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TRANSFORMATION THROUGH LANGUAGE
LEARNING: REACHING FOR WORDS,
STRETCHING ACROSS CULTURES, AND FINDING
STRENGTH IN A BICULTURAL SELF

Meredith Stephens

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TRANSFORMATION THROUGH LANGUAGE LEARNING: REACHING FOR WORDS, STRETCHING ACROSS CULTURES, AND FINDING STRENGTH IN A BICULTURAL SELF

Meredith Stephens

Tokushima University, Japan

Abstract

Bilingualism was not the norm in our family tradition, except for distant ancestors who spoke Gaelic. The only language study by immediate family members was of Latin by my parents. In the first year that Japanese was offered at my high school in the 1970's, I was prompted by the teachers to try this new offering. I acquiesced without giving it much thought, but this proved to be a life changing decision. I ambled through high school and university studying Japanese, and then found myself living in Japan, the language having chosen me rather than the other way around. I found myself having thoughts and conversations that I would never have in English, and discovered both a new world and a new self.

Résumé

Le bilinguisme n'était pas la norme dans notre tradition familiale, exception faite de lointains ancêtres qui parlaient le gaélique. Dans ma famille immédiate, mes parents étaient les seuls à étudier une autre langue : le latin. La première année que le japonais était offert dans mon école, dans les années 1970, j'étais encouragée par mes professeures et professeurs à essayer ce nouveau cours. Même si j'ai acquiescé sans trop y penser, cette décision a changé mon parcours de vie. Presqu'à contrecœur, j'ai étudié le japonais à l'école et à l'université, puis je me suis ensuite retrouvée au Japon, la langue m'ayant choisie plutôt que l'inverse. Je découvrit des idées et des conversations que je n'aurais jamais eu en anglais, ainsi qu'un nouveau monde et un nouveau moi.

Introduction

Learning another language transforms one's inner life, prompting consideration of objects, customs and attitudes from a fresh perspective. Insights are gained by learning words and even grammar for which there are no equivalents in one's own language. For example,

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'simple' concepts such as words for colour do not share boundaries between languages; the boundaries between 'green' and 'blue' in English and Japanese differ somewhat (Deutscher, 2010). Nor does Japanese have a neutral word for such a simple concept as 'water'; rather it is described as *oyu* (hot water) or *mizu* (cold water). I learnt this distinction viscerally when visiting a Japanese outdoor spa with a multitude of pools in mid-winter. A woman warned me that one particular pool contained *mizu*. Of course it contains water, I thought to myself, until I dipped my toe into the pool, and realized that she had been telling me that the water was cold. Moreover, in Japanese even one's choice of nouns and verbs may force one to reveal one's assumption about status differences between oneself and one's interlocutor. If one assumes that one's listener is of a higher status than oneself, or older than oneself, one is obliged to choose a specified verb ending. Daily experiences interacting in Japanese taught me to conceive of interpersonal relationships in an alternative way.

Bilingualism as Enrichment and Personal Transformation

Viewing the world through the alternative perspective of a different language is a source of immense enrichment (Ferre, 2003). In the sixteenth century Charles V is reported to have said, "to possess another language is to possess a second soul" (Wilson, 2008, p. 111). Bilinguals can experience a double sense of belonging: "With their memories perpetually on overload, exiles see double, feel double, are double" (Aciman, 1999, p. 13). As an Australian expatriate in Japan, I identify with Aciman's (1999) description of having an overloaded memory, seeing, feeling and being double in my daily life. According to Besemeres (2007), bilingualism can even enhance research; it provides a different perspective, an alternative way of posing a research question, and curiosity about "how others experience the world through the double lenses of interlingual vision" (p. 138).

However, the benefits of bilingualism are not just the sense of personal enrichment that comes from having alternative perspectives of the world and being able to view one's first language from a distance; they are also cognitive. Bilingualism confers divergent thinking and cognitive advantages as the bilingual ages (Grosjean, 2010). Cognitive ageing may be warded off because bilinguals must exercise their working memory and focus, and must inhibit one of their languages while using the other. The exercise of these activities may serve to build a cognitive reserve for bilinguals to carry into their later years (Erard, 2012). Bilingualism also confers mental flexibility; bilinguals can both inhibit and select their respective languages, switch languages and sustain attention, and may have an advantageous working memory (Bialystok et al., 2012). Hence the benefits of bilingualism are both the insights gained from new ways of seeing the world, and the numerous cognitive advantages.

