

Not in the Same Words: Breaking through the Communication Barrier

By Muramatsu Masumi

A leading Japanese political figure, for whom I had the honor of personally serving as interpreter on numerous occasions, passed away in July. Fukuda Takeo, prime minister of Japan from 1976 to 1978, had just turned 90 years of age when he made his last public appearance in May. A fitting close to this leader's career in the limelight, his final act of public service was to welcome delegates to the Tokyo meeting of the Inter-Action Council, an annual forum of former heads of state or government. Mr. Fukuda founded this council in 1983 and chaired it for several years until he passed the baton to Dr. Helmut Schmidt, former chancellor of West Germany.

Mr. Fukuda was an excellent communicator. A seasoned veteran in public affairs, he had a knack for holding his court and charming his audience, including such finicky listeners as his peers at G-7 summits. He was Japan's spokesperson at the third summit, held in London in 1977, and the fourth meeting in Bonn in 1978. I had the challenging job of serving at these meetings as Japan's head simultaneous interpreter, leading a most capable team of younger colleagues.

The "summiteers" generally spoke, as they do today, in their native language. The Canadian prime minister routinely switched between English and French, representing his bilingual nation of Anglophones and Francophones. When Japanese was spoken, our job was to interpret it simultaneously into English. Our European colleagues would then interpret our English, rendering it into French, German, and Italian. Conversely, when a delegate spoke in French, German, or Italian, the Japanese interpreters would listen to the European interpreters' English rendition and then interpret into Japanese. In this way, English served as the "key," or "pivot," language. The entire relay takes place with no more than a few seconds' delay.

Whether during these multilingual conferences, or during press interviews or state dinners—at such social occasions interpreting was often performed consecutively rather than simultaneously—Mr. Fukuda was always a good storyteller, drawing upon the rich experiences he had garnered over his decades of public service and his impressive political career. Having been a young financial attaché with the Japanese embassy in London at the time of the collapse of the world financial market in 1929, which led to the Great Depression, Mr. Fukuda was able to give startlingly vivid first-person accounts of what he witnessed at that time. As you might expect, he held his listeners in rapt attention. I could feel the audience's breathless concentration as I interpreted Mr. Fukuda's slightly archaic but eloquent Japanese into English.

There was one particular feature, a virtue in fact, in his style as a communicator. When trying to make a point but noticing looks of consternation from his audience, Mr. Fukuda would often reiterate his point, citing other apt examples or other interesting anecdotes to fortify his point. "Since this is a complex matter," he would say, "let me give you another illustration to make sure that you follow me."

"In other words ..." was what he was saying. Verbal communication is not an exact science. Human speech is not like reading a concisely written technical manual or a law book. There are imperfections, ambiguities, redundancies, and therefore individual variations and personalities. Points need to be repeated and are best paraphrased. Paraphrasing and avoiding idioms and tired clichés often drive your point home far more effectively than trying to state your



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views in compact but mechanically enunciated statements.

Subtleties and style

Never, in my experience, did Mr. Fukuda sound in any way less than confident of his interpreter's ability to render his views and moods accurately. Less kind speakers are known to make unproductive remarks such as, "I am not sure if my comment has been translated (i.e. interpreted) accurately. So let me repeat it." Sounding critical of your interpreter in public might cause the listeners to be concerned about his (more often her) accuracy throughout, in addition to not being in good taste.

Such a case took place recently during high-level negotiations between Japan and one of its major trading partners. The Japanese press reported an instance of the other country's chief negotiator having suggested that some possible mistranslation by the Japanese side's interpreter was causing the failure in communication. When the Japanese delegate defended his interpreter for her accuracy, his counterpart then turned to

