

LEARNING AND TEACHING JAPANESE THROUGH ENGLISH AND SLOVAK

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Abstract

The paper deals with the topic of learning and teaching the language which does not belong to any of classical language families. That is the reason why it is extremely difficult to master many of its pitfalls by means of the languages a student/teacher can usually rely on when learning/teaching other languages. These pitfalls concern, among many others, for instance the huge problem of kanji (Japanese characters), their transcription, reading and writing; particles wa and ga which in Japanese present an individual grammatical problem of theme and rheme, accumulation of several verbs or adjectives, onomatopoeic expressions with no existing equivalents of translation, Japanese anglicisms, an honorific language keigo and its demanding usage, word paddings, numeratives, disputable expressions like mono no aware, natsukashii, nasake nai etc. The paper provides, except the summary of several most searing ambits of Japanese based on personal experiences, also some potential approaches concerning learning and teaching Japanese.

Key words: Kanji, wa/ga particles: theme/rheme, verb and adjective hybrids, onomatopoeic expressions with no existing English or Slovak equivalents, Japanese anglicisms, honorific language keigo

INTRODUCTION

Learning and teaching oriental languages can represent a specific problem, following from the completely different language structures, grammar, alphabets, and especially completely different cultural background, without knowing which it is not possible to master the language even when showing the upmost effort. This concerns especially Japanese, as it is an isolated language not belonging to any of the classical languages families, neither of any of the oriental ones (there is a theory though, that it belongs to Altaic language family – this theory is hugely disputed. Usually it is registered as a member of Japonic language family, to which belong dialects of Ryúkyú Islands 琉球語 and other Japanese dialects. But most often it is called “language isolate”). A person determined to master Japanese and – later, to teach it, is to be prepared for many difficulties and pains, especially as far as remembering and forgetting and re-remembering the characters is concerned, understanding and correct usage of all the proper levels of politeness, and for being fully aware of a necessary amount of psycho-linguistic features in the communication.

Yet, and maybe that is why, Japanese is an extremely attractive language to study and teach, when perceived as a challenge. “Nearly seven hundred years have passed since Marco Polo, writing in prison in Genoa around 1298, introduced to the Western World the country of ‘Zipangu’, which, he said, possessed gold in abundance. Since then, whether attracted by the extraordinary richness of the sovereign’s palace – whose roof was said to have been covered in gold – or by the alleged mystic charm of the civilized manners of its inhabitants, many people from all over the world have attempted to learn the Japanese language with varied degrees of success.” (Nagara, S. p.iii)

1. KANJI: THE “BASIC” LITERACY

The first problem, obviously, when starting with learning or teaching Japanese, is the system of kanji (characters, hieroglyphs). In the case of learning it means to endeavour hours and hours of the writing and memorizing drill; in teaching to prepare a student to this drill and try not to drive him away with

the very first introduction of the Japanese language learning strain. In both cases it demands a great deal of inner strength and psychical tolerance to overcome the starting barriers.

To make “the phantom of kanji” more comprehensible, let us repeat the basic kanji information. If a person wants to be able to read and write more-less successfully, it is necessary to manage the 1850 characters designated as “standard” for general everyday use (Tóyó kanji – 当用漢字). Among them, there are the 881 basic characters. A student of Japanese has to be aware of the fact that it is not enough at all to manage the standard 1850 characters one after another, it means to be able to write a character and know all its readings and meanings: the real secret of mastering Japanese lies in the ability to read them in their mutual combinations, otherwise it is not possible to read even the simplest text.

The fact, though, is that the system of kanji, originally brought from China, has been several times simplified. The standard 1850 characters represent a major reduction in the number used before, but they have been simplified in readings and many times even in their written forms. The students of Japanese are usually non-aware of the fact that many expressions, nowadays written only in kana (phonetic symbols) were generally written in characters before. Numerous extremely difficult readings of specific characters have been discarded (the truth, though, is that the Japanese with the arrival of kanji had huge problems to imitate the real sounds of their original Chinese readings). A great help to the students of Japanese is reading as the Japanese children are taught to read: simple texts with only few kanji and individual words in kana written separately, so that the text does not negatively influence their interest to read it, as it is the general problem among the students of Japanese. It is not recommended to read texts only in kana: paradoxically, it makes the whole process even more complicated, as the reader cannot recognize the meaning of the word as it is written only in kana, and not in kanji, which is a real “bearer” of the meaning.

