"Olympic Results Reflect Trajectory of Post-War Japan"

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Just as U.S. TV coverage of the Atlanta Olympics was weighted toward strong American teams and individuals, in Japan there was a preponderance of judo and other events where medals were expected. But it turned out to be mostly media hype as the players crumbled under such pressure, and the results were disappointing to commentators and to the public.

After the 1992 Olympics, Hidenori Tomozoe, a Professor of Sports Ethics at Kagawa (National) University [later at Waseda University in Tokyo], predicted increasing difficulty for the Japanese team. He objects to the nationalism, commercialism and doping that subvert the ideals of the Olympic movement.

Yet the Japanese baseball team won a silver medal, humbling the U.S. team. No one could accuse the scrawny Japanese pitchers of taking steroids, while the muscles on the Cuban players were extraordinary. Nevertheless, the Japanese team kept evening the score, but never going ahead, and lost creditably. Obviously their knowledge of baseball was second to none, their execution steady from endless practice. This will be the case even more when the Olympics let pro baseball players participate.

So then how did they lose after overcoming a 6-0 deficit? Did they lack the killer instinct and hunger to win because of the soft life provided to their generation by parents who remembered the hardships of World War 2? Did the regimen of the Cuban players contain something more potent than sushi?

Somehow the catch-up ball by the Japanese team seems to reflect the post-War trajectory of their nation. The U.S. occupation of Japan was unprecedented in its generosity and can be looked back upon with pride or admiration. Japan was set on a trajectory that eventually led to fears of an unstoppable juggernaut of economic imperialism, Americans sweeping up around their automated factories. It was said that the value of land in Tokyo exceeded that of the entire U.S.

Japan was expected to play a role on the world stage commensurate with its wealth, but seemed to shy away from such prominence. Other nations never found out who was in charge in Japan, and those with power did not speak English. But then the bubble of overvalued land and stocks burst,
and the Japanese government has reeled ineffectually from one crisis to the next, belatedly responding without foresight. It was like a close game with Japan within reach of the lead, but now it looks as if Japan will never be number one, but will fall back to the middle ranks among nations, by economic as well as other measures. The population is aging and will start actually decreasing, moving from 7th most populous in the world to about 20th by the year 2050.

Only high technology could restore Japan's prominence, but Japan has fallen behind in cyberspace, and education is one of the most conservative sectors in its society. The requisite creativity and initiative, the English ability and power of self-expression, do not appear to be forthcoming. It looks to be catch-up ball at best, not the gold. The unspoken consensus in Japan may even be a sort of contentment with the number two role, the silver medal not carrying all the responsibilities expected of a world leader.

"Language as a Window into Japanese Culture"

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Language is much more than the semantic meanings of a lexicon. This becomes clear when studying a foreign language and culture quite contrasting to one's own. Looking at the Japanese language from the vantage point of an English-speaking Western culture, many aspects of language are set in vivid relief, which help us better understand language itself as well as our own culture. This essay will therefore outline some basic aspects of any language, with sometimes amusing examples where Japanese differs strikingly from English. Everyday Japanese words that have no equivalent in English will be featured for what they disclose about Japanese culture. Then cross-cultural communication problems will be touched upon, with the addition of biculturalism to bilingualism suggested as a challenging solution.

Let us first consider a few semantic examples where there is no isomorphic equivalency between Japanese and English, along with some corresponding cultural reasons why translation is defied. Bilingual dictionaries regularly gloss over these deeper differences and cultivate the illusion that certain words can define others regardless of the context. But there are nevertheless everyday expressions for which translators and lexicographers despair to offer any English equivalent.

One common expression that is bound up with Japanese culture and all but untranslatable into English is "o-negai-shimasu." A literal translation is insufficient but provides a starting point. With this caveat the expression could be rendered as "will [you please] do [me/us an an] honorable favor ..." This is because, with a very different syntax from English, no articles like "a" and "the," and the persons referred to often assumed from the context, "o" = honorable, "negai" = favor, and "shimasu" = will do (formal).

