

Gained in Translation

Speech takes a holiday

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When I went to Japan last spring my biggest worry was neither jet lag nor culture shock nor fear of getting lost. After all, at a certain age one doesn't sleep well to begin with, so a twelve-hour flight wreaks little somatic havoc. Unlike China and India, Japan is modern, compact, and very civilized, the most American of Asian cultures. Sushi and tempura, not to mention tofu, soba and udon, and green tea, have become staples of our Western diet, so nothing terrible, or even surprising, was going to slide down my throat. It's a small country and I was going to be in only two cities. I knew that I wasn't going to be stranded.

It was the language that kept me up at nights.

I have always been a proud polyglot. Perfectly useless Latin and Greek, schoolboy German, opera-and-menu and Dante-inflected Italian, and more than passable French have seen me through. Spanish, the language that would be most practical—both at home and internationally—somehow passed me by. (In junior high school, when we started signing up for language study, the unwritten rule was that the best students learned Latin, the least talented Spanish. I was a snob.) Still, with a kind of Romance Esperanto at my disposal, and with a combination of facility, enthusiasm, and the unselfconscious ability to blurt things out without thinking about correctness, I have stumbled through Spain and Portugal as well as France and Italy, once even managing to tell two Portuguese teenagers W.C. Fields's famous explanation of why he never drank water: "In aqua pesce fuqua-fuqua." I doubt that these were the right words, but the boys understood; the joke was international.

And in Bayreuth one October afternoon, an hour after arriving, following a grueling transatlantic flight and a long train ride, I walked around the small town and, when approached by two middle-aged German women asking for directions to the Old Castle, answered correctly in their native tongue. And then went out for a beer.

But I had never gone to a country where I would be unable to speak, read, or understand a single word. In a literary academic, this prospect instilled both fear and challenge. My idea of adventure has never included trekking through the Sahara, scaling high mountains, freezing in the Arctic, or shooting into outer space. My body takes care of itself in temperate climes well enough, and I can get my exercise in modest ways. Excitement has always meant getting along in a new culture with enough language for everyday transactions and understanding. So Japan was something new. I looked at phrase books—not a cognate to be found anywhere. Nothing mnemonic to guide me into the meanings of the words. No clue as to which part of a sentence was the verb and which the subject.

I have—or rather had, age having begun to take its mental as well as physical toll—a gift for languages. I used to be able to review irregular verbs—moods, tenses, and all—on a long plane ride from one side of the pond to the other. Not this time. I have always shuddered when hearing my countrymen abroad begin, without a “by your leave,” to speak English to everyone, on the presumption that they will be understood. (It turns out, of course, that the presumption is pretty accurate.) I always tell my students that wherever they travel they should learn to say “Good morning,” “Good evening,” “I do not speak _____,” “Do you speak English?” and “Where is the bathroom?” These five will get you through almost any situation, and the last one I have always found particularly useful. “Please,” “Thank you,” and “Excuse me” add the necessary note of deferential politesse.

With the help of Japanese-speaking American friends, I finally mastered them all. “Sumimasen, nihongo dekimasen; eigo ga hanasemaska?” became my password, my talisman, my Open Sesame every step of the way: “Excuse me, I do not speak Japanese; do you speak English?” I felt simultaneously humbled and empowered. On the one hand, most of the people I encountered were academics, or worked in the service industry (at hotels, restaurants, shops, museums, shrines), and either had some English or could direct me

to a nearby colleague or coworker who did; on the other, and more important, hand, the very fact of making oneself helpless, child-like, and passive, and having to depend on the assistance of others, meant that one became, even more than in a “foreign” country like England where the bond of a common language eases cultural exchanges, entirely on the *qui vive*, alert to everything and everyone in the surround.

My linguistic deficiencies in Japanese came with attendant disappointments as well as pleasing surprises. My primary, or at least nominal, reason for going to Japan in the first place was to deliver academic lectures, before three university audiences, on the subject of American poetry. Two of these were in the form of seminars for graduate students. Once I realized that their comprehension was not entirely complete, I simply slowed the pace, improvised, gesticulated, and tried to amuse them. Since the Japanese seem to equate professionalism with tedium, and expect their teachers to maintain a pomposity appropriate to their venerability, I am not sure how far I got with light, bright Anglo-American sparkle. At the third university, my host had asked me to talk, before an audience of one hundred forty female third-year English students, about the origins of modern American poetry in Dickinson, Poe, and Whitman. No problem. It became clear after two minutes that the majority of the audience could understand nothing I was saying. Readjusting quickly, I decided upon a pace slower than normal and the elimination of any prepared remarks. Many of the girls had turned on their recording devices. By the end, many were busy on their mobile phones, either taking notes or, more likely, texting their girlfriends. Some were dozing, others chatting. I later asked another professor what the point of my exercise had been. She replied, helpfully, “It’s always important for the students to hear English, especially poetry, read clearly and beautifully.” For this, I suppose, a recording would have served as well, but I managed to get through my allotted time with minimal embarrassment. “But wait,” I asked myself, “how different are these kids from American students who really *do* understand

