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## COMMENTS

Dr. Obata's booklet entitled the "Suggestions on the Study of the Japanese Language" certainly contains some needful suggestions for all of us who wish to speak with our Japanese friends, or wish to understand their psychology as revealed in the shades of meaning employed in the use of honorifics and special vocabulary.

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When I first glanced at Dr. Obata's "Suggestions on the Study of the Japanese Language" I wondered what place there could be for another brief introduction to the Japanese language. I soon discovered, however, that Dr. Obata's approach to his own language is very suggestive and stimulating. For vocabularies and groups of sentences in common use other handbooks are available. I know of no one, however, which makes so clear the social approach to the Japanese language.

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Dr. Obata not only gives a valuable introduction to Japanese language study for beginners but also a great deal of most interesting and useful material for those who have already made some progress in the language. This is particularly true of the second section. This is one of the clearest and most illuminating brief presentations of the peculiar usages in Japanese speech that I have seen. Some appreciation of the historical and psychological background of modern Japanese usage is certainly essential and Dr. Obata has made a real contribution to that end. I gladly commend this booklet both to beginners and more advanced students.

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the School of Japanese Language  
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The "Suggestions on the Study of the Japanese Language" is an excellent monograph prepared by Dr. Obata.

I wish he could now go further and give us a complete short manual of instruction in Japanese. He knows so well the psychology of English speaking people that he could do it with much success.

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## Suggestions on the Study of the Japanese Language

by  
K. OBATA, LL. D.

This booklet is the outcome of a two hour lecture given before the Summer College of Japanese Culture for the year 1933. It is a humble one, claiming nothing original or scholarly. Its aim is to summarise a few underlying principles of our peculiarly complicated language.

There are certain pre-requisites to the study of the language of any country and Japanese is no exception. For the sake of convenience, we divide these into two classes,—the preliminary and the secondary, the former dealing with the language itself and the latter with the social atmosphere wherein it is used.

### 1. The Preliminary Pre-requisites

1. Japanese Alphabets: There are two ways of arranging the Japanese syllabary. One way is called the I-Ro-Ha, consisting of forty seven syllables and the other the Go-Jū-On which means fifty sounds. In the Gojuon, three vowels i, e, u are twice used,

although correctly speaking these vowels i, e, u, should be yi, ye, wu. So, both the Iroha and Gojuon are exactly same in number (47). Besides these, there are syllables which express the guttural, labial and nasal sounds. We call them the Daku-on (sonants) and the Han-Dakuon (half sonants). In the Han-Dakuon, there are five letters expressing nasal tones,—namely ngha, nghi, nghu, nghe ngho. Japanese syllables, excepting the five vowels, are composed of consonants and vowels. Hence, if the reader analyses them, he will find that they can be reduced to seventeen consonants, excluding the letters l, q, v, and x, none of which is used in the Japanese language.

(1). The I-Ro-Ha:

i, ro, ha, ni, ho, he, to,  
 い ろ は に ほ へ と  
 chi, ri, nu, ru, wo, wa, ka,  
 ち り ん る を わ か  
 yo, ta, re, so, tsu, ne,  
 よ た れ そ つ ね  
 na, ra, mu, u, wi, no,  
 な ら む う ゐ の  
 o, ku, ya, ma, ke, fu, ko, e, te,  
 お く や ま け ふ こ え て

a, sa, ki, yu, me, mi, shi,  
 あ さ き ゆ め み し

we, hi, mo, se, su.  
 え ひ も せ す

(2). The Gojūon:

a, i, u, e, o,  
 ア イ ウ エ オ

ka, ki, ku, ke, ko,  
 カ キ ク ケ コ

sa, shi, su, se, so  
 サ シ ス セ ソ

ta, chi(ti), tsu(tu), te, to,  
 タ チ ツ テ ト

na, ni, nu, ne, no,  
 ナ ニ ヌ ネ ノ

ha, hi, hu(fu), he, ho,  
 ハ ヒ フ ヘ ホ

ma, mi, mu, me, mo,  
 マ ミ ム メ モ

ya, i(yi), yu, e(ye), yo,  
 ヤ イ ユ エ ヨ



ra, ri, ru, re, ro,

ラ リ ル レ ロ

wa, wi, u(wu), e(we), wo,

ワ キ ウ エ ヲ

**(3). The Dakuon (sonant):**

ga, gi, gu, ge, go,

(gha, ghi, ghu, ghe, gho)

ガ キ グ ゲ ゴ

za, ji(zi), zu, ze, zo,

ザ ジ ズ ゼ ゾ

da, ji(di), zu(du), de, do,

ダ チ ヅ テ ド

ba, bi, bu, be, bo,

バ ビ ブ ベ ボ

**(4). The Han-Dakuon (half-sonant):**

pa, pi, pu, pe, po,

パ ピ プ ペ ポ

**(5). Japanese Syllables Analysed:**

a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, (l), m, n,

o, p, (q), r, s, t, u, (v), w, (x), y, z.

