

## Some Interesting Japanese Expressions from a Trilingual Person's Viewpoint ( I )

TOMITA Takashi \*

The purpose of this research is to show some *Interesting Japanese Expressions from a Trilingual Person's Viewpoint*.

The informant is *Peter Mathies*, who was born in Austria in 1957 and passed through Graduate School of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. He majored in Chemistry. In Austria he married my cousin *Amy* (英美) and came to Japan to work for the pharmaceutical company Ciba-Geigy in 1991. So it has been fifteen years since he came to Japan. His *mother tongue* is *German*. He also speaks *English* and *Japanese* fluently. His two daughters, who go to International School, speak these three languages, too.

In this paper I would like to examine some interesting Japanese words, phrases, and sentences in our daily life. This is a comparative study of Japanese and Foreign Languages.

**Keywords;** Interesting Japanese Expressions / comparative study of Japanese and Foreign Languages

### 1. *O-kage-sama de* (御蔭様で)

< *Peter's Comment* >

*O-kagesama de* at the end of a conversation: *arigato gozaimasu, do itashimashite, o-kagesama de*

My first Japanese teacher - Professor Akio Maeda, the Schuman expert, in the early 1980's in Zurich - translated it into German as '*Dank werter Schatten*'. This literal translation, in English something like '*thanks to your precious presence / shadow*' always comes to my mind when I hear the phrase. Of course, the contemporary use is better translated by something like '*thanks to this*'...

< *Takashi's Comment* >

*Kage* means *shadow* in Japanese. *Kage* is a word with many different meanings. One of the meanings is '*protection*'. When *O* (御), *Sama* (様), and *de* are added to *Kage*, *O - kage- sama de* means ' thanks to you'. Using this phrase, we Japanese express thanks. However, this phrase is sometimes used ironically. In this case, *Sama* (様) isn't used in Japanese. It is interesting that this ironical expression is used in both English and Japanese.

*Thanks to you*, I failed in the test. (君のお蔭で)

### 2. *Chotto yoji ga aru* (ちょっと用事がある)

< *Peter's Comment* >

*Chotto yoji ga aru* is very symptomatic for Japanese ambiguity. I always feel compelled to ask '*What yoji?*' In the Western world this phrase is too vague as an excuse for not doing something or not having

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\* Department of Liberal Arts

time for something.

< Takashi's Comment >

*Chotto* is also a word with many different meanings in Japanese. We Japanese often use it to express *little, few, slightly, somewhat, bit, a moment, a minute, rather, quite etc.* Also, when we speak to someone, we often begin with '*Chotto Sumimasen.*' It is interesting it is expressed '*Excuse me.*' in English.

'*Chotto yoji ga aru*' is often used when we don't want to do something requested. We would like the person to infer from the expression that we decline the offer.

### 3. ～ *ni narimashita* ( ～になりました )

< Peter's Comment >

Similarly it is a vague phrase for Westerners. Questions that arise immediately are '*Who decided, when and why?*'

< Takashi's Comment >

The phrase lacks the subject in Japanese. We say in our minds, '*Someone decided and not I!*' Similar expressions are in English: '*It is said ...*' or '*They say...*'. As the subject isn't mentioned clearly, it also means I don't take responsibility for this statement.

### 4. シュラフ and リュック

< Peter's Comment >

When foreign words are imported into Japanese and they are considered too long? German words tend to get very long because vowels need to be added to make them pronounceable for Japanese? These words are abbreviated. What strikes is which part of the word is chosen to represent the full word.

For example, シュラフザック is abbreviated to シュラフ in Japanese. In English, it is a *sleeping bag*. シュラフ and リュック are originally German. In German, it is *Schlafsack* and *Rucksack*.

Thus '*Syurafu O Onegaisimasu*' could mean '*Do you have Sleep?*' ????

< Takashi's Comment >

It is interesting to know how foreign words abbreviated in Japanese. For example, '*department store*' is abbreviated to '*depart*' in Japanese. It is not English but Japanese English. Another example, *LA* is an abbreviation for *Los Angeles*, but in Japanese we say '*Los*'. Like '*depart*', it is also Japanese English.

It is also interesting that many German words about mountain climbers' rigs are borrowed into Japanese.

