

Summary of my talk on “Several Topics about the interesting Differences between Japanese and English”

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My presentation on “Several Topics about the interesting Differences between Japanese and English” was based on my belief that there exist cultural differences between Japan and English-speaking society as the basis of the language differences between Japanese and English. In order to argue the topic from this belief, I felt I must clarify what is culture in the beginning.

So, I argued that there is a pragmatic and functionalist view on culture which emphasize that culture can make people’s life easier and more comfortable. I also pointed out that there exists a hermeneutical view on culture. This view tries to understand culture based on its meaning for people. By stating that there are two views on culture, it becomes possible to understand culture not only from its functional aspects, but also from its emotional aspects.

I also argued that there are several layers in culture. The first and the surface layer of a culture is something being observed and those embodied into things as artifacts. The second and the deeper layer of a culture is people’s values that support the surface layer of a culture. The former is visible “hardware”, and the latter is invisible “software”, so to speak.

After pointing out the existence of several layers in culture, I classified cultural differences into differences in artifacts, differences in behavior, differences in social rules, and differences in values. After classifying the cultural differences this way, I showed the 30 most prominent cultural differences between Japan and the United States. For example, I pointed out the contrast found in the national anthems of the two countries exemplify the cultural differences in values. I also took a look at Platters’ “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” and Ishikawa Sayuri’s “Amagi Goe” as typical songs for problematic love in the two countries and tried to compare cultural differences found between them. In doing so, I examined how they are different from each other with respect to the Hofsted’s cultural dimensions and with respect to the Parsons’ pattern variables.

After stating the cultural differences between the two countries, I examined the language differences between Japanese and English. Using a term “drift”, Sapir (1921) showed the existence of the consistent movement to a certain direction occurring in a language. Regarding English, I mentioned several drift tendencies such as the following.

- ◆ disappearance of case inflection
- ◆ simplification of verb’s variations in response to the sex, number, and tense variation
- ◆ The development of auxiliary verb
- ◆ Fixation of the word order
- ◆ More than 70% of English vocabulary have been imported from other languages
- ◆ Disappearances of the distinction between the second personal pronoun singular form ‘ye’ and plural form ‘you’

With respect to the drift in Japanese, I focused on the drift happening in Japanese when foreign words were incorporated to Japanese.

- ◆ Borrowed words of foreign origin that end with “k” was initially pronounced as words ending with “ki”
- ◆ Most borrowed words of foreign origin that end with “k” are recently pronounced as words ending with “ku”
- ◆ Introduction of long vowels
- ◆ Utilization of geminate consonant that includes little “tsu”
- ◆ Pitch accent given in a unique way

I then discussed that Japanese “ga” and “ha” somewhat correspond to English “a” and “the” in a sense. I also clarified that English sentence structure can be expressed as subject + predicate combination based on Noam Chomsky’s theory. I then stated that Japanese sentence structure can be expressed as known + unknown combination based on Ohno Susumu’s theory, or phrase + expression combination based on Tokieda Motoki’s theory.

I then referred to the differences between Japanese pitch accent and English stress accent, and referred to the characteristics of Japanese way of English words pronunciation.

After discussing these points, I showed a diagram proposed by linguist Roman Jakobson. The main section of that diagram is the portion of sending a “message” from “addresser” to “addressee”. But Jakobson added “context” and “code” to this diagram in addition to the main section. He then argued that linguistic message is correlated with the context where such message is exchanged. Based on this diagram, I suggested that the difference between Japanese and English might be explained by the context differences between the two societies. For example, Anglo-Saxon society may be characterized as follows: Heterogeneous people meet with each other and the society is formed through contractual relationships. In this context, there is a strong need to clarify what are the important entities influencing the situation. Such a need would lead to the usage of the inanimate subject sentence structure such as “The force of the smell brought him back to the real world”. On the other hand, in the Japanese society where homogeneous people live together for a considerably long time, people tend not to describe the situation in detail, but to try to capture what kind of movement is happening after all. As a result, people tend to grasp an event as a whole without clarifying details.

I then discussed the relationships between the “code” and the message exchanged among people based on the Jakobson’s diagram. Jakobson regarded the “code” as “metalingual” existence. It can be a grammar of a language, or basic assumptions held in each culture. Therefore, it can be conjectured that the actual messages reflect this underlying “code”. I then pointed out the fact that this Jakobson’s idea influenced Claude Lévi-Strauss’s idea of structuralism. In a sense, I concluded that the relationship between the society and the language is very much structural in nature. But since various kinds of drift is also happening in language, my conclusion might imply that the structural relationship between the society and the language is not entirely static in nature, but involves a state of flux.