

Trade Friction and Language

By Hamano Takayoshi

Since the breakdown in the economic framework talks between the United States and Japan in February, the relationship between these two countries has entered rough seas. This past spring American economist Pietro S. Nivola, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C., suggested to me that a misunderstanding arising from language might have been, if not entirely then at least partly, the cause of the current trade friction.

It occurred to me that it is possible to use a word slightly differently or attach different values to words used by both sides, and I would like to investigate this question further using examples of different usages of economic terms. I know that English is a rich language, so to tackle this complicated problem I sought the advice of an experienced interpreter working with both the Japanese and English language.

What is a numerical target?

Numerical targets presented one of the biggest obstacles in the framework talks. American negotiators pointed out the characteristics of the Japanese market, emphasizing its secretive and closed aspects which are complicated by Japanese regulations and traditional practices such as *dango*, or bid-rigging. America insisted that Japan should set numerical targets in order to open up her market to foreign vehicles and car components, and to improve governmental procurement procedures and foreign accessibility to the Japanese insurance market.

The Japanese side, however, resisted the introduction of numerical targets, remembering the agreement over semiconductors which was reached between the two governments several years before. The interpretation of that agreement was that Japan would allow a market share of up

to 20% for semiconductors manufactured by foreign companies. The economists, on both sides of the ocean, argued against the concept of setting numerical targets as it would be incompatible with free market ideals.

Since the spring of 1993, following the Clinton administration's entry into office, the term "import target" has been widely used. Concerns were raised that the thinking behind these words might be similar to the "numerical targets" of the semiconductor negotiations. Next, American negotiators began using the word "benchmark" to replace "import target." "Benchmark" presented a problem for the Japanese translator. At the same time, the Japanese media began using a word which reflects the meaning of numerical targets. Whichever of the two words the American negotiators preferred to use, the Japanese found it difficult to understand what their counterparts were really trying to convey.

At the Miyazawa-Clinton summit last summer, the terminology for benchmark

changed again. Both negotiators agreed to introduce the term "objective criteria." Everyone this side of the Pacific thought that not just the terminology, but also the nature of what had been called "numerical targets" was slightly changed. However, since last autumn, this term was once again changed and the word "numerical targets" returned to the negotiating table and has been in use ever since. The means of dealing with this issue will be one of the focal points during the June negotiations. In the meantime, however, how to grasp the correct meaning of numerical targets remains unclear as the concept continues to change.

What does this history of an ever-changing word suggest? Barry P. Bosworth, a senior fellow at Brookings puts it simply: "Americans can use 'targets,' 'indicative indicators,' or 'quantitative measures,' but what they have in mind is the same." The American negotiators might have deployed different words as negotiation tactics, however,



Immediately following the breakdown in the February talks between Japan and the U.S., the USTR announced the possibility of the imposition of sanctions against Japan concerning mobile phones. Three months later it was finally announced that economic discussions would reopen. Can the Japan-U.S. perception gap be reduced?

Photo: Kyodo News Service

the fact that the Japanese could not keep up with the different translations made the situation complicated.

A further twist appeared in this numerical target business. In the middle of March, negotiations over cellular phones were concluded by the Japanese and American governments. The agreement states that the Japanese government "monitors and oversees" the program that the Japanese company IDO would carry out. However, the Japanese translation for the word "oversee" is *mitodokeru*. This word can roughly be translated back into English as "witness it" or "watch it through." According to an English-Japanese dictionary, "oversee" is, listed as *kantoku-suru* whose English equivalent is, of course, "oversee," and various other entries include "to supervise," "to control," "to take charge of."

So, the stance that the Japanese government is going to take over this matter is to "mitodokeru" i.e. "to witness." Obviously, there is a difference, if you like, even slightly. At the moment, this issue is settled by either taking advantage of compromise or leaving the true interpretation to one's guesswork.

Misunderstanding English

The history and cultural heritage, including the way of thinking, of a nation all contributes to forming particular values with which people are identified. So it is natural to work out the mentality behind the mother tongue of someone else. Japanese people find it hard to exactly understand the English expression "hundreds of," for instance, because people interpret this to mean strictly under one thousand.

Examples of how to express the same thing differently in Japanese and in English are numerous. However, a misunderstanding is sometimes made worse when the Japanese use phonetics for a foreign word. I suppose this practice happens not only between Japanese and American but also between French and English, and so on. I would like to illustrate this by giving a few examples.

We use the word "essay" in our own way. If Japanese hear the word *zuihitsu* (essay), we imagine it would be any sort

of prose writing, composed by an author who lets his/her thoughts take their course. Of course, an essay in English is more like a short thesis. When Japanese use the words "merit" and "demerit," it means "advantage" and "disadvantage" or "plus" and "minus" in many cases. If we are to avoid such confusion, we must remember that the phonetics we are using are all originally foreign languages.

Japanese is also difficult

English alone can not be blamed for presenting difficulties to the Japanese. Translating a Japanese phrase into English also creates problems; in particular, if we try to convey the feeling that the phrase contains. We have recently created a few expressions which are almost untranslatable into English, although the values attached to those expressions do exist in the English speaking world.

Let me quote a couple of notorious examples: we say "quality of life first" the meaning of which could be conveyed by the English phrase "consumer-oriented." But there is a different dimension here. If I attempt to translate the word "consumer" into Japanese, the word is written as "a person who spends money." However in our environment today, a person who spends money can be a person who produces something as well. And we have come to the stage where we need to have a new word for describing this "consumer." My friend suggests that if we are faithful to this meaning, the closest translation in English would be "a member of society." However many attempts have been made to translate that word, *seikatsu-sha*, as "citizen" or "daily life-oriented person."

Recently I had an opportunity to meet a visiting scholar from Britain. He mentioned that he found it difficult to understand what the Japanese expression "bubble economy" means. We thought that the bubbles had burst, and that this was a pictorial image of the state of the economy. Obviously people on the other side of the globe would not view this phenomenon from that perspective. I suppose that when they talk about bubbles or froth, they do not have an

image that disappears in a moment, but rather like bubbles in a Western bubble bath. Poor Japanese! We thought we were expressing something using vivid images to enhance mutual understanding. However it is clear that this did not work, at least in this particular instance.

Another problem is where the same concept does not exist. We often use such phrases as "confusion in the market" and "excessive competition." James Fallows, an editor and commentator, wrote in the January issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* that "the very concepts do not exist," and regarding confusion in the market, "there are no comparable terms in English. ... 'Excessive' competition is what Western economics texts call 'perfect' competition."

As I have shown, the language barrier is considerable. As a result, mutual understanding among us is not an easy matter. However, we have been greatly influenced by the long history of exchanges between America and Britain. One success story is the concept that the phrase "action program" carries. In the 10 years since it was used to great effect in negotiations between Japan and America over the trade imbalance, the phrase has been integrated into the Japanese way of life and it appears to be used correctly. I maintain that if we are sincere in using words, then our counterparts will understand what we are trying to convey. It is also encouraging to see that the number of people in foreign countries learning Japanese is on the increase.

The reverse of what happened to us is now happening in America today. Words such as *nemawashi* (sounding out one's partners prior to a formal decision), *gaiatsu* (foreign pressure), *kaizen* (to think it over for improvement), *dango* (bid-rigging), are used as they are meant to be, just as everyone knows judo. We are living in an era of exchange all over the world. I personally believe that I should avoid ambiguous expressions and make an effort to refine the words I use. ■

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