The letters in parentheses are not used in Japan.

2. Pronunciation: The pronunciation of Japanese words is very simple. The vowels are pronounced in two ways, long and short.

Long: a i u e o as a i u e o in *far, ski, move, say, coke.*

Short: a i u e o as a i u, e, o in *data, pit, put, yet, obey.*

3. Spelling: Japanese Syllables are invariable in form, and so the spelling is easy and simple. For example, the Japanese word for morning glory is a-sa-ga-o, and for rose, ba-ra, etc.

4. Absence of Silent Letters: The nature of the Japanese syllabary leaves no room for silent letters. There are instances of mispronunciation among Occidental travelers in Japan, who, not being acquainted with this simple rule, arbitrarily mispronounce our well known geographical names. For instance, Ha-ko-da-te, Ha-ko-ne, and Kō-be are not infrequently pronounced, as Ha-ko-dāte, Ha-kōne, and K-ōbe as if the final "e"s were silent, giving a long sound to the preceding vowels a, o, o, as is often the case in English, while the "e"s with the preceding consonants "t", "n", and "b" form separate syllables in these cases.

5. Accent: Generally speaking, Japanese words have no accent. Hence, to pronounce the words Yokohāma, Nagōya, and Nagasāki is an unconscious

Westernization of Japanese pronunciation, quite strange to our ears. The safest way to pronounce Japanese words is to utter them evenly and smoothly, with a slight stress upon the first syllable, like Yókohama, Nágoya, and Nágasaki. We said a moment ago that as a rule, the Japanese language has no accent, but there seem to be some exceptions to the rule, for there are words spelled exactly in the same way, but having different meanings according to the accent, such as háshi(bridge) and hashí(chopsticks), káki(persimon) and kakí(oyster); káwa(river) and kawá(skin); hána(nose) and haná(flower) etc. This brings out the meaning by changing the accent. If one places the accent on the first syllable, he will have bridge, persimmon, river and nose, and if on the last one, then chopsticks, oyster, skin, and flower. However, this statement should not be too rigidly enforced as there seems to be a difference of opinion regarding the meaning of the accented words according to local customs.

6. Construction of Sentences: The order of the Japanese sentence is as follows: Subject, object and verb, with the adjective preceding the noun it modifies. For example: Kare wa kinchaku wo naku-shita. (He the purse lost.); Kano jo wa rippana kimono wo katta. (She the beautiful kimono bought).

In this connection, it should be stated that in the Japanese language there are no articles, either definite or indefinite. Neither are there differences in the words themselves to denote singular and plural, and none to denote gender.

7. Characters Used: Besides the purely Japanese characters, the Iroha and Gojūon, we use more than three thousand Chinese ideographs. It is said that the Japanese typewriting machine provides a little over 3,000 characters, including the Hiragana (the Iroha type), the Katakana (the Gojūon type), and Chinese derivatives. It is also said that our newspapers use about the same number of characters.

## II. THE SECONDARY PRE-REQUISITES.

Now coming to the Secondary Pre-requisites, it should be noted how closely the spoken language is related to the customs and manners of the country in which it is spoken. In other words, the language of a country is so interwoven with its culture that one can hardly utter a sentence stripped of the colour of the culture. We can understand why or how this is so, when we realize that the language is the most powerful organ or instrument to express the thoughts, feelings and will of the people of a country.



A country like Japan which has existed for more than twenty five centuries, with a succession of sovereigns of one unbroken lineage, should naturally have systems most complicated in the spheres of domestic, social, cultural and political life, stamped upon, and reflected by, the spoken and written language.

1. Social Distinctions: There is no denying the fact that very delicate social distinctions in most intricate and ramified forms exist in Japan, although she has no such order as the Caste system of India. Some years ago the class distinction between the Shizoku (Military class) and the Heimin (Class of common people) was abolished by the law of the country. There was a period in the history of Japan, when the people were divided into four classes, from the soldier down through the farmer and the artisan to the merchant, in addition to the Imperial Family and the Peerage. To-day only three classes exist: the Imperial Family, the Peers and commoners.