Bilingualism as Confusion and Ambivalence

Besides enrichment, bilingualism can also bring confusion. The bilingual Todorov (1994) explains how he is French with other French speakers and Bulgarian with other Bulgarian speakers. He has an insider's view of both cultures and societies. When changing languages he changes his imagined audience, and therefore has difficulties with translating his own work into French from his native Bulgarian: "Each of my two languages was an entirety, and that is precisely what made them uncombinable, incapable of forming a new totality" (p. 213). Upon a ten-day return visit to Bulgaria from his long-term place of residence, France, he could not relinquish his French personality, despite having reacquired his Bulgarian

personality: “It was too much for a sole being like me!” he explains (p. 213). He had to take refuge in the physical labour of gardening to escape having to face this dilemma in social contact. Zhengdao Ye (2007), a Chinese Australian, outlines the constant struggles between her English and Chinese. Her languages merge, and she hears herself speaking in English while the substance remains Chinese: “It is my thoughts wrapped in a loose mantle of another language” (p. 58). She describes the anguish of how she feels reduced in her second language: “I mourn quietly, in the corner of my heart, the loss of meaning, the subtlety, and the beauty of my own language in the trajectory of trying to reach the other shore of another language” (p. 58). The precision and uniqueness of expression in one of a bilingual’s languages is sometimes unavailable in the other.

This tension between how thoughts in one language cannot necessarily, or easily, be transferred to another appears in an example provided by cognitive linguist Lera Boroditsky (Vetandam, 2018). She explains how lexico-grammatical choices in each language predispose the speaker to a particular worldview. Some languages do not have expressions for ‘right’ and ‘left’, and instead indicate direction according to cardinal directions; position is indicated by expressions such as ‘south-east’. Unlike the expression ‘left’, which moves according to the stance of the speaker, cardinal expressions are stable. Once the speaker is familiar with cardinal directions she views the world in a new way, and the landscape assumes a new importance.

Integration and Adaption

Simon-Maeda (2011), an American expatriate in Japan, describes how she integrates her Japanese and English-speaking selves:

When I speak Japanese I am evoking my Japanese persona, which does not obliterate my English-speaking self but rather becomes incorporated into who I am (or who I think I am) and the social activities I am engaged in at the time. (p. 23)

Unlike Todorov (1994) who laments his inability to integrate his French and Bulgarian languages, and Zhengdao Ye (2007) who regrets the lack of resources in her second language, and her inability to express the subtleties and beauty of her first language, Simon-Maeda (2011) appears to have integrated and reconciled her Japanese and English-speaking selves.

Yet another perspective is provided by the Jewish-American professor of French, Alice Kaplan (1993). She describes in a positive way how in French she is in exile from herself, and how the very shortcomings of second language speakers of French can push them to say more: “The simplicity of our communication moves us, we’re outside of cliché, free of easy eloquence, some deeper ideas and feelings make it through the mistakes and shine all the more through them” (p. 210). For Kaplan, the imperfections of the second language are not necessarily limiting; the effort required to express oneself in the second language may even summon unexplored depths. Unlike Zhengdao Ye (2007), Kaplan’s struggles with gaining precision in her second language are framed in a positive light. Hence the bilinguals’ interpretation of their imperfections in their second language is sometimes viewed as excruciating, and other times as liberating.

Expatriate Literature

Expatriate literature and essays provide insights, which may not be apparent in academic studies. Mary Antin, an East-European Jewish immigrant to America, published her narrative, *The Promised Land* (2012). She embraced her second language, English, describing it as "this beautiful language in which I think. It seems to me that in any other language, happiness is not so sweet, logic is not so clear" (p. 164). In contrast, another East-European Jewish immigrant to Canada, Eva Hoffman (1989), laments, "maybe I'll never belong comfortably anywhere, that my sensibilities and opinions will always be stuck in some betwixt and between place" (p. 216). Native Polish speaking Anna Wierzbicka (2007) describes the impact of Polish on her second language English, and elegantly expresses the tension between the Anglo norm of not hurting others' feelings with Polish forthrightness. A Russian speaker in Australia, Gladkova (2007), explains how she strives to acquire Anglo norms by trying to sound positive, and by not expressing her negative feelings in English as much as she would in Russian. She observes how rarely people complain about their headaches in Australia, in comparison to her native Russia.

