

TOKYO LETTER

You Don't Need Japanese to Do Business in Japan

I'm not a bad linguist. I speak fair Spanish and passable French, and I can even read Latin—as long as the subject is no more difficult than Caesar's *Commentaries* on the Gallic wars. But I can't read or speak Japanese. Not really. Even though I've been in Japan far longer than I ever was in Spain or France or, for that matter, Rome.

I've been in Japan for 11 years now and my continuing inability to gain fluency in the language is a source of constant irritation to me, and also a source of shame. Whenever I visit my home in America, my old friends assume I'm a master of the language. "Good heavens," they say, "More than 10 years in the country. You must be thinking like a Japanese by now, and speaking like a *samurai*. It's a wonder you haven't forgotten your English." And I avert my eyes in a shady way and mutter something about my Japanese not really being quite as good as it could be, and then I slink off home like some guilty cur and I say to my wife, as I have been saying on and off for years, "Damn it, I'm going to get a handle on that language! I'm going to start studying again. I've just got to get good at Japanese. How can I keep showing this fraudulent face to my friends?" And she smiles and she says, "Don't worry about it. Your Japanese is good enough just the way it is." She says it in English. Just like she says everything to me in English—in smooth and rounded, unbroken English. Even though she is Japanese.

My wife. There you have it. She's the one. She's the cause of all my problems with the Japanese language. She and several hundred thousand other Japanese people just like her. She started studying English when she was 12 years old. She had to start studying it, because it was a

required subject, and remained a required subject right through to her graduation from high school. Admittedly, the instruction she received was very poor; she was taught English in the same way I was taught Latin, trained to parse verbs, diagram sentences, memorize nouns and never given any idea how it was all supposed to come together. In the hands of her literal-minded, rule-bound teachers, English became a dead language. Dead or alive, however, it was a language to which she was strongly exposed over the course of her most formative years. With the result that at the age of 18—an age at which I myself did not even consciously recognize that a language called Japanese existed—she could carry on a rudimentary conversation in English.

She studied more English in college, and then she went to America—to a land where no one, outside certain business ghettos, speaks Japanese. To a land where if you want to survive, you have to speak English. She wanted to survive. And so she spoke English. And more English. And the more she spoke the better she spoke. And at the end of three years, there she was: fluent in English.

I thought the same thing was going to happen to me when I came to Japan. I came to Japan in my middle twenties to take advantage of an exciting opportunity in the international advertising business. Unlike my wife, I had not had the benefit of exposure to the language of this foreign country in my formative years—indeed I stepped off the plane in Tokyo innocent of any exposure to the language at all—but I figured that I would pick it up fast enough, because I would be totally immersed in the culture and would have to start swimming or sink. I would, I thought, have to learn Japanese simply to survive.

How wrong I was! I quickly discovered that the Japanese language, far from being a burning necessity for the conduct of my business, was, in fact, an all but unaffordably luxury. International advertising was my line. My job was to orchestrate and write English language advertising

campaigns for Japanese companies that wanted to sell their products in the West. I spent my days dealing with account executives and overseas department types all of whom had been selected to a large extent on their ability in the English language. Our strategy sessions were in English, our conferences with engineers were in English, our after-hours drinking was in English, even our tours of back country factories were in English. English, English everywhere! Where on earth was Japanese?

It was out there on the streets, of course, and in homes and shops and stations and cafés, and in the past 11 years I've gone to all those kinds of places as often as I can. I've gone out of my way to talk in Japanese to greengrocers, train conductors, waitresses, and even the odd housewife or two. But I've never had the chance to speak Japanese to the people with whom I spend the overwhelming majority of my time; I've never had the chance to speak to my business associates in anything other than English. Because they won't let me. Their English ability is their pride and they want to keep the edge on their form by practicing on me. They smile when I start stumbling about in Japanese and say, "Come, come," and push me back into English. My wife pushes me back into English too. And as a result, my Japanese has never gotten off the ground. It's not that I haven't tried. I've gone through dozens of Japanese grammar books in my time, and memorized thousands of words, and 2,000 *kanji* too. And I've forgotten almost all of everything. Because I don't use it. I don't use it because I don't need it. You don't need Japanese to do business in Japan. Almost all of my foreign business friends agree on that. But even if you don't need it, it'd be a nice thing to have. A real nice thing. And someday I want to have it. Someday I want to have a real fluency in Japanese. Someday I want to speak the language like a native. I really do. If only to impress all my friends back home.

(C. Keb Bellows)

TASTE OF TOKYO

Italian Restaurant "Ristorante Hanada"

Fidanza Luigi, chef of "Ristorante Hanada," has been living in Japan for 40 years. For 20 of them he was the chef at

the German restaurant "Rosenkeller" in Tokyo's Ginza, preparing *eisbein* and other German delicacies. Born in Ortona in central Italy facing the Adriatic Sea, Luigi graduated from the Ortona Cooking School, which has produced many world renowned chefs.

Minako Hanada, the owner of the "Rosenkeller," felt Luigi would be better

able to demonstrate his culinary skills in Italian rather than German cuisine. Moreover, the location of the shop near the Tsukiji market was a plus for preparing Italian dishes, which use more seasonal ingredients than do German dishes. Two years ago, Hanada closed down the 20-year-old "Rosenkeller" and reopened in the same location as "Ristorante