A Common Language For Uncommon Understanding

By Jun Eto

The International Education Center holds a speech contest for non-Japanese nationals every year with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation, *the Asahi Shimbun*, and *the Japan Times*. This year's contest, the 24th International Speech Contest in Japanese, was held on the afternoon of June 25 at Tokyo's Toranomon Hall.

Of course, the contest is only open to people who have neither Japanese citizenship nor Japanese parentage, but the other requirements are that the person must be at least 18 years old and may not have lived in Japan for longer than three years.

It may be that the maximum residence period of three years is a very short time to gain proficiency in the language, but all 15 of the contestants were very eloquent in their presentations, some with biting irony, others with humorous touches, and still others with persuasive logic. As a result, it was a most enjoyable afternoon.

The winner was a 27-year-old Britisher named Martin Cowie who teaches in the education faculty of Kagoshima University. His topic was "Japan: the Land of Speakers," and it was a witty appraisal of the prolific use of loudspeakers in every nook and cranny of the country. As he pointed out, there are P.A. systems at all of the train stations announcing every arrival and departure. There are people with bullhorns at the driver license processing center ordering applicants around with an almost military-like precision. Come election time and there are loudspeakers mounted on campaign trucks. Perhaps, as Cowie suggests, there is something about a bullhorn that makes it addictive for the Japanese. Seeking to escape this constant blare, he fled to a mountain temple, only to notice that there were loudspeakers mounted in the trees. Now, however, he has become used to it, and he says, tongue in cheek, that he plans to take a Japanese bullhorn with him when he goes back to England.

His Japanese was very good, and I think one of the prerequisites for gaining a proficiency in the language is that you have to have a good ear. Cowie must have a very good ear indeed, for his imitation of the ubiquitous rag man was superb. These International Speech Contests have sometimes been called the "foreign comedians' convention," and it is easy to see why.

Another excellent mimic was the 27-year-old French contestant Pierre-Gilles Delorme who gave a speech entitled "I'm Still Alive" complete with an appearance by the yam man. Although Delorme did not win one of the prizes, I had the feeling that he and some of the other non-winners had better presentations than some of the winners did in terms of content. While his delivery may have left something to be desired, his message made a profound impression on me. Delorme is currently teaching French at the Gyosei Elementary School, a parochial school in Tokyo, but he spent his first six months in Japan in Fukuyama in Hiroshima Prefecture. Come about 10:00 every night, the evening silence was split with the plaintive cry of the yam man: "Baked yams. Fresh stoooone-baaaked yams." Apparently, this struck Delorme as very much like the night watchmen of medieval France who closed the city gates and called on the citizens to say their evening prayers and go to bed each night. It was only later that he found that the yam man's melody was not a call to prayer but rather a call to consumption. Reality was not what he had imagined. In summation, Delorme stated that the ordinary encounters of everyday life—including the yam man and his nightly incantation—could be elevated to an emotional, even religious experience.

Another non-winner whom I especially liked was Mary Ellen Miller, a 31-year-old American student. Her "The *Shakuhachi* Culture" was one of the most evocative speeches of the day. Having studied clarinet since the age of eight, Miller came to Japan expecting the *shakuhachi* to be very much like the clarinet. However, she soon discovered that blowing hard into the *shakuhachi* does not produce a sound the way it does with a clarinet. Day after day, she despaired in wonder at "why this *shakuhachi* doesn't like me." After a while, however, she realized that the secret is not to try to overpower the *shakuhachi* and force a sound out of it but to caress the *shakuhachi* with her breath and coax the music out of it. This, she says, is the epitome of Japanese society.

In learning to play the clarinet, Miller spent a lot of time on technique. Yet when she started the *shakuhachi*, her teacher told her that technique is a secondary concern and that it is more important to listen to nature and to ponder how she could reproduce these sounds of nature on the *shakuhachi*. If she does that, technique will come naturally.

Had this been the end of her speech, it would have still demonstrated a good understanding of this for-her alien Japanese culture. Yet she went beyond this to note that a very similar way of playing a woodwind instrument had existed in Renaissance Italy. Given this historical parallel, she concluded that the gap between culture is not oceanwide but is rather the space of a breath.

These speech contests are very valuable, and they deserve more attention by the government, mass media and business community. At the same time, there is no reason to restrict such contests to Tokyo. They could just as well be held in other areas as well—and even overseas. Language is a valuable tool for learning to understand a culture, yet one which we Japanese have been somewhat remiss in promoting. Yet we need to have more people able to identify with Japan, able to criticize Japan's shortcomings, and able to communicate their perceptions of Japan in Japanese. This is a very important area for further efforts worldwide by the government and press, and one which deserves far more attention than it is getting today. ●

(This is the fifth of six parts.)

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