Challenges and Joys of the Japanese Language for English Speakers

Block (2007) aptly describes the ambivalence felt by "those crossing geographical, social and psychological borders" (p. 59). As an expatriate, I straddle the borders between my native Australia and my host country Japan. I tell my students that I am not the monocultural English-speaking foreigner that they may take me for, because I have resided in Japan for half my life. Despite my improbable appearance, I have internalized many of their cultural norms. I use my background knowledge of Japanese to anticipate their meaning when conversing with them in English. My native language, English, has a high status in Japanese society, and many people's expectations of my Japanese ability are low due to my stereotypical ethnic appearance. I use this to preface unconventional linguistic choices. Before I express an English language idiom in Japanese, I may tell my interlocutor that I am borrowing it from English, and then directly translate it into Japanese. More often than not, my interlocutor understands me.

Speaking Japanese has ushered me into a new physical and mental landscape. The most ordinary assumptions that I bring with me from my English language background are challenged daily, even after twenty-five years of residence. Japanese may present particular challenges for English speakers; linguists Michael Clyne (2007) and Andrew Cohen (2001) comment on how they found Japanese to differ from the other languages they studied. The Foreign Service Language Institute classifies Japanese as one of the most difficult languages for English speakers (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2008). The pleasure and challenge in speaking Japanese lie in the remarkable ways in which it diverges from English. Languages typically studied by English speakers such as French and German share commonalities with English. These languages have been described as variants of one another (Van Parijs, 2007). In contrast, Japanese and English have been described as mirror images of one another (Pinker, 2002). I enjoy the stimulation of mental juggling required when speaking Japanese with its diverging word order from English. Not only is the word order different, the pronunciation also contrasts with that of English. In Japanese there is no linking (or liaison in French) between the final consonant of a word and the beginning vowel in the next word. The English speaker, accustomed to linking, must make a conscious effort

when speaking Japanese not to transfer this English language habit. In Japanese you must pronounce each syllable distinctly without allowing the syllables to slide into one another. For example, when greeting someone in the afternoon you must say *kon ni chi wa*, and not *konnichiwa*. If the English speaker links the consonant ‘n’ in this word with the following vowel ‘i’, following the English language rule, they will have an accent. (This is not to suggest that having an accent is somehow a deficit. An accent simply indicates the linguistic history of the speaker. I made a choice to try and approximate a Japanese accent in order to facilitate comprehensibility.) These dual processes of using a mirror image word order while undoing the English pronunciation language habits of a lifetime present an ongoing challenge. However much I try there is always further to go, and these linguistic hurdles are stimulating and enjoyable.

Another joy of the Japanese language is the beauty of calligraphy. In English we have tended to lose appreciation of writing as an art form, and are reminded of this when we study the handwriting of letters written by those of past generations. Written Japanese, however, continues to be appreciated both as a means of communication and an object of beauty. Children in primary school must purchase a calligraphy set and are issued with a calligraphy textbook. During their weekly calligraphy lesson an awareness of the beauty of the written characters is instilled. In the city where I live, Tokushima, there is a literature and calligraphy museum devoted to celebrating the beauty of this ancient art form. Here you can see massive artworks featuring a single written character. Creating calligraphy can be an act of intense concentration and absorption as you follow the strict rules while producing your own interpretation. Although my own attempts at calligraphy have never attracted praise, I still manage to appreciate the artistic calligraphy productions of the masters. Below are just some of the many examples of calligraphy and other Japanese writing I am surrounded with daily.



Figure 1. Ink on wood (n.d.). Photo: M. Stephens, 2020.

This is the lid of a box containing an earthenware vase. The script is to be read vertically from right to left. The writing on the right is the name of the pottery. The writing in the middle says *vase*. The writing on the left is the name of the potter, *Sansei*.



Figure 2. Ink on clay. (n.d.) Photo: M. Stephens, 2020.

This is the base of a vase. The characters are written vertically and from right to left. They read *kutani nanzan*, which is the name of the pottery.