1.1 Reading: On-yomi, Kun-yomi

When kanji were introduced to the Japanese, there appeared an immediate difficulty to apply them to the language with such a different grammatical structure in comparison to Chinese. The first written records of some Japanese words were found in the Chinese documents from the 3rd century, but it lasted more than other five hundred years until the first texts written in Japanese came to an existence. So it is obvious that Chinese had a huge influence on Japanese language as far as vocabulary and phonology (i.e. “deformed” readings of individual words and expressions) are concerned. During the first attempts of applying Chinese writing system to the Japanese one, it was clear that many changes are necessary to be done. Japanese, unlike Chinese, is an agglutinative language with simple phonotactics: a pure vowel system, phonemic vowel and consonant length, characteristic by its lexically significant pitch accent. While Chinese is a tone language which can be heard to be almost “sang”, the sound of Japanese is characteristic by its flat, easy-to-understand flow of individual vowels. There is the only separate consonant in Japanese: n.

In practice, if the original reading of a Chinese word is “kiao-tz”, in Japanese, because of its “deformed” pronunciation, it becomes “gyó-za” (餃子, ギョウザ – Chinese origin food, popular in Japan). The pronunciation of separate kanji depends on a specific Chinese region from where it has been “brought” to Japan – one kanji in a vast land of China could differ in reading according to its districts, and it was probably too complicated to choose only one of the given pronunciations. I personally believe that this fact also corresponds with the typical Japanese sense for perfectness and thoroughness. That is why almost each kanji in Japanese has several readings – all of them applicable only in a specific combination of two or more kanji. Needless to say that all this makes reading of Japanese texts extremely complicated.

All kanji in Japanese come with two systems of reading: *on-yomi* 音読み (readings taken from Chinese) and *kun-yomi* 訓読み (native Japanese readings). *On-yomi* in the dictionaries is usually written in capital letters above the separating line between the two kinds of readings, and usually

contains one and more one-syllabic readings (coming out of the Chinese phonetic reading system), and *kun-yomi* under the separating line, written in small letters, containing the original Japanese words readings, added to a specific meaning represented by the grapheme of the particular kanji.

Examples:

雅 GA – elegance, refined taste

miya(bita), miya(biyakana) 1– graceful, refined

(Nelson, A. N.: 595)

反 HON – roll of cloth (c.10 yds); 245 acres, 300 tsubo. HAN – antithesis, opposite,

antagonism; anti-

tan – roll of cloth (c.10 yds); 245 acres, 300 tsubo. *so(ru)* – warp; curve; lean backward.

so(rasu), so(raseru) – bend, warp. *han(suru)* – be inconsistent with, oppose; contradict;

transgress; rebel. *kae(ru)* – change, turn over, turn upside down. *kae(su)* – change, turn over,

turn upside down. *sori* – warp, curvature, curve.

(Nelson, A. N.: 229)

The treacherous problem in reading kanji lies in the fact that the student has to be psychically prepared for not being able to read Japanese texts, even after many years of learning individual characters. It means, that if he/she knows how to write the kanji, and masters all its possible meanings and readings, he/she cannot read the word which consists of two or more characters, unless he knows the particular reading of a word in this exact combination.

Examples:

1.

雅 GA – elegance, refined taste

miya(bita), miya(biyakana) – graceful, refined

俗 ZOKU – customs, manners; the world; wordliness; vulgarity; mundane things; the laity

zoku(ppoi) – cheap (reading); vulgar, worldly-minded

(Nelson, A. N.: 152)

雅 + 俗 = 雅俗 *gazoku* – the refined and the vulgar; the classical and the colloquial

¹ The letters in the brackets are written by hiragana. Explanation see in 1.2.2. Hiragana and Katakana

2.

反 HON – roll of cloth (c.10 yds); 245 acres, 300 tsubo. HAN – antithesis, opposite,

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transgress; rebel. *kae(ru)* – change, turn over, turn upside down. *kae(su)* – change, turn over,

turn upside down. *sori* – warp, curvature, curve.