their native teacher's language but who are not giving full notice to what he is saying?" *Plus ça change*, in other words, or *mutatis mutandis*, or whatever one might say in Japanese: Students are pretty much the same the world over. Such was my revelation not so much at the time, but *ex post facto*.

The most compelling revelations come to travelers in the most ordinary situations. Every transaction in a foreign country becomes an adventure: "Oh, this is how to buy a train ticket." "Now I can make a phone call." "They drive on the left? Who knew?" Years ago, with a colleague from my university's art history department, I led a score of well-heeled, worldly, sophisticated, middle-aged travelers on what we billed as an art-and-culture week in London. Mid-winter: therefore slow tourist season and easy-to-get tickets for operas and plays; reasonable rates at a dowager Bloomsbury hotel (the Russell) from the Edwardian era. What many of the campers most remembered about the trip upon their return stateside was that, regardless of how many times they had been to Britain previously, this was the first time that they had actually ridden the tube. Wot larks! What an adventure. How—what word will serve?—exciting. How banal.

Japan opened the ears, the eyes, and the mind in more dramatic but also subtler ways. Banality has a lot to recommend it. As in all travel, everything boils down to sameness and difference: the recognition that *they* and their world resemble us and ours, and also do not. Because language comes at us through both eye and ear, through what we see and what we hear, linguistic retrieval and experience become more allied with general sensuous vigilance abroad than at home. Everything is to be read. Everything is to be heard. Every phenomenon, in the country Roland Barthes called an "empire of signs," demands unpacking.

Not only an empire: an elaborate display, which the attentive, though casual, tourist cannot help thinking is intentional even though it may not be. Here come some Sumo wrestlers, like so many

French geese or ducks, force-fed for their livers to the point that they can no longer walk properly. The big guys can only waddle and shuffle into the stadium for their brief afternoon matches before sidewalk crowds of adoring photo-taking fans. What do they mean? How does one read them? Like everyone else in Tokyo, they seem to be on parade. And it's not just the wrestlers, but also their diametrical opposites, the geishas, arriving at sunset for their appointed assignations, modest but at the same time aware that all eyes are on them. Or the swans of Ginza, gorgeous Japanese Audrey Hepburn look-alikes, thin, long-necked, elegant, coiffed and pearled, going to work or to shop. And the kids in Takeshita Street, like punks the world over, sensitive to fashions different from the ones I know: the popular look here, these days, is part Goth, part Barbie Doll, part Alice in Wonderland. These stapled and pierced teenagers seem to slouch to a different drummer.

In Japan fashion looks more serious than it does at home, either because it really is or merely because a tourist watches more carefully things he might ignore on native grounds. He knows the signs better at home and therefore internalizes or forgets them. What we do not understand, what we cannot read: this is what strikes us abroad. A kimono, for example—what does it mean in 2008? I saw some ladies, all of a certain age, walking down the street in traditional garb. Perhaps they worked in some industry that demanded the costume. Perhaps they were going to a special event. In Kyoto geishas wear the kimono but expose the rears of their necks, by tradition an erotic spot. In my Tokyo hotel I saw a half-dozen weekend wedding celebrations: some of the older women wore kimonos, but the rest, including all of the younger ones, were garbed in high European chic. Every department store was filled with Armani, Burberry, Ralph Lauren, and all the other usual couturier suspects. Banana Republic outlets lined the streets. The culture of 1966, when Barthes made his trip, has been almost entirely transformed. Ginza, Madison Avenue, Rue St.-Honoré, Via Tornabuoni: It's all one. Except when it is not.