How I Came to be Working in a Liberal Arts Department in Japan

Now I will explain how I made the trajectory from a monolingual subculture of English speakers in my youth to a bilingual adulthood. As a student, I never imagined that I would finish my career in the East Asian end of the corridor of a Japanese university. There is a professor of the Heian Period (794–1185) on my right, a professor of the Edo Period (1603–1868) in front, a professor of Contemporary Japanese Literature next to her, and three professors of Chinese to my left. Strangely, it feels like nobody is there, but in fact there must be, because every day during the summer the professors' doors are wedged slightly open. That means that not only are they present they are also refraining from using their air-conditioners. It is considered *de rigeur* to be conscientious concerning electricity usage, and unconscionable to turn on the air-conditioner while the door is open. Reducing electricity usage is an effective cost-cutting measure for the university, and staff members want to be seen to be supporting this collective goal.

This is an unlikely place for a teacher of English to be situated. I made the move from a south-facing room, surrounded by offices of professors of English and history, to a north-facing room in the East-Asian section, simply because of my preference for a room with less direct sunlight and heat. The professor in my current office had suffered from cold, and she agreed to allow me to make a swap to the East-Asian end of the corridor. At first the East-Asian professors were bemused to find an English-speaking foreigner in their

midst, but as the years wore on their look of mild shock was supplanted by a cursory and yet respectful nod whenever our paths cross. Those who are close to me look at me earnestly as I communicate in my English-accented Japanese, but those who do not know me so well sometimes look bewildered to see a senior member of staff communicating so imperfectly. I have joined the group from a distant locale and culture, and my inclusion indicates an acceptance of diversity. I have tuned in to the daily rhythms of staff and students over the years. The university campus is not a foreign land to me, but rather an island of familiarity. I have become so comfortable on the campus that whenever I see a Japanese visitor in one of the university offices, I wonder who they are and why they are there. I have become a member of the university community even in my role as a foreigner.

This unlikely journey to the East-Asian corridor began as a twelve-year-old in Australia. Upon starting high school, faced with the choice of German or Japanese as a foreign language, I chose German. There were no heritage languages in my family other than English, and Scottish Gaelic a few generations ago. The only other language my parents had studied was Latin. I thought that it might be difficult to study two languages, so I chose German, without giving it much thought. However, during the pre-enrollment interview, I was urged to take Japanese because they were trying to encourage takers for this new subject. Not having the where-with-all to ask any questions, I accepted their suggestion. This brief suggestion from the teachers changed the course of my life and career.

For the five years at high school, I continued my choice of studying Japanese. The more I studied it, the more I enjoyed it. I found the back-to-front word order to be fascinating, and enjoyed grappling with an unfamiliar script. When the time came to start university, I continued to study Japanese for sheer interest, without thinking of where it might take me. As graduation loomed, I was informed of the availability of scholarships to Japan and decided to apply for one. I found myself studying in Tokyo and then Yokohama, on scholarships. Initially, culture shock was severe and homesickness set in. Earthquakes were a surprise; never having experienced one before I mistook the sensation of being shaken in my bed during the night for a delirium. Finally, my studies in Japan were concluded, and I asked myself whether I had chosen to come to Japan or whether Japan had chosen me. All of these opportunities to study Japanese had just seemed to present themselves.

I wanted to take some control over the direction of my studies. While studying in Tokyo I used to overhear the daily conversations of the French-speaking students. This prompted me to spend six months in France to study French while I worked as an au pair, and then two years in London where I taught French in public schools, after which I returned to Australia. Back in Australia restlessness set in yet again, and my thoughts turned to Japan. Living and working in Europe had enabled me to achieve that longed-for understanding of my roots; I was satisfied to have a sense of agency concerning where to spend my time. I was ready to return to the more distant culture of Japan after having deepened my understanding of the west. Before I left for Japan I married and had a family while pursuing graduate studies in applied linguistics.

Raising Bilingual Children

It was the pre-internet era, and I had a Japanese journal sent to me in Australia so that I could find a job for my Australian spouse in Japan. Once he was offered a job we relocated there and raised a family. My formative experiences of motherhood were in the company

of Japanese mothers. I enjoyed enduring friendships with two Japanese mothers in the neighbourhood. Moving to the city of Takasago in Japan where I had no friends, no car, and was a first-time mother were three new challenges I had to face simultaneously. Thanks to my best Japanese friends Mieko and Yukie, not only did I overcome these challenges, I also thrived as I acquired new Japanese vocabulary and cultural knowledge concerning child-rearing. I celebrated my friendships with Mieko and Yukie in a chapter in a recent anthology entitled *Twenty-first Century Friendship* (Stephens, 2019). Motherhood in Japan gave me a myriad of insights into alternative ways of raising and educating children. The first was culinary. My elder daughter's first food was rice which I learned to simmer until it formed an *okayu* soup. Rather than snacking on cookies and chocolate my daughters preferred tiny dried whole fish and dried squid.