日 JITSU, NICHI, NITSU – day; Sunday

hi – sun; time; day, date. *hi(narazu)* – before long, in a few days. *hiniwa* – if, in case.

hi(mosugara) all day long. *-ka* day. *-Nichi-* Japanese.

(Nelson, A. N.: 473)

反 + 日 = 反日 *hannnichi* – anti-Japanese

3.

日 JITSU, NICHI, NITSU – day; Sunday

hi – sun; time; day, date. *hi(narazu)* – before long, in a few days. *hiniwa* – if, in case.

hi(mosugara) all day long. *-ka* day. *-Nichi-* Japanese.

本 HON – book; this, the same, the present, the current; main; true; real; regular, normal;

counter for long things

moto – beginning, origin; foundation, basis, source; cause; root (of a tree); raw (material),

base, capital; principal; cost; forebears; formerly. *moto-(yori)* – originally, of course

(Nelson, A. N.: 64)

日 + 本 = 日本 *nihon* – Japan

日本の *nihon(no)* – Japanese (adj)

語 GO – word, speech, language, term. GYO

kata(ru) – talk, tell, narrate, recite. *kata(rau)* talk, chat; pledge one's troth; invite, entice;

win; conspire with. *kata(rai)* – talk, chat; lover's vow. *kata(ri)* – narrative (in the noh);

reciter. *-go* – (technical) term.

(Nelson, A. N.: 832)

日 + 本 + 語 = 日本語 *nihongo* – Japanese (language)

etc.

These examples represent the wide range of individual kanji reading-meaning possibilities, but the fact is that each single word has its strictly set, fixed reading (and obviously, meaning), so the knowledge of the separated kanji readings and meanings, however important and necessary, is only the first step to be able to read Japanese. These complications cause that many students quickly give up with Japanese, unable to overcome the combination of the great strain vs. relatively poor outcomes and slow progress. That is why the role of a teacher is extremely important in his/her ability and willingness to motivate and inspire the students in their endurance.

A small “consolation” for those who struggle with the study of Japanese may be the fact that the native Japanese have the same problem with mastering their own language: usually a Japanese student is not able to read a little more complicated text until he/she reaches the age of completion his/her high school education. And even then it depends on his/her individual field of study, interests, intellect and passion for reading, that he/she is able to read newspaper, literature (basic or more advanced, average or more complex and demanding), or scientific and professional texts.

1.2 Writing – Main Difficulties

According to the reading of a particular kanji in the dictionaries there come their meanings or rather definitions (a slightly different meaning comes with each different reading), and a number of strokes (according to which it is possible to find the kanji in the dictionary, and to write it in a correct way). Needless to say, both teacher and student must be extremely precise as far as the strokes number is concerned: if not so, a kanji may be deformed in its written form. According to the knowledge of the exact number of strokes, and even the order and direction of their written form, it is possible to assume whether the writer of a kanji studied Japanese properly, or he only imitated “the picture” they represent, and the kanji written in that way is not possible to detect in a dictionary, thus neither to read it. It means, when the Japanese or a japanologist sees a written kanji, he/she can immediately judge an extent of the author’s writing experience and education in Japanese language.

1.2.1. Development of Japanese Font

Japanese in a writing system differs from Chinese completely – not only considering that Japanese as a language has been developed long ago before the Japanese adopted the Chinese writing system, and thus its vocabulary and inner structure of the language existed on the different base. The Chinese writing system as the only one in contemporary languages world kept the important ideographic component of which clearly phonetic writing system has never developed, in spite of the fact that the Chinese used to know the way of phonetic recording of speech. Paradoxically, taking into consideration all the changes the Chinese writing system went through, it was able to keep its basic typological characteristics. The font of Chinese is logo-morpheme-graphic, it means the font the signs of which record words or morphemes, and where, from the phonologic point of view, one sign (hieroglyph) represents a syllable. This font is comfortable for Chinese – a typologically isolating language, e.g. a language without flexion. The number of syllables in Chinese is quite limited in spite of the tone existence which led to a high homophony – one language unit has several different meanings. That is why Chinese is not a logographic language anymore. Particular kanji are connected with meanings more than with their written form – it means, that if one homophonic word included five different meanings, each of them had a special kanji to be written by.

