

Fuzzy Country

By Yukichi Amano

Fuzzy is the current buzzword. Just a year ago, most people would not have had the slightest idea what it meant, but now everybody is using it and it has become a household word—so common that young women have been known to upbraid their wishy-washy boyfriends with the scathing comment, “You’re an awfully fuzzy person, aren’t you!”

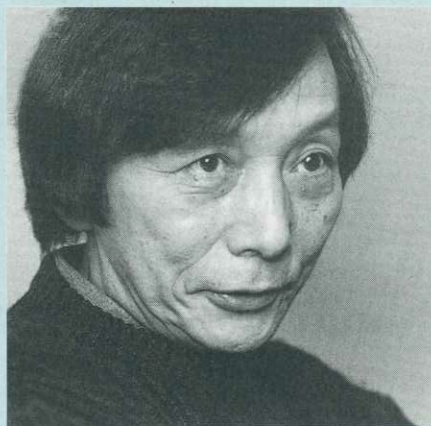
It was home appliances that popularized this term, as we now have washing machines, vacuum cleaners and other appliances that apply fuzzy logic to their functions.

Fuzzy logic, of course, was invented by Dr. Lotfi A. Zadeh at the University of California (Berkeley) in 1965, but it is accessible to people with less rigorous academic backgrounds as well. Even people who understand nothing at all about the theory recognize the advantages of having a vacuum cleaner that distinguishes between carpets and *tatami* and adjusts the vacuum pressure accordingly, or a washing machine that senses whether the clothes are oil-soiled and need heavy laundering or just a little dirty needing only a light once-over. These products have been very popular, and the word “fuzzy” has ridden their coattails to fame.

Popular ambiguity

If you look the word “fuzzy” up in the dictionary, of course, you will get definitions such as “covered with fuzz” and, by extension, “blurred, indistinct.” Thus it is that fuzzy is used to describe things that do not fit any neat categories. For example, it might be possible to use it to speak of the borderline between hot and cold, or between hard and soft, where there is no clear dividing line.

Given the Japanese preference for ambiguity, it is easy to see how this would be so popular here. In fact, a number of people have asserted that Japan is itself the very epitome of a “fuzzy” country. There is no clear distinction between the private and the public selves, and many of



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the promises business makes are also somewhat fuzzy. There is no clear distinction between classical music and popular music, and Japanese religious feelings are also fuzzy at best. Everything is fuzzy.

Like the chicken and the egg, this fuzzy culture is accompanied by a fuzzy language. The popular “*ussoh*” and the very common “*ganbatte ne*” or “*sumimasen*” would be virtually meaningless if literally translated into English. And translating “*wakatta*” as “I understand” has caused myriad problems. This “*wakatta*” usually means simply “I see what you mean,” and it does not necessarily imply any agreement at all.

Among the fuzzy terms used by lesser Japanese politicians are “*maemuki ni zensho suru*,” which is literally “taking care of it in a forward-looking manner,” but which actually means doing nothing in most cases. Recently we have had “*bappon-teki na minaoshi wo hakaru*,” which literally means undertaking a radical overhaul and actually means hoping the people can be satisfied with cosmetic tinkering. People who stake their political lives on promoting a particular policy do not even think of resigning their Cabinet posts when the policy is shown to be a vastly unworkable failure.

Of course, fuzzy is not all bad. The fuzziness of the Japanese language is of-

ten a key factor in the richness and beauty of the culture. At the same time, the reluctance to make dogmatic distinctions between black and white, right and wrong, is one of the things that distinguishes Japanese culture.

Japanese television advertising, for example, features world-class painters, novelists, actors and academics. Not all of these people are Japanese. Frank Sinatra and Woody Allen have both appeared. So has Placido Domingo from Europe. Just recently, so have Arnold Schwarzenegger and Stephen Hawking. (In fact, the department store commercial with Woody Allen and the NTT commercial with Hawking were among the best ever made.)

Friends in the United States tell me that it is almost unheard of for people of that caliber to appear in commercials. Top artists do sometimes do endorsements, but it is very much the exception and there is a feeling that it may cheapen them or tarnish their star-like glitter. There is a very clear line—almost a Berlin Wall dividing line—between fine art and crass commercialism, and commercials are for the second-rate or tawdrier sort of people.

Consumer whimsy

Such is not, and probably never has been, the case in Japan. People are not so much interested in whether or not the appearance is a commercial as they are in whether or not it is interesting. That is why first-rate copywriters or other advertising people earn so much more in Japan than second-rate artists do and are so much more respected by society. There is no border between the world of art and the world of advertising.

At the same time, Japanese advertising tends to be fuzzier in its expression than American advertising is.

In one of the advertisements featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger, for example, he is shown carrying an old woman piggy-



back along a country road and saying a Japanese abracadabra to himself, "Chichin V V." That's all there is to it. The product it is advertising is a health drink called Arinamin-V, but Americans who have seen the ad apparently have great trouble understanding why this is an ad for a health drink. But most of the Japanese who have seen it like it much more than an ad that goes into a hard-sell medical pitch about the health drink. All of the competing products are going to make basically the same claims, and so rather than worrying about this or that claim,

Japanese consumers are inclined to buy from the company that entertained them best.

This seems to be a difference in basic consumer philosophies. To me, American commercials are designed on the assumption that consumers are rational beings. But Japanese commercials assume that consumers are people with feelings, likes and dislikes—even whimsical beings—whose product selection is not done on the basis of function or quality but on the basis of fuzzier criteria.

Born in the United States, fuzzy logic

has come into its own in Japan—not because of the Japanese fascination with all things new (although that may be part of it) but because Japan is such an inherently fuzzy place to start with. ■

(This is the first of five essays by Yukichi Amano.)

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