

SOME OUTSTANDING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE.

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WHILE reading Romanes' *Mental Evolution in Man* I have been often impressed with the fact that the Japanese tongue presents so many features which that famous author affirms belong to primitive language. Some of these facts will be here presented.

To take a very simple instance—the absence of the personal pronoun. The psychologist says that race life-history and individual life-history have left marks of the inner life of man of the ages before and after the rise of self-consciousness. Without self-consciousness personal pronouns are not used.

Now in Japanese this curious state of things is still in existence. Of course the first person pronoun is the most significant in any language. But there is no exact rendering of "I" in Japanese; in common speech there are several nouns used. With the help of lexicographer Brinkley let us see what these terms mean.

Watakushi is the most universally used term; it has three proper significations: (1) self-interest, selfishness; (2) private, not public; (3) embezzlement. But these significations are all lost sight of when the term performs the duty of a pronoun. In careless speech this word *watakushi* becomes *watashi* or even *washi*. A speaker addressing a deliberate body will speak of himself as *hon-in*, "the present member." *Sessha*, "stupid person," may be used in familiar discourse with an equal. The official will speak of himself as *honkwan*, "real official post" (as distinguished from those which are temporary or are not accompanied with official title).

Vulgar language uses besides *watashi* and *washi*, *ore*, and *oira*, corruptions of classical terms. Students and young men in general use *boku*, "servant." Sometimes *soregashi*, "a certain person," and *yatsugare*, "your servant," are heard.

The servant in addressing a superior will say *temae*, "before your hand."

These terms are all of the first person, and found in the spoken language only; it would take too long to treat all of the persons and styles. Sufficient has been adduced to give a general idea of the situation. We see how these several nouns are gradually being worn away, as for example, *watakushi* which in its vulgar form, *washi*, does not convey the original meaning of selfishness, but which though now a vulgarism, will in time along with *ore* or *oira* become a pure pronoun.

Still another mark of the primitiveness of the Japanese language is the lack of narrow discrimination between the parts of speech. We have just seen that Japanese "pronouns" are nouns. It is also true that verbs may all of them be used as adjectives. *Miru* means "to see," *miru koto* means "sight," *koto* meaning "thing." *Ushinatta kane*, "lost money." Even whole clauses can become adjectival so that such expressions appear as *yoku hashiru koto ga dekiru hito*, "well-run-can-man," i. e., a man who can run well. In this way the relative clause of English is very often turned as there is no relative pronoun in Japanese.

As in English the verb furnishes many prepositions. It also is used as a noun: *iishi wo warera wa kikeri* is from Mk. xiv. 18; *iishi* means "said" and is in the accusative case governed by *kikeri*, "heard." *Shikashi* and *keredomo*, both meaning "but," are verbs. True adjectives are fitted up with verbal endings and become verbs.

In short it is impossible to construct a scientific grammar of Japanese on European models. The language is a composite that has not yet worn its several elements into a well organized unit. It is a popular remark that Japanese scholars have never written a scientific grammar of their own tongue. The spoken language is specially in a state of flux.

Another feature that impresses the student is the abundance of words in Japanese. This is not a mere generalization, but will be clearly proven by a few examples. In teaching English to Japanese one often notices that what we express in English by a tone of voice will be put into a word in Japanese. For example the rising inflection or interrogation mark, as you please, becomes *ka*, a word which is appended to the interrogative sentence. The pause which sometimes occurs between clauses or sentences may be represented by *shi* in Japanese; this *shi* is not translatable by any English word, "and" is too strong.

What time is it? is *Tokai wa nan ji desuka*, lit. "clock-by what

hour is—?” This way of putting it seems tautological in “American” but not so in Japanese because the syllable *ji* has so many meanings that unless you see its written character or have in spoken language some limiting indicative term like *tokei*, “clock,” the hearer will not know whether you mean *Nanji desuka*, “Is it you”; *Nan ji desuka*, “What character is it?” “What road is it?” “What bridge (of a violin) is it?” “What matter is it?” I learned this by the puzzled look on the face of my companion who could not answer because my question had missed fire.

This large number of homonyms is as you know due to the adoption of Chinese words into the language, both spoken and written. In China there are “tones” to differentiate these similar words; but in transplanting the words the Japanese omitted to bring the tones and so introduced a great deal of confusion along with a mass of invaluable material. I must qualify the last remark to the extent that the Japanese are not entirely without “tones” although I have seen no clear statement of the matter in any of the books. There are groups of native homonyms that so far as I can discern are clearly distinguished by the Japanese among themselves by using slight accents and tones together; to imitate them in this matter is next to impossible as there are no settled principles on which the pronunciation can be determined as is evident from the fact that they disagree among themselves as to just what the differences are.