Examples:

<i>Kanji</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
雅	GA	elegance, refined taste
画	GA	picture, drawing, painting
伽	GA	nurse, entertainer, attendant
俄	GA	sudden, abrupt; improvised, off-hand
衙	GA	government office
牙	GA	tusk, fang, canine tooth, eyetooth
瓦	GA	tile
蛾	GA	moth
etc.		
(Nelson, A. N.)		

Homophonic words with different meanings:

1.

岳父	gakufu	one's wife's father
学府	gakufu	a seat of learning
楽譜	gakufu	a sheet music, score

2.

紀行	kikó	an account of the trip; a travel book
氣孔	kikó	a pore; a stoma; a stigma
起稿	kikó	drafting
奇行	kikó	eccentric conduct
奇効	kikó	a signal success, a remarkable effect
寄稿	kikó	contribution; correspondence
氣候	kikó	climate; weather
機構	kikó	a mechanism; structure

起工	kikó	commencement of construction work; laying down (a ship)
帰校	kikó	return to school
帰港	kikó	return to port
帰航	kikó	make a homeward voyage
奇港	kikó	call (stop, touch) at; put in (at)

(Ito, Yamaguchi: Sanseido's New Concise Japanese-English Dictionary)

That is why it is possible to say that the Chinese font removes unwanted effects of homophony (Krupa, V., Písma sveta).

In comparison to Chinese, Japanese represents the most complicated writing system in the world, as it lacks the inner logic of a writing system that in case of Chinese developed together with the language itself. The uniqueness of Japanese writing lies in the fact that it has adopted the writing system **completely unfitting** to the structure of the original language. This is very important information a student of Japanese must be fully aware of to avoid (necessary) doubts about the Japanese writing system.

1.2.2. Hiragana and Katakana

The Japanese font consists of the Chinese ideograms (after the second world war the number of which has been partially reduced) and of two alphabets, *hiragana* ひらがな and *katakana* カタカナ, the need of which appeared because of the Japanese language agglutinating quality (not present in Chinese). Japanese is usually written in a combination of kanji and the two above mentioned alphabets. This writing system has developed in the long-lasting process of adapting the Chinese font to Japanese language, which is characteristic by completely different phonetics, structure of a syllable, morpheme and word, and rich morphology reflected in numerous affixes. The adaptation of Japanese words to Chinese hieroglyphs was complicated, and had to go through many difficulties following from different style of word order, and already mentioned rich morphology. The Chinese was originally considered to be a language of well-educated people – this was due to the influence of Buddhism, and its texts brought to Japan in the sixth century. The adaptation went through many various phases: first, it was reading of Chinese texts with the Japanese pronunciation which caused that many of Chinese words found their own place in already existing language. Up to now they create a core of the Japanese vocabulary, which in its effect may seem paradoxical. Later the need to read Chinese hieroglyphs in Japanese became more and more necessary – it was enabled by assigning their Japanese equivalents to particular characters on the base of their meanings. The need to write down also the affixes caused a change in usage of Chinese hieroglyphs: at first these affixes used to be noted down by those characters, the Chinese pronunciation of which was the closest to their phonetic form. Gradually writing of these hieroglyphs went through the process of simplification: a new system of writing the syllables necessary for noting down affixes was created. These “kanji” looked different and did not exist in Chinese: their written form was simpler and seemed “rounder”, and their usage was in the beginning popular especially among women. This is the reason they were called “a female font” – *onnamoji* 女文字, and later they gained their final form and the name *hiragana*. The second alphabet, *katakana*, was created in the ninth century on the base of the same system, but these letters looked more angular and “harder” than hiragana. They were created of the Chinese quadrangle font and have a markedly visible rectangular quality (Krupa, V., Písma sveta). Katakana arose to note down the foreign loans in the language (especially those from English, the number of which is amazing and it seems that Japanese does not feel the need of any protecting system against this phenomenon, which

on one hand makes it obviously “uglier”, but on the other hand it enables the English speakers, both native and those who use English as their second language, to master the rules of Japanese conversation much more quickly and relatively easily) and names of foreigners. Katakana is often used also to make some words, usually the names of shops or some expressions in the advertisement, striking, as the reader notices them first. The paradox of both alphabets usage is that hiragana seems to be easier to learn, but harder to read in the beginning, in the following stages of a study their roles exchange and hiragana becomes easier to write and read, while katakana causes problems in remembering its individual letters both in reading and writing. Generally, hiragana is used to note down the grammatical morphemes in agglutination, it means affixes (*okurigana* 送り仮名 – so-called “alphabet to see off”) and particles, or to note down the Chinese (Sino-Japanese) readings of a kanji (*furigana* 振り仮名). The “root” of a kanji is usually noted down by a Chinese character and the Japanese part of a word is written by hiragana.