It goes without saying that the Imperial Family stands by itself and that His Majesty the Emperor is the supreme head of the Imperial Family, and the sovereign Monarch of the entire nation. Next come the Peers, with five ranks: Princes, Marquises, Counts, Viscounts, and Barons. Commoners are equal

to one another before the law, but the strong hand of tradition still rules the minds and hearts of the people, even though the technical distinctions have been done away. So there remain in Japan social distinctions implicitly and persistently.

In the domestic life a custom exists which reveals a peculiar distinction among the members of the family. Here of course father and mother are the most prominent personages as they are in any home in the world, but before they become father and mother, they, as husband and wife, show a peculiarity which is quite strange to the Western mind. The husband may call the wife by her given name, but the wife rarely uses his given name in addressing him. He may call her Mary, but she never calls him John. Insead, she says to him "anata" (honorable you).

The parents are addressed by their children with dignified, graceful and endearing terms which vary according to the social status of the family. They call their father *tō-sama*, *o-tō-sama*, *o-tōsan* and mother, *kā-sama*, *o-kā-sama*, *o-kā-san*. The birthright, or the order of birth counts much among children. One will soon find which one is older or younger by the terms of address they use for each other. Superiority goes with the order in which they are born. Japanese



words for elder brother and elder sister are respectively "ani" and "ane", while for younger brother and younger sister are "otōto" and "imōto". When the younger brother addresses his elder brother, he says "oniisama", "niisama", "oniisan", or "niisan". In case of girls, the younger addresses her elder as "oneisama", "neisama", "oneisan", "neisan". The older brother addresses the younger one, calling him by his given name, say Joseph or Benjamin, often with the suffix "san". It may be Taro san or Goro san in Japanese. The younger daughter is addressed by the elder also by her given name, with the suffix "san", say Aiko san, or if the girl is small, the suffix "chan" is used instead of "san". Besides these distinctions, there are civil, army and naval officers who hold court ranks and Decorations.

2. Honorific Terms, Prefix and Suffix: To master the peculiar forms which we call honorific terms, both prefixes and the suffixes is absolutely necessary in our ordinary conversation. One's cultural quality is easily betrayed by the proper use or the abuse of these forms. When we speak of their Majesties, the Emperor, the Empress and the Empress Dowager, we use the suffix "Heika". For example: Ten-nō Heika (His Majesty the Emperor),

Kōgō Heika (Her Majesty the Empress), Kōtaigō Heika (Her Majesty the Empress Dowager); of their Highnesses, the Prince and Princesses of the Blood, Denka: Chichibu no Miya Denka (His Highness Prince Chichibu), and Chichibu no Miya Hi Denka (Her Highness Princess Chichibu); of Their Excellencies, Peers and high officers, Kakka: Ito Kōshaku Kakka (His Excellency Prince Itō), Gotō Hakushaku Kakka (His Excellency Count Gotō); of other superiors and equals, Dono and Sama: Shimada Saburō Dono (Mr. Saburō Shimada), Takahashi Ichirō Sama (Mr. Ichirō Takahashi). Besides these personal suffix honorifics, there are prefix honorifics such as "O", "On", "Go", "Gyo", "Mi". There are also such auxiliary verbs as "asobase" and "gozaimasu". These honorifics give elegance and dignity to our conversation.

### 3. Personal Pronouns:

(1). 1st Person Singular: Watakushi, Watashi, Wagahai, Onore, Ore, Temae, Jibun, Sessha, Boku, etc.

1st Person Plural: Ware-ware, Ware-ra, Watakushi-domo, Watakushi-tachi, etc., "ra", "domo", "tachi" are suffixes which indicate plural number, applicable to nearly all personal pronouns,—1st, 2nd, and 3rd. persons.



(2) 2nd Person Singular: Anata, Kimi, Omae, etc.

2nd Person Plural: Anata-gata, Kimi-(ra, -tachi, -gata), Omae-(ra, -tachi, -gata), etc.

(3) 3rd Person Singular: Kare, Anokata, etc.

3rd Person Plural: Kare-ra, Anokata-gata, etc.

4. Conversation: In the face of such varied social distinctions, it is a most difficult matter for the foreigner to learn to use the Japanese language correctly. A good deal of discriminatory wisdom and skill in the use of words in conversation is required. In our ordinary conversation, it is safe to treat the other Party with whom one is talking more as one's superior than as an equal.