And then there is the problem of trying to figure out where you are, and how to go elsewhere. Tokyo is notorious—like Venice—for the absence or inscrutability of addresses. Numbers do not move consecutively along a street. Streets often lack signage in any language; maps are equally unhelpful. Still, things are better marked than they were forty years ago when Barthes visited and discovered that in order to get from one place to another you often needed an improvised picture—jotted down by a friend on a piece of paper—with buildings and landmarks drawn in. To get to a certain popular restaurant, a Japanese friend of mine had to tell the taxi driver to head to a specific corner (“Go to the Atré department store in Shinjuku and then go one block farther”). Even the locals can’t read the signs of direction.

Barthes claimed that everything in Japan is surface, form, or design. There is no Eastern equivalent for what he would call a transcendental signified. In other words, things have no meaning deeper or greater than themselves. His general point may exaggerate the idea of cultural difference. It is true that the idea of *kata*, the form of things, plays a big part in Japanese culture. There is always the correct way of doing something, whether slicing fish or arranging flowers, and it takes years of apprenticeship to master the simple. This reliance on propriety suggests an almost Platonic idea of form as something eternal and immutable. But Barthes, who could understand Japanese language and culture no better than I, failed to account for the fact that correct form itself signifies an eternal verity. Fascinated by packaging and framing—elegant exteriors that might conceal the most trivial of gifts—Barthes also took the haiku for everything that happens in Japan. Haiku neither defines nor describes (these being characteristic functions of Western poetry, or of Western philosophy): it simply is. “The West moistens everything with meaning,” he famously observed, but in his eagerness to find in Japanese culture an “exemption from meaning” Barthes was clearly just as guilty of what we now might call essentializing the other as

any other traveler intent upon understanding both difference and resemblance.

Even more than looking at, and trying to understand, the signs of fashion, the actual language provoked my curiosity. The most enticing, because frustrating, part of the written language is, of course, its tri-partite system: the kanji, old Chinese ideograms taken over by the Japanese but pronounced differently, and the hiragana and katakana, both phonetically based and used especially for foreign and new words. Not to mention romaji, the Western alphabet freely used. I began to feel modestly proud when one of my hosts showed me the kanji figure for “man,” which becomes—with the inclusion of a single vertical stroke—the figure for “big,” and then, with the inclusion of yet a second vertical stroke, the figure for “heaven.” I mastered four or five others as well.

Considering that Japanese schoolchildren live on a tight, regulated schedule—they learn so many hundred characters per year throughout school—and that basic newspaper literacy requires the knowledge of several thousand characters, I realized that I would never make the grade. Donald Richie, the American writer who has lived in Tokyo for almost sixty years, and has written novels, journalism, and books about Japanese culture and especially film, told me at dinner that although he is a fluent speaker, he is also an illiterate, and he needs people to read the newspaper to him every day. Other Americans have had, of course, different, more successful experiences in acquiring reading skills.

However lost I felt—being unable to read, speak, or understand—the language, I never sank as low as the pathetic Bob Harris, Bill Murray’s character in *Lost in Translation*. He has virtually no interest in anything around him; I was fascinated by everything. Coming abroad, floating unmoored and loosed from daily habit, only reinforced the deeper alienation and inner unrest his character bore with him everywhere. For him and for Charlotte,

Scarlett Johansson's character, it took an experience of the foreign to reveal the pathos of the everyday, the emptiness within themselves. But a good traveler returns exhilarated, restored, and confirmed by the jolt of strangeness. Not lost in translation but having gained something. As I mentioned, it all comes down to sameness and difference, in life as in literature. The literary technique that goes by the name of metaphor is a "carrying-across." The Latin equivalent for this Greek term is, wonderfully, "translation." A thing resembles, or is *like*, another thing, only by virtue of the fact that the two are not identical. Sameness and difference: twin sides of one coin. One culture resembles another, as one person resembles another, but each has a unique imprint, DNA, or fingerprint. In art, this uniqueness goes by the name of style, the mark of the maker.

In travel one tries to read everything and, as I have said, even the banal gets infused with the exotic just by virtue of being elsewhere. Every tourist comes home impressed by Japanese politeness, cleanliness, punctuality, and deference. Trains that run on time and are as tidy as drawing rooms. Public bathrooms so clean that even the fussiest Western lady will not complain. Earnest, often comic, attempts to introduce Western foods: bagels, sometimes spelled "bagles," are a staple, but I stopped short of trying the soymilk and edamame combo, or the green tea and white chocolate one, that I found at "Bagels and Bagels" in the food exposition of one major department store.