Example:

反 **HON** – roll of cloth (c.10 yds); 245 acres, 300 tsubo. **HAN** – antithesis, opposite,

antagonism; anti-

tan – roll of cloth (c.10 yds); 245 acres, 300 tsubo. *so(ru)* – warp; curve; lean backward.

so(rasu), *so(raseru)* – bend, warp. *han(suru)* – be inconsistent with, oppose; contradict;

transgress; rebel. *kae(ru)* – change, turn over, turn upside down. *kae(su)* – change, turn over,

turn upside down. *sori* – warp, curvature, curve

反らせる *so(raseru)* – bend, warp

反する *han(suru)* – be inconsistent with, oppose; contradict; transgress; rebel

反す *kae(su)* – change, turn over, turn upside down

In general, a student of Japanese starts learning writing with these two alphabets, first it is hiragana, after mastering it, katakana, and only after that the study of the simplest kanji follows. Each alphabet consists of 46 letters and they have to be learnt – like kanji later – according to strict rules of keeping the right number of strokes and the order which determines which stroke should be written as the first, the second and so on. The task of a teacher in this stage is to reassure a student that these alphabets are easy, consist “only” of a limited number of letters, and despite many of them look enormously similar, each little detail is absolutely important. I personally believe that if this stage of learning how to write Japanese is mastered with a positive effect, the later study of a really hard and never-ending number of characters may be successfully conducted.

1.2.3. Japanese Sound System and its Romanization

The usual question not only from the Japanese language students-beginners, but also from the laymen, is: why to use such a complicated system of writing? Would not it be easier for everybody if the

characters were cancelled and substituted by the Roman letters? This question has been already partially answered in the explanation above.²

After understanding how Japanese writing system functions in practice, the person has to admit that there is no other way how to write. Japanese is a language phonetically extremely poor: it is a syllabic language and lacks many of sounds present in other languages. The wide homonymy of Japanese is thus perfectly comprehensible, especially considering the fact that many Sino-Japanese readings of kanji are limited to one syllable. Thus one syllable may mean a lot of different “roots” of words, it may represent a various extent of meanings, and the only way how to recognize what a particular word signifies, is to see its written form

Examples:

藤 TÓ

fuji – wisteria

(NELSON, A. N.: 792)

富 FU, FÚ

to(masu) – enrich, *to(meru)* – wealthy; abundant, *tom(u)* – be rich, become wealthy; teem

with, abound in; be fruitful; be rife; be replete. *tomi* – wealth, mammon, fortune; resources;

lottery

(NELSON, A. N.: 325)

土 TO, DO – earth, ground; Saturday

tsuchi – earth, soil, ground

(NELSON, A. N.: 264)

不 FU – negation; bad; clumsy; ugly. BU – clumsy; ugly

-zu – negation

(NELSON, A. N.: 37)

治 JI, CHI – peace; government

ji-(suru) – cure, heal; rule; conserve (resources). *osa(meru)*, *chi-(suru)* – govern, manage,

regulate; quell, subdue; patch up; heal. *osa(maru)* – be at peace; calm down; be settled, be

ruled. *nao(su)* – mend, repair, put in order, reform, correct; revise, amend; re-do, alter; cure;

restore; adjust, regulate; convert (money). *nao(ru)* – be mended; get well; be restored;

return to normal; be installed (as a legal wife); change (from third to second class)

(NELSON, A. N.: 540)

² See in 1.2.1. Development of Japanese Font

二 NI – two, second. JI – two, second

futa(tsu), fu, fū, futa – two

(NELSON, A. N.: 106)