At this literal level, "o-negai-shimasu" is therefore closer to the Spanish "Por favor" than to any expression in English. One of its meanings has a closer equivalent in British than American English, when an offer of something is accepted by saying not "Yes, please," but rather just "Please." However, "O-negai-shimasu" is used more often in asking favors, as in "I would be much obliged ..." Yet it also seals self-introductory expressions where Americans would say "Nice to meet you." Its ubiquitous use in various situations reflects a culture where human relations are of the utmost
seriousness, and obligations are a major currency bonding human relationships.

There is also a large vocabulary to describe the dynamics of obligations, repaying them or not, making people feel obligated or sparing them the burden. Obligations are calculated with precision in the exchange of gifts as well as favors, so this is too important an area of Japanese life to be left to spontaneous feelings or the Western concept of sincerity. Common sense is almost the opposite in this respect, with the imperative to efface oneself and to placate others, even if this means telling them whatever they want to hear.

An interesting expression is the verb "norokeru" used to criticize or tease a person for praising someone in his or her own group. It is seldom invoked because people in Japan rarely break this taboo. But a Japanese-speaking foreigner, speaking Japanese with a non-Japanese communication style, is liable to run afoul of this way of thinking. When I first got married, for example, naturally I was smitten by the beauty of my stunning Japanese wife. But when I said anything about it, even in a relatively informal situation, I would get hit by that "Norokeru," softened by a sympathetic laugh.

In Japanese as in English, the present tense is all-too-powerful in framing a generalization. In English, for example, an unqualified "is" is often an exaggeration. The present tense spans the past and future, so if one ever praises someone in his or her own group, one is branded as if always having done so and intent on continuing to unrepentantly do so. This came home to me when a colleague repeated "Norokeru" about ten years after hearing my earlier violation, and I had all but ceased the practice in face of my domineering wife's proven capability to lead a Bataan March.

In any case, Japanese culture dictates humility toward oneself and other members of one's group, along with elevation of valued people outside of one's group. In Japan it could be considered an ironclad rule that "He who humbles himself will be exalted; he who exalts himself will be humbled." But in the Japanese way of thinking, "he" extends to one's group and vice versa. The above considerations point to a culture that is thoroughly regulated and hierarchical, in which group affiliation tends to be a definitive characteristic of the individual.

Even in these brief examples it has proven difficult if not impossible to discuss semantic differences alone. The way of thinking behind "norokeru"--that to praise a member of one's group is to indirectly praise oneself and hence violate a taboo--is codified in the very language as well. In what linguists call register, the level of formality in expressing a certain meaning differs according to the situation and one's status in relation to his or her interlocutor(s). The sense of register is weak in English, with its relatively egalitarian culture, but there is still a sense that, for example, casual speech is inappropriate before a judge. There might even be adverse consequences to an inappropriate level of formality.

In a hierarchical society like Japan's, this sense of register constitutes a much stronger protocol. The fact that native speakers of Japanese will usually not correct grammatical mistakes of non-native speakers but tend to correct errors of register shows that the culture values maintaining the social status relationships among speakers over and above the correctness of what they express. One concomitant of this way of thinking, and perhaps another cultural contrast between Japan and the U.S., is that the vast majority would rather be liked than to be right. Rather than risk a confrontation or rock the boat of a whole group, a Japanese speaker can select from all sorts of sociolinguistic strategies to be ambiguous and non-committal until the coast is clear.
In everyday speech ambiguity is thus an art, with a keen eye on subtle audience reactions. Sentences can trail off before the end if there is any whiff of turbulence, as one's position is not committed until the verb inflection at the end of the sentence, and even then one can reverse the polarity or postpone the conclusion to stay on safe ground. This again points to a culture where human relations are uppermost, with the reaction of others felt to be more important than self-expression. Individuals tend to be viewed in terms of the role they perform in a group, rather than in and of themselves. As a consequence, their self-image is largely vulnerable to definition by others, and their happiness may depend on supportive gestures from others certifying their sense of belonging to the group.