The eyes are always open abroad. As are the ears. Japanese, to someone who doesn't understand it, is just music, meaningless sounds. Sound in Japan is important, among other reasons, for what it is not. It is seldom loud. The uniformed junior high school students whom I saw marching through national shrines in Kyoto were not only more orderly than their American counterparts; they were also quieter. People do not holler. Voices are not raised. You don't hear mobile phones, or people speaking on them, on the subway. This would inconvenience other passengers. It is impolite. (On the street is another story; the phones seem to have been surgically

implanted.) As I wandered through the shrine called Kinkakuji, the Golden Pavilion, one May morning, I was impressed by these kids, who had both the normal hormone-induced high spirits of thirteen-year-olds on holiday and an adult sense of earnestness in their mission. I was approached, twice, with a request for information and a photo op. (What kind of assignments do the teachers give their students, and why?) One shy girl stepped forward, and read from a prepared script: "Hello, my name is Yoko. I have been asked to take a picture of a foreigner. What is your name? Where are you from?" Answers duly given, request honored. After a solo shot, I suggested one of Yoko and me, along with some of her chums. The girls giggled, surrounded me, made donkey ears with their fingers and smiled. Ten minutes later I repeated the experience, this time with a bunch of boys. Same questions, same photos. One boy asked me how old I was. When I said sixty-three, they gasped, they bowed, they applauded. How wonderful to be respected for one's height (in my case, a mere five-foot-eight) and one's age. Never has being a gaijin (foreigner) made me feel so dignified rather than, or in addition to, out of place.

It all comes down to language: to what we hear, what we read, what it all means. Words, what are they? The late poet Amy Clampitt, an inveterate traveler who loved seeing new people as much as new places, wrote a marvelous travel poem called "Losing Track of Language," which recounts a train ride from the French Riviera into Italy during which she and her companion sit squeezed in their compartment with non-English-speaking Italians. They manage, nevertheless, to communicate, flirting and trading in cigarettes and banter. A sonnet of Petrarch is all they need to establish relations; then Sappho comes into play. At each stage, the clickety-clack of the train reminds the poet, and her readers, that just as the scenery changes, the Vaucluse giving way to the Mediterranean coast, words themselves give way, like leaves. Everything changes and everything remains the same. The music, rather than the words,

unites the communicating and semi-understanding fellow travelers. By losing track of language, the poet gains an even greater sense of herself and her relations with other human beings.

However little my Japanese students could understand of me, in lecture or in casual conversation, I could understand still less—that is, nothing—of them, or of any sounds I heard. I was paradoxically deaf, or at least uncomprehending: I saw mouths moving but grasped not a thing. I was liberated, relieved of language and consequently of meaning. In the language of literary theorists or structuralists like Barthes, there were no signifieds, because there was nothing that might, to my ears, signify anything. Such absence had its own charms.

One afternoon in Kyoto, I scheduled an appointment for a shiatsu massage with a Japanese woman, a friend of a friend of a friend, married to an American yoga instructor. She gave directions to her house, which in any case I could not follow, and we opted instead to meet at a French bakery at the foot of a nearby hill on a convenient bus route. We walked up the hill into one of those quiet, private neighborhoods one finds throughout Japan—minutes off the busy thoroughfares yet a world away. The street looked like something from California—Palo Alto or the Hollywood Hills—although of course the residences were both smaller and more closely packed. Japan is not a big country, about the size of California with 130 million people living in close quarters. Because much of the landscape is mountainous, the populace is packed even more closely and vertically into dense urban areas. My masseuse and her husband lived in a narrow three-story apartment in a duplex building. The massage room was at the top of the house. We went up. I lay down. The windows were open; the day was warm and close. I heard ambient noise.

Japanese are trained not to make loud sounds. I said to the woman that if we were in America or the Mediterranean we'd be hearing the radios and televisions of our neighbors, not to mention their voices discussing the affairs of the day and other mundane matters. We would hear shouting, screaming, expressions of pas-

sion. Think of an Italian village in summer. We would know that all the energies and despairs of human life surrounded us. According to my local contacts, the Japanese allow only dogs to make noises—these they regard as natural—not people, not machines. From two stories below I could hear the faint, barely audible, sounds of three men talking. I couldn't determine the language, English or Japanese or some combination. Their voices blended with the wind, the wind chimes, and the twitter of the birds. The masseuse asked me whether the human sounds were distracting or annoying; if so, she would ask the men to step outside. No, I said. I heard no words, only murmurs and whispers. I could neither understand nor even really hear what they were saying. It was all foreign, because *sotto voce*. It was music to my ears. Not a signifier anywhere, just the magic of sound.