Furthermore, I was impressed with the education they received in primary school; they were regularly required to write Japanese haiku, consisting of three lines of five, seven and five syllables, for homework. (Sadly, I was unable to help them.) They were introduced to a variety of visual art forms that I had hitherto been unaware of, such as *chigiri-e*, made by tearing up tiny pieces of coloured paper and sticking them onto a blank page to form an image resembling an impressionist painting. Physical education was systematic and thorough; the primary school even featured a sumo wrestling ring for the children. Jump rope homework consisted of 34 steps. There are too many to recount here so I will confine myself to the first two and the last two. Step One was jumping rope for either 20 seconds or 30 times forwards. Step Two was the same as Step One but backwards. Step 33 consisted of passing the rope under one's feet three times in a row without touching the ground for either five seconds or seven times. Step 34 was the same but backwards. The teacher would provide a stamp each time a step had been achieved. As for Music education, children would regularly perform for parents in the gym on high quality instruments. An older child would conduct the ensemble. I was regularly reduced to tears by the exquisite instrumental and vocal performances of school children. Other such experiences as a parent of children in Japanese schools have been previously documented (see Stephens, 2015, 2016).

These rich experiences of the Japanese education system were made possible by my decision to bring up my daughters as bilinguals. This began when, thanks to the help of Mieko, I enrolled my firstborn in a local child care centre, and many of her first words were Japanese. Later at primary school her developing literacy skills formed the focus of two studies of childhood biliteracy in English and Japanese (Stephens & Blight, 2002; Stephens & Blight (2004). At the time of writing she is 25, and despite having been raised in an English-speaking home she has indeed become bilingual and biliterate.

Japan had claimed me. As the years passed, my family members returned to Australia one by one, but I continued to live in Japan alone. The reason I stayed was the endless and fascinating challenges I regularly faced. Unlike London, where I had felt a strong sense of belonging, Japan presented a stream of novelty. The difficult language and rich culture lured me. Word boundaries in Japanese and English do not nearly map onto one another; rather than doing a mental translation of each word one uses, one must learn each word afresh in the context of usage. Over twenty-five years I have constantly acquired new words, and this process continues to the present. Unlike European languages, the new words do not bear much resemblance to English, and it is hard to guess their meaning. I make daily efforts to comprehend the multitude of new words, and my interlocutors do their best to explain them to me. Not only does this process of discovery apply to language; because culture

and language are inextricably intertwined the new vocabulary gives me entrée into a new appreciation of Japanese culture. Now I will present some examples of cultural practices which may be unfamiliar to western readers.

Cross-cultural Insights into the Workplace: Replacing my Signature with my Personal Seal

One of the pleasures of living in Japan and speaking Japanese is that I can participate in rituals that would be improbable in English. One such ritual in my workplace is the registering of attendance with a personal seal. One day I was suddenly summoned by email to stamp my attendance record, so I wandered over to the main office just after five. Of course, it was still staffed, and no excuses seemed to be required for arriving at the end of the working day. Stamping of attendance was always supervised and taken very seriously; the act of not only being present but being seen to be present conveyed that one was actively contributing to the group and the organization. The seal features the characters of one's name, engraved on a miniature oval stamp. As I stamped my seal into the attendance register, I struggled to get the right amount of red ink evenly on the seal each time I hit the ink pad. Then I struggled with applying just the right amount of pressure, so that the seal would leave its mark evenly in the allotted space. The clerical worker had the responsibility of supervising employees' daily stamp entries. Lacking the fine motor control of my Japanese colleagues, my attempts to stamp were sometimes met with suppressed giggles, or reassurance in order to save my face. One day I was particularly late and had to catch up on months of registering my attendance. If one was a trusted member of staff there was a tacit and unofficial agreement that attendance need not be registered daily. The clerical worker encouraged me with each attempt as I caught up with my stamping from late October through to mid- January. As she encouraged me, I responded with greater accuracy each time. Once I missed though and sensed that I was the clumsy westerner trying to delicately stamp into tiny spaces. Then, inevitably, I only managed to stamp half of my seal into one of the allotted spaces.