Nowadays there are individuals who have considered the Western viewpoint and are actively seeking self-realization. But some cooperative customs have proven necessary and viable through over 2,000 years of exacting rice cultivation, resulting in a strict sense of appropriateness. The obstacles to liberation or non-conformity in a Japanese environment extend to the everyday rules of speech. To use a set phrase in a certain situation rather than innovating has perhaps served to keep the members of a crowded society in relative harmony, maintaining their social distance so that others remain not so far as to be useless yet not so close as to be meddlesome.

To use honorifics toward others in face relationships is obligatory, while only an evil cartoon figure would stoop to so honor himself or someone on his side. Thus it is difficult to open one's mouth in Japanese without affirming the historical hierarchies with all their inequalities. Praising one's wife is stigmatized, as discussed above, while nearly all of the words for "wife" literally consign her to the "interior" of a house, and most words for "husband" mean "master." To avoid these implications by employing an unnatural usage can easily mark the speaker as disengaging from cultural allegiance, so feminists in Japan must experience much frustration. They must often swallow the football lest they be branded "Oba-tarion" or Aunt Battalion after the unstoppable females in the zombie movie.

Some extreme expressions, however, are no longer acceptable in polite company, like "gusai," which means "my stupid wife." In considering why the expression used to be acceptable, we need to bear in mind that it was and still is unacceptable to praise a member of one's group, and more than acceptable to cut them down. What happens is often that people speak nothing but ill of their spouse and children, but this is taken as a virtue by their interlocutor, who then proceeds to exalt the humbled.

We have seen examples of how grammar, register and so forth reflect culture. Paralinguistic features such as gestures also differ among cultures and are inseparable from their languages. An amusing case of gestures wedded to words is bowing on the telephone. When non-native speakers of Japanese begin to do this, home folks pronounce them "too far east too long," heads shake and eyes roll. On the other hand, a native speaker of Japanese who is bilingual may not bow on the telephone when speaking English. The bilingual needs to switch behavioral as well as linguistic gears back and forth when the two are as dissimilar as the cultures of Japanese and English are.

Another aspect of language is communication style, and the cultural differences expressed therein are legion. In Japanese there are expressions used when English speakers would probably say nothing. While the latter would just listen in a conversation, speakers of Japanese are expected to back-channel with phrases like "Hai" (Yes) or "So desu ne" (That's right) that show their active engagement if not agreement. If a listener is quiet on the telephone, the speaker might say "moshi
moshi?" (Hello?), wondering if the listener disagrees or the connection has been cut off.

An amusing Japanese word said when most people in the world would say nothing is "yoisho," which rhymes with "Joey show..." This onomatopoetic expression is often used when people pick up something heavy or even walk by others at close quarters, in effect plowing through their personal space. By the same token, when people sit down, they may say "yoisho" to viscerally express the touchdown, all the more so if others are nearby and the space thicksens, as it were. It could even be said when entering a tight parking space.

Japanese-Foreigner Controversies betray a lack of Biculturalism

Because of cultural differences, words may be understood in their dictionary meanings but are taken the wrong way, such as innocent remarks that cause offense. Recently there was a controversy where a newscaster said he preferred foreigners not to be fluent in Japanese, a sentiment evidently shared by many viewers. Non-Japanese pressed for clarification, while the TV station stonewalled, reflecting some differences in communication style. A special program was planned to placate the offended foreigners, but the newscaster ended up avoiding the original issue of why foreigners should not be fluent in Japanese. Instead, the program just focused on the word "gaijin," translated as "foreigner" or sometimes "outsider." This word is also controversial among non-Japanese, but it represents safer, more familiar ground to the TV staff. They know that, while foreigners may misunderstand it, the word "gaijin" is often used innocently or even admiringly in reference to Westerners.

Once an 18-month-old baby saw me on a train platform, pointed her finger at me and said "gaijin" before her mother noticed me. Submerged minorities like third-generation Koreans or Chinese may or may not apply for Japanese nationality, but they would not be considered "gaijin" in any case. Only the conspicuous minorities and Caucasians in particular attract the epithet. So the meaning cannot be "foreigner" with assumptions about nationality. It means something like persons outside the national ethnic group, and this phenomenon is by no means unique to Japan. This also bares the inadequacy of dictionaries. What is needed is a sociolinguistic or pragmatic dictionary that shows how words are used, if at all, in certain situations, and explains the cultural background thereof.

