

Let me pose one question to you. What do you think is the difference between Japanese and English? Of course, the writing, the pronunciation, the grammar, and all kinds of stuff are so different. But that is just the surface of the language. When I was living abroad, there were some people who have learned Japanese coming up to me and say “Oh, Japanese is an easy language” even though they couldn't communicate well enough in Japanese to say so. It made me think deeply about what it truly means to learn a language. And now I believe that we can't actually ‘speak’ a language until you understand the culture fully. So in this speech, taking Japanese as an example, I'm going to talk about the importance of learning each other's culture in order to master a language.

Firstly, in English, there are only two first-person pronouns; “I” and “we”. On the other hand, there are dozens of first-person pronouns in Japanese. As long as I counted on wikipedia, there are 65 established words and countless words that describe your position in society. However, why do we have so many pronouns? It is because, in Japanese culture and history, the relationship between you and others has been very important. People use a different pronoun depending on their position in society, gender, class, and birthplace. Let me give you some examples. “うち” is a young woman's pronoun, and “おら” sounds like a man living in countryside. “おいら” is like a naughty boy, and “あたし” gives an impression of a stubborn girl. Can you see that each pronoun has its own meaning to show your personality? The words that you choose will practically define who you are. So a good understanding of culture and history is very important in order to know the language more deeply.

Secondly, there is a huge difference in mentality between Japanese and non-Japanese. Especially in the western part of the world, people tend to be standing up for themselves and speaking out their mind. But in Japan, harmony is a virtue. Standing out is not considered a good thing. They're afraid to be out of the group. So to speak, the Japanese have the “we” mentality valuing collectivity whereas non-Japanese have the “me” mentality valuing individuality.

Now I'm going to introduce two proverbs as an obvious example. “A nail that stands will be hammered down”. This is a Japanese proverb that tells you ‘not to stand out’.

“The squeaky wheel gets the oil”. This is an American proverb that says ‘the more you stand out, the more attention you get’. There’s no corresponding proverbs in each country, which is because the perspective is totally different from each other.

What I mean by this is that the way of thinking influences the way of communicating as well. For example, even though they have a problem, Japanese people don’t say it straight forward because they don’t want to hurt others’ feelings and be kicked out of the community. So we go around using indirect words and make others figure out that we have a problem. This is so-called ‘reading the air’. You have to literally ‘read’ what the other person is trying to tell you. And if you can’t do that, you will just be thrown out of the group or at least backstabbed. That’s why you need to understand and get used to the culture to be able to communicate smoothly in other languages.

Thirdly, the talking behavior is pretty unique in Japan. As I said earlier, people in Japan don’t really say what they’re thinking. Moreover, they often say the complete opposite thing just not to be disliked by others. This spirit of self-sacrifice is very peculiar to Japan. On the other hand, people from English-speaking countries such as America, Australia and New Zealand tend to say their opinion directly. This is because their country consists of a lot of immigrants. So they had to insist clearly on what they think. I personally like the way of Western people, who state their opinion in a straight forward way.

In conclusion, if you understand the cultural differences between Japan and Western countries, your skill of communicating with foreign people will be well improved. So I think even though there is a big cultural gap between your country and others, you should never ever keep them away, because a good conversation can only be held with respect for each other.

How can one expect to truly communicate by memorizing vocabularies and grammar alone?

Don’t you really need to understand the culture in order to have meaningful communication?

Thank you.