The English Character

Peter Milward
(Sophia University)

This title, "The English Character," is a little ambiguous. It has two meanings. You can say "the English character" where English means the people. But you can also say "the English character" meaning the language. I really wish to speak about both subjects—both the English language and the English people. I want to show how the character of the people is reflected in the character of their language.

The real difficulty in Japanese is not in the Japanese language but in the Japanese way of thinking, mainly the thought behind the words. I have found as an Englishman that the way of thinking of Japanese was very different from the way I was accustomed to as an Englishman. Probably Japanese people, when they read certain articles or books in English, have the same experience. To them I might ask: "Why do you find English so difficult?" It is the way of thinking. The way of thinking which is so different from the Japanese and which is somehow derived from the national character. So it seems to me that in the study of English we have consider not only linguistics but also what is called "psycho-linguistics"—the thought behind the language, not only the language or linguistics but the psychology behind the language.

"Kore wa hon desu" is not the same as "This is a book." It is very different. First of all, there is a difference in word order. This is a slight difference but it is a very important difference because it is a structural difference. Difference in structure is very fundamental. The Japanese tend to put the verb at the end of a sentence. The English people put the verb directly after the subject. This means that the Japanese suspend their judgement until the end. "Kore wa hon desu" is short. But sometimes one hears long sentences and at the very end we expect a positive, and what we hear is a negative. So you have to keep your judgement in
a state of suspense. This is connected with the patience of the Japanese. The Japanese are very patient, cautious and non-committal. For this reason they are puzzling to Westerners. The English people are simple and blunt. They say exactly what they think even before they have said everything. They say "This is a book." They don't wait before telling about the book. He puts all his cards on the table. He does not like beating about the bush. But he is also a little impatient. I think this is one of the reasons why the Japanese are slow in speaking English. Fundamentally they find it difficult to adjust their mentality. Their whole mentality is geared to putting the verb at the end of a sentence, and they suddenly have to speak a language which puts the verb at the beginning or soon after the beginning of a sentence.

In English "a" in the sentence, "This is a book," is very important. There is no distinction between singular and plural, no distinction between definite and indefinite in Japanese. In English we like to make these two distinctions. Mr. Shusaku Endo has said the Japanese like to be vague. They don't like to be definite. And I find a particular example of this "aimaisa" in the non-use of the article. In English we want to examine the nouns very carefully. Whenever a noun comes up in a sentence, we instinctively want to ask two questions: "Can this noun be counted?" and if it can be counted, "Is it definite, or is it indefinite?" I think this makes English a rather logical language. It is full of rules. But sometimes, the rules mix with each other or they clash with each other, and then one rule is more important than another. But it seems that the Japanese are weak in logic. Here is another reason why the Japanese are rather slow in speaking English. They have a certain difficulty in adjusting their lines not only to putting the verb immediately after the subject but also to clarifying their idea of nouns. The English people want to know how clear the noun is, how definite or indefinite the noun is.

It seems to me that Japanese say "kore wa" to distinguish it from something else, "kore ga." This is the way they put emphasis into a sentence. The Japanese need to indicate their stress or emphasis by adding a certain word, "wa" or "ga," because Japanese is not a stress language. The English language has no need of an extra word because English is a stress
language. In fact, almost any sentence in English changes its meaning according to the stress you put on different words. This is not just a difference of grammar. It is also a difference of national character. The Japanese are rather placid, quiet, peaceful. Your language is peaceful and smooth like a river. In English the people are very active, positive and insistent on their meaning. We gesture with our words because we put stress into our words.

There is a further difference in "This is a book," that is, in the pronunciation of the words. In Japanese every consonant is followed by a vowel. English has many more consonants than vowels. Most syllables in English are closed on both sides by a consonant. You have a consonant on both sides of the vowel in "this" and in "book." This characteristic of English pronunciation makes for greater heaviness. Japanese is rather a light language, while English is rather a heavy language. This, I think, is another reason why the Japanese find English so difficult. It expresses a certain difference in character. The Japanese are light, subtle, flexible and musical. The English are heavy, serious, strong and prosaic.

I would like to dwell on three more aspects of the English character as illustrated in the language. First, in English we like to use the personal pronoun or the possessive adjective much more readily than the Japanese. The personal pronouns in Japanese are rather heavy. In English we use the personal pronoun frequently, but we usually do not stress it, except when the words that are contrasted have to be stressed. Secondly, Japanese people seem to have a strange prejudice against pronouns in general. They prefer repeating the noun rather than using the pronoun in its place. On the other hand, English people have a horror of repetition. We do not like repeating the same word more than is necessary. In fact, a fundamental axiom in English philosophy is: "Things are not to be multiplied without necessity." Nouns are not to be repeated without necessity. These points add up to a certain quality of modesty, reticence, or even humour, which is characteristic of the English. We do not always say exactly what we means. We have something in our minds, but when we speak, we put it rather softly. We do not insist on it. We just suggest it. We express our meaning in understatement. Our meaning may be strong, but we don't
like to express it strongly. We express it weakly. This often gives rise to a certain ambiguity.

I may have been overemphasizing the difference between the English and the Japanese in order to bring out the peculiar qualities of English. But I think that similarity is more fundamental than difference. The important thing is to realize that the English are human beings and that the English language is one expression of rational thought. When you recognize the connection between the language and the national character, when you see how certain fundamental features of language reveal points of national character, this will make your study of English more interesting, more fascinating. Because then the study of English is not just a study of "eigo," but also a study of "bunka" or "hikaku bunka." Even the study of English grammar can be a study of "hikaku bunka." And in these studies you will find something not only about the English character but also about your own Japanese character. In studying English, you are studying yourself too. Then you will see what is common to the English people and the Japanese people. You will also see something human in both. And then instead of saying, "Kore wa hon desu," you can say "Kore wa ningen desu," which I translate into English, not only as "This is a man," but also as, "This is man," "This is human nature."

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