5. Attitude of Humility: The expression of humility, whether one truly feels it or not, is a deep seated practice in our conversation, which should not be ignored. The use of honorific terms is based upon this principle of humility or self-abasement. To call one's self "boku" (servant) or "sessha" (uncouth-fellow) [see 1-, 3, II.] is itself the sign of the existence of the idea of humility or self-abasement.

In this connection, it will be quite amusing, or rather shocking to the Western mind, if the following words are cited: "Gu-sai" and "Kei-sai", the

former meaning [fool-wife] and the latter [thorn-wife]. It is generally understood that "Gu-sai" does not mean foolish wife, nor "Kei-sai" thorny wife. The adjectives, foolish and thorny are intended to go with the husband who is using these expressions, instead of, with the wife, so that the real meaning of the words is this fool's wife or this thorn's wife. The writer doubts whether there can be much consolation for a woman to be called either a foolish wife or the wife of a foolish husband. Anyhow this is a conspicuous illustration of the peculiar sense of humility in the Japanese language. So much for the literal interpretation of the meaning of those words, but the free translation makes them mean "my humble wife", and this is the true usage of the unsightly terms,—the usage which explains the reason why the Japanese wife has allowed the coinage and currency of such words to go on unprotested and unchallenged.

6. Omission of subjects: Japanese frequently omit the subjects in the 1st and 2nd persons in conversation.

In principle, it will be very easy for the reader to understand the usage of honorific terms and sentences, but as has already been hinted, they are painfully difficult in their practical applications. A few



illustrations are here given in an effort to show the reader the usages and peculiarities of the Japanese language. The heavy-typed words are all honorific:

(1). Court Usage:

His Majesty the Emperor left the Palace at eleven o'clock yesterday morning, and went to the Omiya Palace to call on Her Majesty the Empress Dowager.

Tennō **Heika** niwa sakuchō jūichi ji **go** shutsu-  
mon Ōmiya **Gosho** e **gyōkō asobasare** Kotaigo **Heika**  
ni **go taigan araserare** mashita.

(2) Question: How are you?

Answer: Thank you, I am very well.

O kawari mo **gozai** masen ka?  
Arigatō **gozai** masu **okage sama**  
de jobu de orimasu.

(Omission of the personal pronouns)

(3) Question: Have you seen this picture?

Answer: Yes, I have seen it.

Kono ye wo **goran** nasaimashita  
ka  
Hai **haiken** itashimashita.

(Another case of the omission of the personal pronouns)

Here is a good example which shows a great difference between the English and Japanese usages. In English one uses the same verb "seen" in the ques-

tion and answer, while in Japanese two different predicates are used,—namely "**goran**" and "**haiken**". It will spoil the whole tone and beauty of the conversation if one answers, saying "Hai **goran** nasaimashita", when one is asked "**goran** nasaimashita ka", because "**goran** nasaimashita ka" is a polite or honorific expression to which one should give a plain or humble reply. This simple illustration opens up before one a very wide and long avenue of the Japanese language in its use of honorific terms and of responses to them.

(4) Request: Please give my kindest regards to your mother.

Reply: Surely, I shall give it to her.  
Dōzo O **kā sama** ni yoroshiku  
**mōshi agete kudasai** mase.  
Kashikomari mashita (or) ari-  
gato gozaimasu kanarazu haha  
ni **go kōi** wo tsutae masu.

In the request, "O **kā sama**" is used while in reply "**haha**" is used, both meaning "mother". "Kashikomari mashita" and "arigato gozaimasu" are profusely used. The former means "Yes, and the latter "thank you".

(5) The prayer in the garden of Gethemane given in the Gospel of St. Luke in the 42nd verse of the 22nd Chapter:



"Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thy will be done."

"Chichi yo **mi** mune naraba kono sakazuki wo ware yori torisari **tamae** saredo waga kokoro ni arazu shite **mi** kokoro no naran koto wo nego.


(6) In one of the "Noh" dramas entitled "Hachi no ki" (Plant in a pot), this expression is used:

"Tadaima nitemo are Kamakura ni **on** daiji araba", which can be rendered: "Even just at this minute if there arises a great crisis at Kamakura".

The language of "Noh" drama is full of prefix honorifics such as "O", "On", "Mi", "Go", "Gyo". Take for instance, the "On"; **on** yado (lodging), **on** monogatari (narration), **on** jihi (mercy). "Gyo" is used to express high respect: Shinjuku **gyo** en (the Imperial garden of Shinjuku), **gyo** i (the will of a lord or master or superior).

The End.

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