### 5. Asameshi Mae ( 朝飯前 )

< Peter's Comment >

I often get up early and do much serious work before breakfast. Especially reading and studying is very productive before you eat - the mind is alert, the body rested but not yet distracted. Once you eat, the body diverts blood for digesting food. This wisdom is also expressed on the phrase "You study better on an empty stomach".

< *Takashi's Comment* >

The phrase means 'very easy' in Japanese. What we can do before breakfast is very easy, so the phrase was born in Japanese. In English it can be expressed 'a piece of cake'. It is interesting that both Japanese and English are concerned with food in this expression. I think it more interesting to say 'Ochyanoko Saisai' (御茶の子さいさい) in Japanese as the same meaning. 'Ochyanoko' means 'Cakes served with tea'. So in this expression both Japanese and English have *cake* in common.

**6. Sumimasen (すみません)**< *Peter's Comment* >

'Excuse me.' and 'I am sorry.' are used in English. The difference between 'Excuse me.' and 'I am sorry.' is that the former is a request to the other person for pardon whereas the latter expresses the speakers feeling of regret.

But I was surprised to know it is often used to express 'Thank you.' in Japanese. Why do they use *Sumimasen* to express gratitude? Why do they apologize?

< *Takashi's Comment* >

*Sumimasen* is a word with many different meanings. *Sumimasen* literally means 'I'm not finished with something.' What is *something*? I didn't or won't give someone something in return fully, so it is used in apology and gratitude.

**7. Sayou-nara (左様なら)**< *Peter's Comment* >

"if so it be" ... sounds like "if there is / we have nothing more to say" or "if it cannot be helped" ... then "good-bye"

It is one of the first Japanese words known in the West, probably from the 1957 (my birth year) movie *Sayonara* with Marlon Brando and Miiko Taka.

< *Takashi's Comment* >

In Japanese it was originally a *conjunction*. In English it is a contracted form for 'God be with ye (you).'

*Sayonara Home Run* ( さよならホームラン ) is one of the Japanese baseball terms. It is a happy phrase, but in English they say *a game-ending home run*.

**8. Doumo ( どうも )**< *Peter's Comment* >

A very versatile phrase that can be used in many ways. My Swiss university professor used to tell his students – in the eighties – that *doumo* and *douzo* were the two most useful Japanese words on his visits to this country. He used the first one for expressing gratitude in some way or other and the second one when offering something.

## &lt; Takashi's Comment &gt;

*Doumo* is a word with many different meanings. In Japanese, it is used to express *gratitude*, *congratulation*, *apology*, *sympathies* etc. It is often used at the beginning of a greeting like 'Konotabi Wa *Doumo*.' It is thought that the phrase following to *Doumo* is omitted. For example, 'Konotabi Wa *Doumo*. *Sumimasen*.' As mentioned above, *Sumimasen* itself is ambiguous, so it probably puzzles foreigners.

## 9. Ototoi-Koi ( 一昨日来い )

## &lt; Peter's Comment &gt;

Time expressions can be used to emphasize one's emotions. We say "I am gone." or "I am history." for I *am about to* go. I am / you are history can also mean that my / your time is over, that there is *no more future*.

## &lt; Takashi's Comment &gt;

As *the day before yesterday* is a past day, a person can never come naturally *the day before yesterday*. So it means not only 'Never come !' but 'break friends with someone' in Japanese. It is a term of abuse.

## 10. Goal in ( ゴールイン )

## &lt; Peter's Comment &gt;

If a person doesn't know the meaning in Japanese, he / she could guess only something like 'to reach a goal'. It seems very common that foreign nouns are used as verbs: our company Newspaper in Japan is "Let's Novartis".

## &lt; Takashi's Comment &gt;

In Japanese it is often used to express 'get married'. In English '*goal*' is a noun, and it means only a purpose or a score. In sport '*goal in*' is Japanese English, and '*reach the goal*' is correct. We Japanese compare '*marriage*' to '*marathon*'. It is also interesting that we sometimes compare '*marriage*' to '*grave*'.

Those 10 examples lead to the following conclusions:

- (1) We are likely to prefer *ambiguity* to *clearness*.
- (2) We have a special ability to create *Japanese English*.
- (3) Japanese is not quite different from English. We occasionally have the common way of thinking.

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