"You only have half of the face in that space," she quipped. I giggled, and continued in mock solemnity until I reached that day, January 20th. Years later I was proud of having learnt to hold the seal with my right forefinger in the indentation on its side, and not making a mess all over the page with each stamp. However, my slowly-won pride was short-lived. It appeared that my seal of thirty years was not suitable for authorizing particularly important documents.

"You have to stamp it with your official seal," I was advised by a member of the administration.

"I've been using this seal for around thirty years," I protested. "Isn't this one ok?"

"No. You need an official one."

I had hardly enough time to squeeze in a visit to the municipal office to register my seal, but I obediently trudged off during a gap in my schedule. Upon arrival, I took a number from the ticket machine and waited my turn. Finally, it came, and the clerk kindly apologized for keeping me waiting. I produced my seal, and was about to fill out the paperwork, when she asked me,

"Do you use this name in official documents?"

"No," I replied, confused. "Meri" was not my official name.

"We can only make a seal for a name that is officially in use."

I pondered this. My first name, *Meredith*, and my last name, *Stephens*, could not be translated into Japanese without becoming unrecognizable.

"Can I use my middle name, *Anne*?" I asked her.

"Yes." She confirmed. Finally, there was a straightforward solution to a problem.

"Where is the nearest seal maker?" I asked her.

She went off in search of a map, and gave me careful instructions. Then I cycled off to the seal maker.

I parked my bicycle outside, and wandered into a tiny shop, with a sample of seals in the showcase. It was staffed by an elderly man and his grandson. The elderly man showed me the range of seals of different sizes, shapes and styles of calligraphic writing. I chose one without much deliberation, because there was only so much I could do with the two simple characters, which were needed to write *Anne*.

Then his grandson interjected, "This kind of seal is only necessary for purchasing a house or a car. Otherwise you can just buy one for a thousand yen off the rack."

He pointed to a revolving rack of hundreds of seals. After having been shown the range of artistic seals in their beautiful cases with accompanying bright red ink, it was with some embarrassment that I decided to go with the thousand-yen seal. I would have liked to have spent more money to have saved the face of the assistant who had devoted so much time to showing me the beautiful and more expensive seals. It was commonly accepted that workers in privileged positions buy relatively expensive goods to support local businesses in the stagnant economy. Nevertheless, I persisted with the choice of the inexpensive seal, and was told to come back to collect it the next day after it had been engraved.

The next day I cycled back to the seal maker. This time it appeared to be staffed by a member of the generation in between the grandfather and the grandson. I collected the seal in a tiny paper packet, and then made my way back to the municipal hall to register it. Again, I took my number from the ticket machine, waited my turn, and filled in some paperwork. Then I was told to wait at a different counter, and after again taking a ticket and waiting my turn, was presented with a certificate authorizing the use of my new seal. I gave the certificate to the university office, and the task was almost complete.

"Be careful with this seal. Keep it in a safe place," the university clerk advised.

She recommended I use my other seals for everyday purposes such as registering the receipt of goods or banking. I followed her advice, and stored my official seal in its paper packet inside a special box.

However, I was not the only one who was immersed in busyness. The clerical staff were three times as busy as me, as I found out late one evening when I paid a late-night visit to the campus. I had left the electronic card for out-of-hours entry in my office. Whenever I forget it I wait until a sympathetic passer-by is about to enter, and follow them in. That evening I arrived at the entrance and no-one was there, but there were lights on in two offices downstairs. I decided to attract the attention of the office workers. I walked to the side of the building and jumped up to knock at the window. Three familiar faces peered at me from the lit window, as they struggled to recognize me. We gestured at each other until we could agree on which entrance we would meet at. Once I got back to the entrance a besuited worker was waiting at the door for me.

"How fortuitous! I need you to check some of the paperwork you sent in. Do you have a moment?"

I was much too tired to check paperwork, but it would be ungracious to decline, so I agreed.

We headed back to the administration office, and there were four office workers still at their desks, busily responding to deadlines. They raised their heads from their screens and smiled at me as I entered, discreetly chuckling at having had to rescue me after I had knocked on their office window late at night. The besuited office worker ushered me to his computer terminal, and painstakingly questioned me on the minutiae of the document. I furtively glanced at the clock. These office workers were twenty years younger than me, and were happily chatting away as they waded through their work. They had been at work nearly twelve hours, and might not be able to leave the office until after midnight.