時 JI – hour, o'clock, time; Buddhist sect originating in the thirteen century

toki – time, hour, moment; occasion; season; opportunity; the times; tense. *toki(meku)* –

prosper, flourish, be influential; prosperous, influential. *toki ni* – now, by the way, in

passing. *toki(naranu)* – unseasonable, untimely, inopportune; sudden, unexpected.

toki ni totte – on the occasion, for the occasion. *toki niwa, toki(tama) toki toshite* –

occasionally. *toki(shimo), toki(shimoare)* – just then. *toki to shite* – sometimes, in some

cases. *-ji* – time, period

(NELSON, A. N.: 481)

寿 SU, JU – age; one's natural life; longevity; congratulations

kotobu(ku) – congratulate; wish one well. *kotoho(gu)* – congratulate. *kotobuki* – long life;

congratulations

(NELSON, A. N.: 89)

Kanji	Romanized kanji	Meaning
ふじ	fuji	(hiragana)
フジ	fuji	(katakana)
富士	fuji	Mount Fuji (wealthy ground)
富士	fuji	Mount Fuji (another version of fu kanji)
藤	fuji	wisteria
不治	fuji	incurability
不二	fuji	peerless, unparalleled
不時	fuji	emergency, unexpectedness
富寿	fuji	Mount Fuji (another version of both kanji)
etc.		

Nevertheless, it is obviously possible to note down the Japanese language in Roman letters, at least its phonetic form. There are several system of Romanization, one of them, “the Official System”, *kunreishiki* 訓令式, is considered the most systematic, but the English speaking students usually use

so called Hepburn system, as it is easier to switch from the English sound system to the Japanese one. Most of dictionaries use Hepburn system as well – needless to say that it is difficult to study or teach Japanese without considerably wide knowledge of English as not only dictionaries, but also the best studying materials are published in English, and moreover, the huge number of generally used English loans in Japanese vocabulary make its mastering difficult for students who do not speak English.

However, I recommend the Slovak students studying Japanese to use the original Slovak phonetic system to Romanize Japanese, as it can precisely adapt to Japanese phonetics. This can be especially useful in the usage of Japanese words in Slovak texts, as many people tend to read Hepburn system incorrectly, not talking about the long syllables which usually in Hepburn system are not recorded. Slovak with its softeners and lengtheners is perfect to Romanize Japanese, and thus it makes usage of Hepburn system uncomfortable.

The typical example can be a word *tofu* 豆腐, which either in English or in Slovak is usually read shortly as it is written. But the original Japanese reading of this word is “tófu”, and it sounds really strange to the ears of the Japanese or Japanese speaking people to hear it in its deformed short version.

1.2.4. Phenomenon of Forgetting

A specific problem is represented by a phenomenon of forgetting. It is hugely connected with psychology and ability to keep discipline and so called “hygiene of work”. Not only the student, even the teacher himself has to be aware of the necessity to cope with the fact that learning of hundreds kanji is not only demanding and naturally requires lots of patience and accuracy, but its real danger lies in constantly repeated forgetting them. This aspect of psychological stress is extremely difficult to manage: the vulnerability of human mind can be treacherous in accepting the inevitable fact of vanity while learning reading, but especially writing Japanese. This usually leads to a huge loss of interest in Japanese: an enormous number of people, first interested in Japanese, under the influence of this phenomenon tend to give up and literally throw away their up-to-date knowledge and belief in their own capacity to learn this language. Here a sensitive attitude of a teacher is needed: he himself had to go through the same obstacles, and probably more often than only sometimes, he/she longed to give up his/her Japanese studies. In teaching Japanese, thanks to this particular personal psychological experience, a teacher should be ready to face the crises in his/her students’ endeavour, and use specific techniques of encouraging them in resistance. On the other hand, a person who learns Japanese should be able to accept, and, what is possibly even more important from the psychological point of view, to get used to the fact that he/she memorizes the kanji in order to *forget* them; and *forgets* them in order to memorize them on and on.

