

# Transcending the Language Barrier

By Jun Eto

Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone in his recent visit to the United States managed to achieve something rather rare in the history of Japanese state visits abroad: social success. He did this with an equally rare rhetorical device—using a foreign language. Although the prime minister's English can hardly be called beautiful, the fact remains that he managed, by using his flawed English at several social engagements, to befriend a few important people and charm many others.

This visit as prime minister was by no means Mr. Nakasone's first trip to America. He had, in fact, been there several times before, and had participated in an overseas study program in that country as a youth. His constant efforts over the years to maintain and improve his English were rewarded when he found himself able to converse directly with the president of the United States.

The prime minister was even courageous enough to take on Washington's predacious press corps in their own language. There, too, in spite of a few comprehension and speech errors, his earnest efforts and charm won the day. I know from personal experience that Americans are generally quite patient and forgiving toward those who are struggling with English as a second language.

Formal diplomatic occasions of course required interpreters to minimize the risk of misunderstanding, but this in no way detracted from the positive effects of the prime minister's good-natured efforts to speak English on other, non-official occasions.

Lest it be thought that Prime Minister Nakasone is the only Japanese prime minister to have studied English, it should be noted that the vast majority of Japan's population has studied English in school from junior high school up.

With most Japanese having studied English for at least nine or ten years, one might expect that Japan would not lack for proficient English speakers. Yet it does. Among the reasons for this paucity are the reticence and introspection characteristic of Japanese. These two qualities are amplified in the case of foreign language conversation by a third Japanese trait: perfectionism. While perfectionism is normally a laudable quality, in modern Japan it includes a pathological dread of error and thus has a chilling effect on anyone who even contemplates speaking in a foreign tongue.

I was recently reminded of this problem when I took part in supervising this year's national standardized university entrance examinations, where I had the opportunity to study the nervous faces of many examinees. These notoriously difficult examinations require almost super-human preparatory studies, and I could read in the taut faces of the examinees a desperate fear of failure. This abnormal emphasis on perfection has been drilled into their minds since early childhood, and I wondered how such minds could ever aspire to the spontaneous art of cross-cultural dialogue.

Prime Minister Nakasone's social success in America, despite his less-than-perfect English, is praiseworthy as a fine example for his countrymen to follow. Let us also applaud his secret efforts to learn some Korean prior to his recent trip to South Korea, where he delivered part of his official greeting in that language. Prime Minister Nakasone's linguistic efforts, in addition to his relaxed affability at the dinner which followed the official summit, have undoubtedly helped to improve Japan-South Korea ties. In this case too, Mr. Nakasone was more concerned with making friends than with making mistakes.

On the other side of the coin we have the fact that in Japan there are very few foreign politicians or businessmen who can function in Japanese. Britain's Ambassador Sir Hugh Cortazzi is an all-too-rare example as he delivers speeches and converses cheerfully in Japanese. The unfortunate fact is that very few foreigners in Japan make a serious effort to learn the language.

Japanese businessmen living abroad are often criticized for their tendency to socialize only among themselves and to regard the local folk as the foreigners. But is the situation that much different here in Japan, where most foreign diplomats and businessmen mix with Japanese only when necessary, and even then only with those Japanese who can speak their language? Seldom is an effort made to break into Japanese society through serious study of the language and customs. In short, the Japanese have no monopoly on xenophobia. The problem exists the world over, and more often than not it is xenophobia fed by an inability to understand the language.

While I am on this subject, I should like to take this opportunity to dispel

JOURNAL readers' fears about the "inscrutable" Japanese language. Although the Japanese writing system is indeed cumbersome, the spoken tongue—which is after all the heart and soul of the language—is actually relatively simple when compared, for example, to spoken English. I have discovered through my teaching experiences that foreign students can and do learn to speak Japanese fairly fluently within a surprisingly short period of time, provided that they have a modest talent for languages and an ability to relax. It was also evident, however, that only a minority becomes proficient in reading and writing Japanese. This was not surprising considering the complexity of the writing system as well as its secondary importance in actual face-to-face communication. Spoken Japanese, on the other hand, includes an easily pronounceable vowel system similar to that of Italian, and a syntax which poses no great problem either. Consequently, it is not unreasonable to hope that more foreigners will learn Japanese.

Entertainers are among the world's most ardent language students. Their success depends upon their popularity, and they have found that singing and speaking to an audience in its own language is most winning. Perhaps the first foreign entertainer to try this in Japan was the French songstress, Yvette Giraud, who sang *chansons* in Japanese, albeit with a rather heavy French accent. This was shortly after the war, and her friendly efforts to use Japanese endeared her to the Japanese people. In fact, so enchanted were audiences with her accent that there soon arose quite a number of Japanese *chanson* singers who carefully imitated it in their own Japanese lyrics even though it was technically wrong. Nowadays, many foreign singers not only learn to sing in Japanese but even learn enough Japanese to engage in light banter with the audience.

Although the current trade friction between Japan and the West admits no easy solution, I would venture that if more Japanese were to follow their prime minister's example by casting aside their perfectionist reticence in foreign language conversation, and if more foreign politicians and businessmen were to follow the entertainer's lead in learning to make conversation in Japanese, the salutary effect this would have upon human relationships would go far toward resolving some of the misunderstandings that exacerbate international tensions. Many so-called "trade barriers" have emotional and linguistic foundations, and removing such barriers between nations mandates that we first open the channels of communications between people's hearts.

(This is the second of six-parts.)