As for the deeper problem of discomfort with non-native speakers fluent in Japanese, the language is the last bastion of uniqueness that many commentators have sold to the public. Even so, there could be a modicum of justification for the aversion some people feel toward fluent non-native speakers. For one thing, speaking Japanese, or any foreign language to an extent, with a non-native communication style can constitute the sociolinguistic equivalent of a bull in a china shop. For example, a group of non-Japanese went into a no-frills restaurant that was busy and asked that tables be put together for their party. The reply was that they do not do this, but a woman insisted on it in Japanese, which hardly any native speaker would do in that situation. Staff members acceded to the request, but the cross-cultural damage was done.

The moral of the story is that a person has to be bicultural as well as bilingual to speak a foreign language in such a way as to do no violence to the culture behind the language. Much as Japanese is one of the world's most difficult languages, many non-natives reach a level of fluency in speaking Japanese without becoming bicultural to any appreciable extent. Where the cultures contrast and one or both tend to view cultural allegiances as mutually exclusive, biculturalism evidently represents a stage even beyond bilingualism.
Issues that first seem black or white turn out to have at least two sides if not many subtle shades of gray. Cultivating no illusions that the path will be easy, it can still be said that the higher the mountain, the greater the accomplishment and rewards of scaling it. Not stopping short at a serviceable bilingual proficiency, East-West biculturalism is possible, and it may be just what the world needs.

"Educational Rigors Begin Early in East Asia"

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For those who have not been to Japan, this article goes down to the neighborhood level to describe some of the variegated specifics that are often missing amid the plethora of generalities about Japan. A day in the life of eight-year-old schoolboy Kiley Ishikawa demonstrates how educational rigors begin early in East Asia. Citing commonalities as well as differences between Japan and countries such as Singapore, South Korea and China may also shed light on actual diverse practices within the educational ethos of East Asia.

To set the scene, the Takamatsu suburb of Kokubunji is on Shikoku island, the most traditional among the four largest islands of Japan. This area is the bonsai capital of Japan, and English-speaking grower Hiroyoshi Yamaji takes orders via the Net. The town originated with 8th Century Nara Period Buddhism, Kokubunji being a temple name. Nowadays it is more of a bed town on the edge of Takamatsu, a capital of the Inland Sea region (pop. 320,000). Tiny Kagawa Prefecture (pop. 1 million) is sometimes called "Japan in miniature," and tends to the middle statistically, so it is representative in many ways of the "real Japan" outside of Tokyo. [New editions of historical and cultural guidebooks to Shikoku and Kagawa are available at the author’s Humanities Commons profile page].

Kagawa retains some compelling historical sites, although its natural beauty noticeably diminishes every year. One of the finest of all Japanese strolling gardens is Ritsurin Park in Takamatsu. The pine-forested mountain behind the park is typical of the many small but steep and conical mountains throughout Kagawa, with Kokubunji surrounded by them.

Kindergarten in Japan runs from age three or four to six, and the large but well-organized classes with school uniforms are the training grounds for becoming Japanese. Kindergarten and elementary school seem to be fun for the children, with pressure building in junior and senior high school toward “exam hell,” the sense that one's career or status is determined for life by college entrance exam results. This reflects a credentialistic society, dominated by big companies, with little scope for entrepreneurship. A bureaucratic social organization and its effects on education can be seen throughout East Asia, harking back to the Confucianistic meritocracy of ancient China. The severe competition among students with similar backgrounds in a standard national curriculum results in the world's best test-takers, with Singapore tops in the world because it is a city-state with no educationally disadvantaged countryside.