The Chinese elements in the Japanese language probably constitute the same proportion of it as do Latin elements in English. It would be most interesting to trace the parallel between the incorporation of Latin into English and of Chinese into Japanese. We may close this passing reference to the question by saying that without the aid of Chinese or some similar tongue it is impossible to conceive how Japanese could ever have survived as the language of a thinking, civilized people.

The multiplicity of words in Japanese is also due in part to the extraordinary politeness of the people. If two coolies are searching for a lost article and one of them finds it he exclaims to the other, *atta*, lit. “was,” meaning “I have found it.” But when he goes to his employer he will say “*Arimashita no de gozaimasu*” with not the least difference in meaning.

Still another reason for the large number of words in common use is the custom of repeating the major part of the interrogative sentence when replying to it. For example: *Danna san wa o uchi desuka*, *Hei uchi desu*; “Is the master of the house at home? He

is at home." Any number of examples might be adduced, but in nine times out of ten a simple Yes or No will not be used but some part of the questioner's sentence will be repeated. As a matter of fact the Japanese have no true rendering for our yes. In the answer *Hei, uchi desu, hei* does not mean "yes"; it means simply that the speaker is listening or has understood the previous speaker. *Sayō* comes nearer meaning "yes," but its literal meaning is "according to what is at the left"; or more freely, "as follows." This comes about from the fact that the text in Japanese runs in columns and reads from top to bottom and from right to left. Hence "as follows" must be "as written on the left." This idiom has been transferred to spoken language and is presumably followed by a sentence in which the speaker states explicitly his agreement with the last remark. *Sō desu* often represents our "yes" but its meaning is "It is so"; "so" being one of the very few vocables having the same meaning in both Japanese and English. The literary equivalent of *sō desu* is *shikari*.

When denying an affirmative the sentence may be introduced by *ïie*, "no," but more often the negative idea is incorporated in the verb. *Orimasen*, "is not," means that the master is not at home. *Sen* is the negative affix.

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Another matter bordering both on linguistics and social psychology is the matter of attention. I have noticed three men conversing on the train; in the course of their remarks, say Mr. A took the leading part. In order to maintain the attention he finishes nearly all of his sentences with some exclamatory word like *ne* or *na* which serves as a prod to waning interest. The listeners must do the polite thing of course, so at every pause made by the speaker to gather wind for additional discourse, Mr. B and Mr. C put in with a *hei*. At the larger pauses Mr. A will close with his *ne*, Mr. B will say *naruhodo*, Mr. C will say *so desuka* and Mr. A will reply to both with a *hei* to indicate that he has heard their signs indicating that they have heard him. To one who can understand very little of the language such a conversation consists of a series of vocables punctuated at convenient places by a mutual exchange of grunts.

In speaking to children one must put a *ne* after nearly every word if he suspects he is not being understood. The response to this particle written on their faces will signify to him whether they yet comprehend his talk or not.

In addressing adults it is impracticable to use a style of address

as compact as one commonly employs when using English. The natural flow of speech is so watered by really useless terms that the hearers will not keep up with the speaker if he omits them. I am not now referring to discussion of abstruse subjects or the employment of unusual terms. I refer simply to any simple narrative told without interruption. Some may contend against the position taken up in this paragraph on the ground that Japanese are not naturally slower to comprehend than Westerners as is implied by the above remarks. But every-day intercourse of the people in which they in familiar discourse do use shortened forms is not to be quoted against my remarks because of one vital point: in common conversation the colloquy alternates between two or more speakers and gives each one time to gather up what has been said—a thing evidently impossible when speech flows on without a break.

It takes no philosopher to discover the depth of the indirection of thought and speech among the Japanese. Difficulty in holding attention is but one symptom of a fundamental intellectual trait. For numerous reasons the foreigner is met with a pointless and roundabout reply when he expects a plain answer. If you ask the green-grocer the price of potatoes he will begin to tell you of their virtues, or scarcity, or where they come from. I have asked in plain unmistakable language for prices three times before getting an answer. There is a well-known reason for this hesitation and indirection, viz., an inherited custom to pretend that money is a foul thing and not worthy the thought of a self-respecting person.

Then the custom of using go-betweens and a thousand and one other customs have ingrained indirection of thought and speech to the very bottom. Modern methods of education are doing much to awaken the minds of these Oriental Yankees and bring them into their own inheritance. They are after all not stupid nor asleep in the general sense of the word yet from certain points of view they are guilty of almost inconceivable indirection. A Japanese who has spent years in a foreign land has an altogether different force and mental grasp from his untraveled brother. The Japanese have given abundant proof of real, though hidden, alertness in that they have been capable of turning the tables on boastful European pedants and prodding shaggy beasts till they open their eyes in wonder at their own stupidity.