Nevertheless, the positive side of this process is, that – taking into consideration the ability of brain to interact with a movement of hand – if one memorizes writing one particular kanji more than a certain number of times (this number, obviously, is individual, and depends on many factors), he/she will be able to write it correctly “forever”, even without any contact with the Japanese language.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHO-LINGUISTICS IN JAPANESE LANGUAGE

One of many inter-cultural problems is related to the ability of one’s psycho-linguistic attitude towards Japanese. The person dealing with Japanese culture and language should be aware of a specific system of the Japanese conversational rules. This language has developed in isolated atmosphere, untouched by any contact with other languages. Its ethno-genesis is still unclear, despite there are some theories about its formation. The traditional dwellings were built of wood and paper not providing with enough privacy. People were living together in the limited space which made the rules for mutual conversation rather strict. In order to avoid misunderstanding, communicational crushes, not talking about conflicts which in Japanese mentality are considered extremely impolite, dangerous and destructive, much more than for example in continental cultures, the rise of a special conversational system is perfectly comprehensible. It is fatally important even for random visitors of Japan, not talking about the

students of Japanese or foreigners who permanently reside in Japan, to be aware of these rules, otherwise they often have to face various difficulties, misunderstandings, feelings of isolation etc, which usually lead to the final (rather real than fictive) refusal of the community these people are in contact with.

In my interpreting experiences, it was always quite sad to meet the ambassadors in Japan who did not bother with the study at least of this non-written system of cultural communication. It was extremely hard to handle many faux-pas caused by this negligence from the official cultural representatives of my home country, and many times it was necessary to censor parts of their utterance in order to avoid real international awkwardness.

2.1. Occident and Orient Communication

Usually there are two main modes of communication in different cultures, information oriented and socially oriented one. Although it is obvious that the border line between the two of them is fluid, as all communications usually show aspects of both, in Japanese it is extremely important to be careful of their proper mixture usage. In English if the question stands for example “where are you going?” it is expected that the addressed person answers truthfully. It is usually the information oriented communication, if only a person does not want to hide the final goal of his/her direction. While if in English the answer to the question: “where are you going?” どちらへ? is: “just over there” ちょっと、そこまで, it could be considered rude (as a sign of no-respect to the asking person), in Japanese this conversational mode would be considered perfectly polite as both sides are aware of the fact that the question and the answer are made only to fill-up the “gap in existence”, the small talk, the conversational game of no other meaning than having said something to show the interest and respect. It means that what in Occident is considered to be information oriented communication, in Orient it may be a socially oriented one.

2.2. The Famous Vagueness of Japanese

The problem is in the well-known, often mystified vagueness of Japanese: the less the utterance is unclear and “foggy”, the more Japanese it sounds. As an example I can provide with an episode from the early era of my Japanese-Slovak interpreting – I was not able to find the proper expression for “spa” in Japanese, that is why I helped myself with description of this kind: “it seems that the person is at the moment at the place notably similar to a hospital” which was accepted not only as an expression perfectly understood, but even “very Japanese” because of its vague psycho-linguistic quality, as the whereabouts of a mentioned person was veiled in mystery while his privacy has been tactfully protected.

CONCLUSION

Japanese is a complicated language to master, but the more difficult it is, the more luring is the challenge it represents for the foreigners interested in it. In this paper I mentioned only several aspects of its pitfalls, but obviously there are many other specific phenomena making it so demanding and mysterious at the same time. Apart from the inter-cultural elements like above mentioned conversational rules, semantic vagueness, ambivalent utterances, non-written patterns of discourse, differences in Oriental and Occidental language usage traditions, there is the basic maze of writing and reading, but also other spheres there was no space to present here. Among others it is for example grammar and its peculiarities, following from the uniqueness of the language, like word order, which in comparison with English is more flexible, and yet it has several rules to keep. The verb stands in the end like in German, and as in Japanese there are no prepositions but postpositions it causes problems especially in interpreting, as the simultaneous interpreting is never really simultaneous because the interpreter has to wait many times up to the end of a sentence to be able to start to

interpret. Another problem is related to the particles, especially particles *wa* は (theme) – interesting is also that this particle, in spite of its pronunciation, is not written as *wa* わ but *ha* は – and *ga* が (rheme), the function of which is so complicated that they create a great space for linguistic research.

Another “peculiarity” is the combination of several verbs or adjectives, so called verbs and adjective hybrids, feelinguals, expressions with no equivalents of translation etc.

There are many more special aspects of this language, which causes the study of it a never-ending work for the whole life. Despite all the difficulties, to learn and teach Japanese is an adventure worth all the struggles, pains and obstructions this field offers.

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