Finally, I excused myself and made my way to my own office. Then I saw two workers from the other main office locking up ready to return home. They greeted me with an *Otsukaresama!* (said to acknowledge someone's hard work). They must have thought I had been there for twelve hours like them, but in fact I was the one who should have said *Otsukaresama*. The perseverance and dogged dedication to work is one of many cross-cultural differences that continue to bewilder me; I would not be able to appreciate it first-hand without the access provided by my second language.

Cross-cultural Insights into Society: Public Bathing

Another unique ritual is segregated nude public bathing at bath-houses and hot springs. For many years I was urged by an English friend to come with her into the hot spring. Her family would attend once a week, and then enjoy a delicious meal afterwards, washed down with a beer, at the spa restaurant. The notion of nude public bathing horrified me, but finally, I could not bear listening to my friend telling me how enjoyable it was. I took my family to one of the many spas, in the city renowned for having the oldest spa in Japan, Dogo Onsen in Matsuyama. We purchased tickets for each family member from the vending machine. Because the spas were segregated my husband went off to the men's section and my daughters and I to the women's section. We agreed to come out at the same time. This was possible because of the large clocks positioned in the bath-houses.

First, we entered a changing room, undressed, put our clothes in the lockers, locked them, and put the key, which was attached to a wristband, around our wrists. Then we entered a washing room where there were hand-held showers in individual booths with mirrors, where we soaped and rinsed ourselves thoroughly. Then we entered the bath-house. Every bath-house was a little different, but there was always a steaming hot communal bath. According to the different bath-houses, there were sometimes carbonated communal baths, aloe baths, cold baths, individual horizontal baths facing a large communal television screen high up on the wall, outdoor mud baths, massaging baths, electric-pulsing baths that would send an underwater current to your waist, and saunas. I was relieved that nobody was particularly interested in looking at me, and gradually became less self-conscious about communal nudity. This experience was made accessible because I was able to use Japanese. It remains one of my most precious past-times in Japan. For me, the experience of nude communal bathing is an activity associated with the Japanese language and culture. It is a mainstream experience in Japan, but not in any other country where I have lived.

Exclusion

I cannot pretend that my expatriate experiences are always, or necessarily, enriching. Being visibly foreign can exact a toll. Many Japanese have been taught to speak English with those perceived as foreigners, even those of long-term residence. Many interactions begin with the interlocutor having to establish which language they should address you in, even if they are not English-speakers. Then if they speak to you in Japanese, they have to establish your competence. Sometimes they may pitch their Japanese at a level that is too easy, and other times at a level which is too hard. I try not to judge someone for getting the level wrong; it is up to me to get it right in the country where I reside.

Besides the problem of having a different appearance from most other people, is the issue of having an accent. Even when I think my accent is acceptable, my interlocutor may imitate me, and I realize how foreign I sound. Students very occasionally mimic me, underestimating my ability to understand them; their mimicry might be a sign of empathy, or it might be ridicule. Being mimicked heightens my awareness of myself as an outsider. When the students imitate my English accent, I deliberately continue the conversation in even more heavily accented Japanese, and they laugh. I am trying to appear not to take myself too seriously, but inside I am horrified when I realize how foreign I sound. My daughters do not have accented Japanese because they attended kindergarten and school in Japan. They would often laugh good-naturedly at my English accent. Whenever I had to make a phone-call in Japanese, I would retreat to another room out of earshot of their giggles.

Concluding Remarks

These experiences have not diminished my love-affair with the Japanese language. Even after over forty years of studying and using Japanese, I still relish being addressed in Japanese, even when the postman delivers me a parcel. I take it as a sign of the acceptance of someone who has come to live in this community from a very distant geographical and cultural space. When my colleague from the office opposite mine rushes in to my office to tell me some news in Japanese, I am touched. I never take the experience of being addressed in Japanese for granted. Unlike foreigners in other countries, who are expected to learn the language of the country, I am often expected not to learn the language of the country. Japanese speakers understand the challenge of their written language for westerners, and many will go out of their way to help hapless westerners who are illiterate in Japanese. Although I send emails almost daily in Japanese, I confess that these low expectations of westerners gave me an excuse for not rising to the occasion to fully master the written language. Perhaps I should count myself lucky to speak the English language which is currently considered to be the lingua franca (Jenkins, 2007), but I understand the beauty in other languages, and have enjoyed personal transformation by living in Japan and communicating daily in spoken and written Japanese.

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