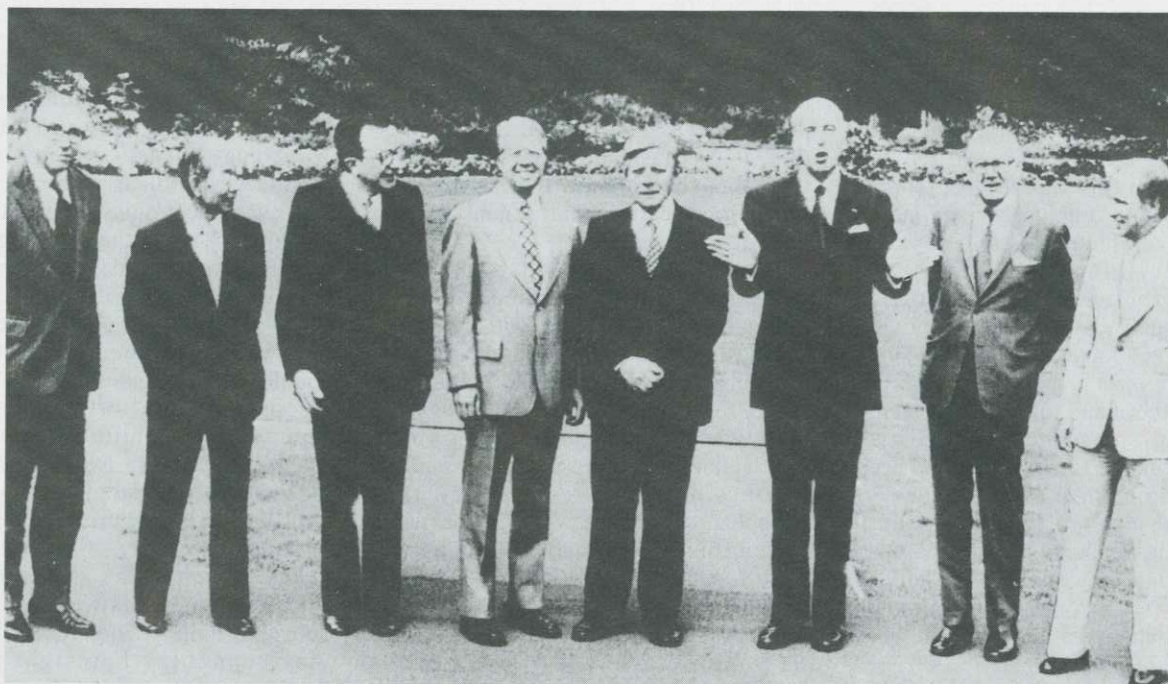


Photo: Kyodo News Service

The 1978 Bonn G-7 summit, where the author served as Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo's interpreter, as he had the previous year. (Left to right) EC President Roy Jenkins, Prime Minister Fukuda, Italian Premier Giulio Andreotti, U.S. President Jimmy Carter, West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, U.K. Prime Minister James Callaghan, and Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

his own interpreter for blame. Upon this, she was so upset that she shed tears, according to the press.

If the interpreter had been made of sterner stuff, as I believe we should be, she would not have shown tears, but gone about doing her job. But I sympathize with this unfortunate young colleague, whoever she was. If the late Mr. Fukuda were in a similar situation, he would have been more likely to have tried to paraphrase his ideas or otherwise restate his views with different illustrations or examples rather than disgracing and therefore discrediting his interpreter. Interpreters, like everyone else, are not infallible.

For communication to be thoroughly effective, especially in important international meetings, whether government-level trade talks or private business negotiations, much depends on good teamwork. Interpreters are very much

part of your team. To make certain that they are familiar with what you wish to convey to your counterparts, the interpreters should be given background papers and in particular copies of any texts to be read. Allow, if at all possible, the interpreters to ask you for clarification of special terms or jargon. Keep in mind that there is no such thing as word-for-word translation between two such different languages as Japanese and English. We are not talking about Spanish and Portuguese or French and Italian, where the grammar is almost identical and words and idioms are generally quite similar.

In the final analysis, however, forget about interpreting. Even when trying to communicate in the same language (be it in English or Japanese, in which I claim some professional skill), it is best not to rely solely on the same phrases or lines of argument that one is accus-

tomed to. Try new twists, present more interesting stories, quote object lessons, for example, that sound new, different, and refreshing to the ear.

This holds true not only in international or cross-cultural communication—when, of course, differences in cultural and linguistic idiosyncrasies make the job extra delicate—but also in daily interpersonal communication when we are speaking the same language.

Even when one does not need a good professional interpreter at one's side. ■

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