In the Japanese countryside, people look up to the biggest cities, and many younger people want to move away to Osaka or Tokyo. But this is placing the priority on availability of information and social amenities. Contrary to the image of "rabbit hutches" and subway staff pushing crowds into the trains, most people in the fairly urbanized "countryside" of Japan live in spacious houses they own, and
they can usually find a seat on the train or bus. A roadside parking space in any city is probably a rumor, but more people outside the cities drive cars because there is room for them. Still, the air is fairly clean in the countryside amid the uncrowded highways and occasional twenty to thirty-story condos or office buildings. Compared to the even more crowded squalor of other parts of Asia, Japan is urbanized nationwide, but pleasantly so with nearly the whole population of 125 million enjoying middle-class affluence.

Kiley Ishikawa lives in a four-bedroom house, not unusual in being mostly Western style but with one traditional-style room with a tatami mat floor and tokonoma alcove. He meets the other elementary school kids in the neighborhood and they theoretically walk to school together for safety. In practice there are many stragglers, for one reason to avoid being bullied by older kids. The school year has many more days than that of Western countries, and each day is longer. Moreover, there is much homework, including not only weekends but also vacations. Mothers tend to supplement this, because other mothers do, with correspondence courses and lessons at after-school schools. At the secondary school level, cram school life begins in earnest for university aspirants, but so far Kiley has just taken lessons he wanted: swimming, karate, and abacus.

As for what is studied, there is a nearly 100% literacy rate in the 2,000+ Chinese characters, two phonetic syllabaries and the English alphabet. That alone demands much study, but a country with few natural resources feels an urgency to overcome this with math and science. Early in the third grade, Kiley multiplies three digit numbers by two-digit ones and has started division. He can multiply and divide larger numbers on the abacus, which goes back to about 500 B.C. in China.

Not all study is drudgery, either. One homework assignment that starts in first grade is the picture diary, reporting what the child has enjoyed over the weekend. Drawing the picture tends to add a cognitive dimension to strengthen the writing. One second grade assignment was to research festivals, go to a certain one, and then report it all in the picture diary. Kiley’s mother said that they would have had to go to the library, except that there was an entry on festivals in Kiley’s children’s encyclopedia. In such ways, supplementary educational materials also tend to become a necessity. Kiley’s father, yours truly, took this opportunity to explain about citing sources that were not his own writing, but Kiley sniffed that he already knew that.

To the dismay of his parents, Kiley has never shown any aptitude except for playing, but the educational system is forcing him to learn an enormous amount. It is taking a day-dreamer who would otherwise play outside all day--like his father in his youth--and enculturating him into a society where people have to pay attention and study hard. [Update: the family moved to Osaka, Kiley went to Ritsumeikan University near Kyoto, and now he is enjoying an IT career in Tokyo].

Educators outside of Japan could not import the whole ethos that drives students, but they could at least investigate what is going on and select elements that might be enriching to import. This is, after all, what East Asians have been doing with things Western.

Now while there are many traditions common to East Asia with roots in the Chinese cradle of civilization, each country has its own particular practices. This is shown when East Asian countries come into conflict with one another or prove to be a mystery to each other. Generally speaking, South Koreans are far more open than Japanese nationals. Taiwanese students in Japan once said that Chinese are more like Americans than they are like Japanese.
A delegation from the Singapore National Institute of Education, not to be complacent, recently came to Tokyo looking for tips on how Japanese schools instill a sense of commitment to community and society. Since I was invited to meet them, I checked if their assumptions were true or not. Voluntarism is indeed part of the secondary school curriculum in some parts of East Asia such as Hong Kong, but it is still at the proposal stage in Japan. My Japanese informants stated that local schools do not instill a sense of community, so people tend to pursue selfish aims within the group-oriented system [but recall that praising one’s associates is taboo]. Singapore should rather look to a multicultural society like that of the U.S. for inspiration, they said. It turned out that even a Singaporean with degrees from Japanese and Western universities had been projecting Singapore's desiderata onto the unknown screen of Japan. So, if East Asians can be so mysterious to each other, then how much more easily can Westerners be deceived by appearances and project mistaken assumptions onto the folding screen of a country as enigmatic as Japan.