basics of Japanese, it comes off as a long-winded excuse for simply being obnoxious and lazy. A response on the Q&A site Goo Oshiete to the question “Why don’t Westerners who live in Japan learn Japanese?” summarized this attitude as a unique form of arrogance:

「一般的にやはりアメリカ人は、英語は世界のどこでも通じると信じていますよ。」

Americans generally believe that English can be used anywhere in the world.

## (JP) Link: Why Don't Westerners Who Live In Japan Learn Japanese?

なぜ日本に来る欧米人は日本語を学ばないのか？

英語圏出身の外国人って、日本語学習に対する意欲が薄いですよ...

[oshiete.goo.ne.jp](http://oshiete.goo.ne.jp)

It's easy to understand the frustration. Not every Japanese person is hip to the idea of foreigner worship. Not everyone wants to be spoken to in English nor cares about the “magic act” of Westerners flaunting their native-speaker status. In these cases, it's far more considerate to have some basic knowledge in your back pocket as a form of respect and appreciation.

## Check Your Attitude

Ultimately, how a non-Japanese person living in Japan is perceived for their knowledge of the language, or lack thereof, comes down to their attitude and their reasons. Tourists and

temporary visitors will be given more leeway than those who stay long term, but use their foreigner status as a free pass to avoid responsibility and over-rely on their colleagues or spouse.

A general rule of thumb to follow: just don't be the guy who complains about "how horrible Japan is to foreigners," or "how hard it is to live there," if you haven't taken the initiative to learn the language and culture. Don't flaunt your Western status as a crown and expect every Japanese person to worship you as the "cool, funny foreigner."

You don't have to master the language. But learning the bare minimum, or at least enough to get by on your own and chat with your neighbors, will make a world of a difference when it comes to not just earning respect in the community, but authenticity as a person who truly appreciates and respects the culture you've chosen to live in.

*Krys is a Japanese-fluent, English native currently based in the US. A former Tokyo English teacher and translator for several Japanese companies, Krys now works full time as a freelance artist, writer and translator with a focus on subjects related to Japanese language.*

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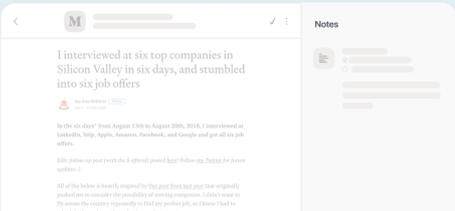
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