

Chapter One - Language and Culture

I. Reading

Interesting, isn't it?

No serious student of language can feel comfortable for long without a dictionary. Naturally, they are indispensable tools for learning foreign languages - or even our own native language. Then, why do I always warn my students, "Dictionaries are dangerous!"? One of the big reasons is that language and culture are complexly, inseparably intermixed. What we say and how we say it is shaped and colored by the culture we come from. A dictionary can only give us a very general sense of what a word means and how it is used. It would be impossible for a dictionary to explain the many nuances and contexts that affect how a given word is used or understood. The dictionary equates the Japanese "すみません" (*sumimasen*) with "Excuse me" or "I'm sorry." Yet, the way these expressions are used is completely different. (See Chapter 5.)

Another example is the seemingly safe word "interesting." Dictionaries almost always list the Japanese "面白い" (*omoshiroi*) as the equivalent of the English word "interesting," but the nuance of context and usage can make the words quite different. An old girlfriend got very angry when I said that I thought her uncle's rare illness was interesting. In Japanese, "面白い" would never be used for something as serious or potentially hurtful as a relative's illness; it's used for much more positive, upbeat situations. However, in English, the word "interesting" is used for happy and unhappy situations alike. You know what the word "bank" means in English...or do you? Look in your dictionary to see the many other possible meanings of the word.



Of course, the problem just begins with individual words. There are specific patterns in conversation that are unique to each culture and language. When asked a question, Westerners answer first, and then explain the answer. Japanese usually do the opposite. They begin with background information and explanation, and offer the answer at the end. Japanese will let silence or a lukewarm response signal their disagreement or refusal, but a Westerner will often express disagreement or refusal very directly. In Japan, the idea of rank or hierarchy has a great impact on the language used and the pattern of conversation. A good example is 敬語 (*keigo*). These ideas are much less important among native speakers of English speaking English. In Japan, men's and women's ways of speaking can be quite different, while the differences in English are much smaller. (See Chapter 4.)

Who did it? (The missing subject)

Our different cultures not only affect how we say things, but even what we say. Japanese is sometimes called a very contextual language; that is, much of the meaning of what is said is derived from the surrounding situation. In English, every formal sentence has a subject, but in Japanese, the subject is often omitted. In English, it is much more important to clearly express cause and effect than it is in Japanese; English speakers always need to know why, and if you don't tell them, they will ask...and very directly. Part of the reason is that their culture does not

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place as high a value on harmony and “saving face” as does Japanese culture. When describing an automobile or bicycle accident, a native speaker of English will usually explain that “I got rear-ended,” or “I ran into a truck.” If you had a traffic accident, what words would you use to tell a friend about it?

All this makes learning a foreign language much more interesting - and more difficult, too! For now, what is important to remember is that language and culture are connected and intertwined in complex ways that are not always obvious. In order to communicate in a foreign language we also need to learn about the culture surrounding and creating that language, and learn to think in ways native speakers of that language think. Just as importantly, we also need to understand our own culture and how it affects how we think and how we communicate in our own native language.

II. Comprehension Questions

If you have a difficult time answering these questions, read the passage again. If you can't find the answer, make a note of your question and ask the teacher for an explanation in your next class.

1. Why are dictionaries dangerous?
2. How are the words "interesting" and "面白い" different?
3. How does the idea of hierarchy make speaking in Japanese and speaking in English different?
4. What is different about answering questions in Japanese and in English?
5. Why is learning about culture important when learning a foreign language?

III. Thinking

New words and expressions

What are the main points in this chapter?

General summary of main points:

List some examples from your own life or observations that support these points:

List some examples from your own life or observations that do not support these points:

Your reactions and opinions: