

Alien Language

By Takao Okamura

As mentioned in the previous installment, I had gotten my part-time job as an interpreter with the 71st Signal Service Battalion not because of any great fluency on my part but more because the *nisei* examiner had a nephew who was applying for admission to Waseda University and thought it would not hurt to have a Waseda student on the payroll. It was pure luck, for I surely would not have passed any more rigorous test. And it looked like a godsend for me—a chance to practice my English and earn a little money at the same time.

This was a time of American omnipotence, when GIs in their polished army boots and fresh-pressed uniforms pranced the streets of Tokyo happily chewing their gum and blithely ignoring the traffic rules that all of the Japanese obeyed. Their service caps tilted jauntily on their heads, many of them had also found brightly painted Japanese girlfriends who hung on their every word. These were people who assumed that they were the rulers of the earth and who had little use for the bulk of the dirty, malnourished Japanese population as we scrambled for their leftovers.

Glorious victors

Until then, Japan's ruling class had preached an ethic of disdain for outward appearances and working to improve the inner self. It was the very antithesis of ostentation. Today there are beauty salons, fitness clubs and untold numbers of other businesses for young men to make them look nicer. Outward beauty is the ideal, and people have forgotten about the inner self. But back when I was in college, we aspired to inner greatness and feigned indifference to surface beauty. Soap was in short supply, and even young women—who were supposed to be clean and pretty—had to go without. Everyone accepted that a certain shabbiness was inevitable.

Yet here were these GIs, all spick-and-span, strutting around and showing off

how rich they were. There was considerable envy, but more than that there was a feeling among Japanese men that these GIs came from a different planet. To think that such people actually existed. It was mind-boggling. Exotic. And rich. No wonder the girls were attracted to them. And the question remained what strange thought patterns had produced such people. Of course, they were not about to speak Japanese. They could not even be bothered to try. So the only way to find out was to learn the alien language and to talk with them in English.

At the time, Japan had just lost a very long and costly war. It was an impoverished, third-rate country. Why should these glorious victors in their shining armor speak Japanese? Yet this disdain for Japanese seems to persist even today when Japan is a major world economic power. In fact, a considerable number of Japanese seem to have acquired the same assumption that nobody else can be expected to speak Japanese, and the first impulse of Japanese traveling overseas or even encountering non-Japanese people here at home is to try to communicate in faltering, broken English or some other foreign language.

We do not expect other people to speak Japanese, and society assigns very considerable prestige to someone who speaks a foreign language well. Sadly, there are foreigners living in expensive Azabu apartments who do not feel that it is worth their while to learn Japanese. Why should they, they ask, when Japanese is such an inconsequential language and they can get by in English.

I would expect anyone living in a foreign country to try to learn the local language, but this is often not the case with foreigners in Japan. This will probably change as Japan becomes not just an economic power but also a political, cultural and educational power, but for now the English-speaking world still seems to assume that the whole world is English-speaking. The Occupation mentality lives

on, both in the arrogant foreigners and in the Japanese who pander to them.

There were numerous scenes of incongruity during the actual Occupation. In one that I remember particularly well, a GI was asking directions but nobody understood him or, even if they did, wanted to venture an answer. Then, out of the crowd stepped a nattily dressed Japanese who proceeded to give directions clearly, slowly, and with great grammatical precision. The GI listened intently, but it was clear that he was not understanding the old gent.

As he looked around in bewilderment, a hooker stepped out, her lips and fingernails painted bright red, and took over in broken English. "Old man English no good. I teach. Go straight. OK? Three block walk, OK? Left? Understand? Two block. You there." To which the soldier said, "Thank you," and left. Later I found out that the old gentleman was an English professor, but it was plain for all to see that the hooker had better English communication skills.

Book learning

This same thing was true across the spectrum. Most Japanese had learned about the outside world through books, not through practical experience or personal encounters. There is an old student drinking song about spending half the year with "*Dekanscho*" and the other half just doing nothing—*Dekanscho* being student slang for the trio of great European philosophers (Descartes, Kant and Schopenhauer) who were studied by all students. People listened to Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi and other classical music not at the concert hall but on records. They saw Michelangelo, Millet, Rodin, Picasso and the other great artists not in the originals in museums but in pale reproductions in their art history textbooks.

And they learned their English from Japanese teachers whose own English was not always the best. Little wonder

that the hooker was better than the professor. She was one of the few Japanese at the time to have come into everyday contact with the language. These were the people on the front lines of internationalization, and they were also the front-line defense for other Japanese girls' chastity.

At any rate, there I was, my first evening on the job. I was at my post in the basement when the slightly built soldier with his feet up on the desk suddenly barked at me. "Hey, boy. Go get the paper." In school, I had learned that two verbs such as "go" and "get" could never be used in combination like that. I understood the words—go, get and paper—but hadn't the slightest idea what he meant.

"Paper, sir?"

"The f***ing newspaper. What d'ya think?"

And here was some more that I had not learned in school. We had studied literature, not gutter slang. But my first day here, this young soldier was yelling at an even-younger me to go get the f***ing newspaper. Still, I suppose it would have been unreasonable to expect much more. I was only a part-time interpreter, and he was with the victorious army of Occupation.

"Move it, you son of a bitch."

