

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

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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. It has been sixteen 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. Kekko desu (結構です)

< *Peter's Comment* >

The basic meaning is very easy to grasp and I remember it was one of the first Japanese phrases that I used. My disappointment came soon when I was misunderstood. Being asked: "Would you like some tea?", I answered: "*Kekko desu*" ... and did not get any tea. I meant to say: "That is good. That would be great. I would love to have some tea."

< *Takashi's Comment* >

In fact, this Japanese expression has roughly two meanings. One is "That's all right." and the other is "No, thank you." Even we Japanese are sometimes puzzled which of the two is meant, so we ask again, "Yes or No?"

2. Nemimi ni mizu (寝耳に水)

< *Peter's Comment* >

Water in my ear when I am sleeping would not so much surprise me as annoy me. The phrase definitely connotes an unpleasant surprise like when some friend unexpectedly died.

< *Takashi's Comment* >

In Japanese it means 'It is as if water were put in a sleeping person's ear.' If it is done actually, the

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sleeping one is very surprised and jumps out of bed, perhaps angrily and / or quite seriously damaged. So in Japanese we often use this phrase when we hear totally unexpected bad news.

3. *Yasegaman* (やせ我慢)

< Peter's Comment >

I understand this term to denote a positive characteristic of a person as in '*Ano otoko wa gamanzuyoi.*' It also reminds me of a biblical passage where in *Matthew 6:16-18* we are advised about fasting:

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

< Takashi's Comment >

In the Edo period some *samurai* were very poor. However, they were so proud as to put honor above life. While they didn't eat anything and were getting thinner in fact, they would rather, with a toothpick in their mouth, have pretended they ate sufficiently. *Yasegaman* means '*Someone really wants to do something, but he / she is obstinately too proud to do so.*'

4. *Ishi no uenimo san nen* (石の上にも3年)

< Peter's Comment >

Quotes about Perseverance:

"The block of granite which was an obstacle in the pathway of the weak, became a stepping-stone in the pathway of the strong." **Thomas Carlyle**

"The waters wear the stones." **The Book of Job 14:19**

< Takashi's Comment >

The origin of this proverb is the following ; If you keep sitting on a rock for as long as three years, even the cold rock will get warm and let you feel a little more comfortable. So it means '*Perseverance brings you success in the end.*'

5. *Me no kuroi uchiwa* (目の黒いうちは)

< Peter's Comment >

Eyes are an indicator of how alive a person is, physically and spiritually. Physicians examine a person in the eye – to know about his / her pupil reflex – to determine his / her condition.

< Takashi's Comment >

The color of most Japanese eyes is supposed to be black, though actually it is brown. When we say 'Someone's eyes are black.', we mean the person is alive, not dead. It translates into English as '*As long as*

I live,' . Note that neither *eyes* nor *black* appear in English. On the other hand, it is interesting '*to give someone a black eye*' means '*to hit someone in the eye and make a bruise around the person's eye*'.

6. *Ikeru kuchi* (いける口)

< *Peter's Comment* >

When I first read the phrase I thought it would mean something like '*to be able to speak well, or argue well*'. Many English phrases about a mouth relate to speaking, like: '*keep one's mouth shut*' for '*say nothing; avoid revealing a secret*', or '*watch one's mouth*' for '*be careful about what one says*'. So I was surprised it has something to do with drinking ... because drinking is probably more associated in English with the throat, like in '*A delightful quench for a thirsty throat*'.

< *Takashi's Comment* >

In Japanese '*Ikeru*' literally means '*can go*'. In time it has also come to mean '*can do something well*'. Young people today often use '*Iketeru*' in place of '*wonderful*' or '*nice*'.

It is interesting '*Ikeru kuchi*' means '*someone who drinks much and deserves admiration by his / her way of drinking*'.

7. *Neko o kaburu* (猫をかぶる)

< *Peter's Comment* >

While cats feature frequently in idioms, the traits referred to usually are: cats see well, they have nine lives, they fight, they are bad-tempered, and if they become too tame they are no good for catching mice any more.

The phrase '*Neko o kaburu*' has no equivalent in English or German.

< *Takashi's Comment* >

Both cats and dogs are typical pets in many countries, and some are even treated like human beings. Because they are very familiar to people, there are a lot of idioms about them in English as well as in Japanese. For example, both cats and dogs appear in '*It is raining cats and dogs*'.

In '*Neko o kaburu*', we regard cats as animals which mask their feelings and play the hypocrite.

8. *Tanuki neiri* (狸寝入り)

< *Peter's Comment* >

The fox '*Kitsune*' is pretty much the equivalent of a raccoon dog '*Tanuki*' in Western folk tales. He is the most cunning animal and has many tricks to fool its victims with. Pretending to be asleep is but one of them.

< *Takashi's Comment* >

In Japanese folk tales, raccoon dogs often transform themselves into human beings or even into

inanimate objects, and trick or cheat the unsuspecting. We often refer to a cunning person or deed as ‘*Tanuki*’.

‘*Tanuki neiri*’ is one of the interesting expressions: someone pretends to be sleeping when circumstances become bad or difficult, but, sadly enough, he / she is seen through the lie.

‘*A fox’s sleep*’ could be the equivalent for this in English. As a matter of fact, ‘*Kitsune*’ is often used to describe a cunning person in Japanese, too.

9. *Famiresu* (ファミレス)

< *Peter’s Comment* >

The term itself is easy to understand; a restaurant that primarily caters for families. The abbreviated form is Japanese English and not seen in the West. However, as it is, it is very practical to shorten a word and get an easier pronunciation when the word looks too long after taken into Japanese. (English *family restaurant* is short enough, because ‘*mi, s, t*’ are hardly pronounced. By the way abbreviations in spoken language are not common, while acronyms like UFO for Unidentified Flying Object or EU for European Union are more common.)

< *Takashi’s Comment* >

We have a tendency to abbreviate two words to one. For example, we usually say ‘*conbini*’ for ‘convenience store’. Needless to say, ‘*conbini*’ is not English but Japanese English, and might not be understood by English-speaking people.

We omit ‘*ly*’ and ‘*aurant*’ of *family restaurant* and create ‘*Famiresu*’, another Japanese English. Many Japanese people know it is the abbreviation of *family restaurant*, while they take ‘*conbini*’ as the original English word.

10. *Ame ni furareru* (雨に降られる)

< *Peter’s Comment* >

This passive way of expression where the subject is a human and in some way suffering, is very Japanese and I believe not used in English or in German. It does not directly translate into ‘*to get rained on*’ but requires a form like ‘*to be caught in a rain*’. It expresses a situation very well in which something is happening to a person that he / she may not like at all but has to accept.

< *Takashi’s Comment* >

In Japanese we sometimes use the passive voice to express ‘*suffering from some damage*’, and here the fact seems to be the more interesting that the subject ‘*I*’ or ‘*we*’ is omitted. For when the rain prevents me from doing something good or pleasant, it is not the sky but ‘*T*’ who *am crying*. The subject ‘*T*’ is far more often omitted in Japanese than in English.

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