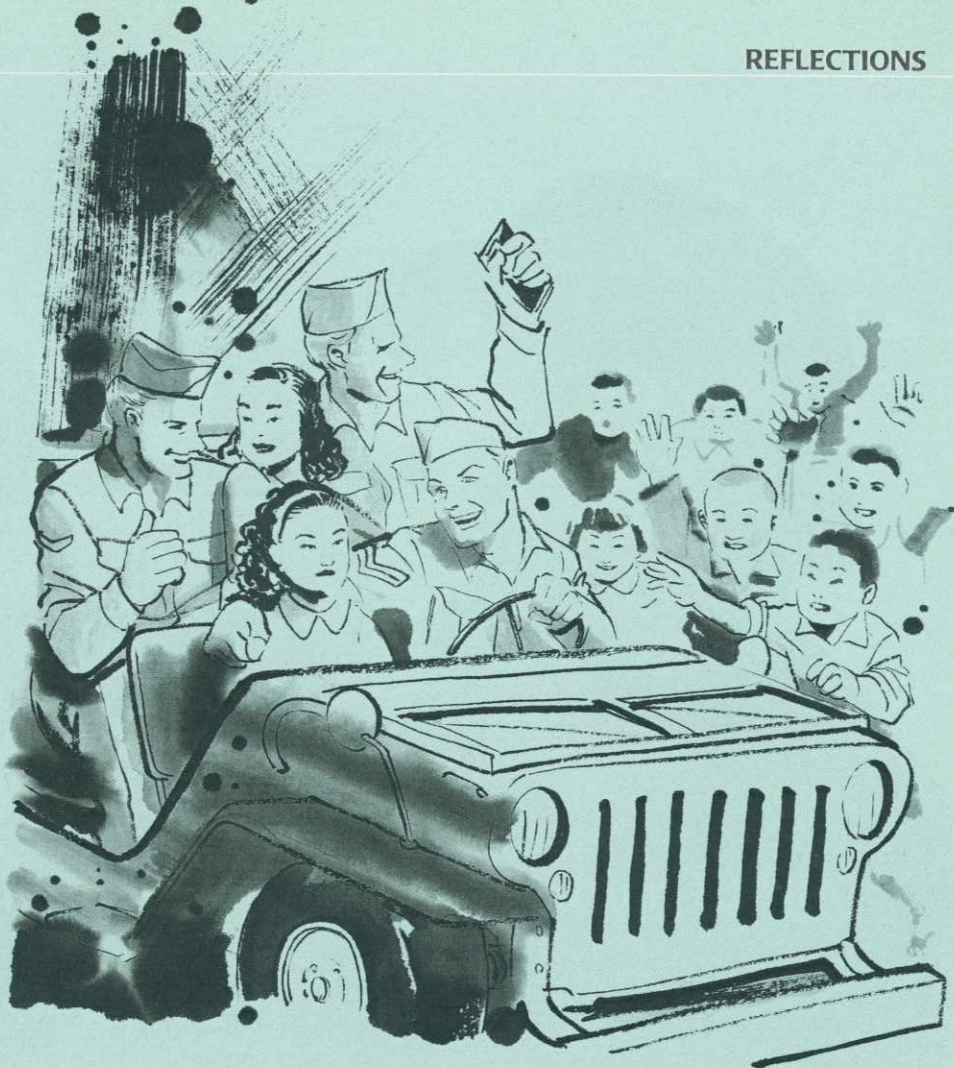
"Son of a bitch, sir?"

I was obviously out of my depth, and I began to wish that nisei had not had a nephew applying to Waseda. Not having the slightest idea what he was saying, I added "sir" to the end of everything I said, just to be on the safe side. But to no avail. Now he was mad.

"Lazy f***ing son of a bitch. Get your ass upstairs and get me the f***ing newspaper. And step on it!"

Not understanding his words, I still understood his tone, and I replied in kind under my breath too quietly for anybody to hear.

Later I asked my mother—who was a professional translator—what all these strange words meant. Blushing, she got out her English-Japanese dictionary and told me to look them up for myself. Bitch was only in the dictionary as a female dog, and it was only when she explained that it was slang for a slut or whore that I realized how crude this slang was.



Years later when I was living in Europe and heard people routinely bandy about such crudities as "Kiss mine," "Mother-f***er," and other terms that totally derogate the other person's worth as a human being, I realized that Japanese has its curses but none to compare. An agrarian society, Japan does not have the violence that characterizes hunting societies. *Kuso-yaro* and *baka-yaro* are about as vicious as the average Japanese gets. Having lived for generations in the same towns and villages among the same neighbors, the Japanese have necessarily come to value harmony and good interpersonal relations. And as a result, there are limits to how much you abuse someone in Japanese.

By contrast, Western societies have their origins in nomadic bands of hunters where it was always possible to move on and where most relations are transient at best. Constantly on the move, the hunter develops a self-reliance and independence that the farmer does not have. In a confrontation, the hunter goes for the kill.

Even a well-bred European lady who

looks like a Greek goddess will speak to the hired help in language that no Japanese man would think of using. All around the world, there is a discrepancy between what people would like to have you think they are and what they really are—but nowhere is this greater than with people who aspire to be thought of as cultured.

If he wanted me to go upstairs and get him the newspaper, why didn't he just say so. Why this need to lash out in such abusive language? I felt as though I had been pummeled with a truncheon. The money was good, and it was a chance to learn real English; but this real English was certainly different from anything they had taught me in school. This job was not going to be as easy as I had thought. ■

(This is the second of five essays by Takao Okamura.)

Takao Okamura, one of Japan's most popular opera singers, studied in Europe, won international concours, and then had 20-year stage career there up to 1979.