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JAPANESE AS 'THE DEVIL'S LANGUAGE' – AN ESSAY ON LINGUISTIC PREJUDICE

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The topic I am going to talk about concerns a chapter in the history of human culture in early modern times in which the language spoken by Japanese people was called 'the Devil's language'. To those of you who know something about Japanese as well as to persons like me who speak Japanese as their native language, the term 'the Devil's language' as applied to Japanese not only sounds strange and puzzling, but also seems simply unjustified and unwarranted. First of all, the Devil (N.B. 'D' in the capital) refers to Satan, the archenemy of God in Christianity, while Japan has traditionally been a Buddhist country where even today believers in Christianity constitute only a marginal proportion of the whole population, as compared with its neighbouring country Korea.

In the first part of my talk, I propose to offer a brief personal account of how I came across this curious but highly intriguing idea of 'Japanese as the Devil's language' and of what I was able to find out through my own subsequent research on the topic. Then in the second part of my talk, I propose to discuss, from the point of view of cognitive linguistics, the latest development in language research, how we, as speakers of different human languages, can most reasonably come to terms with the diversity of human languages (allegedly the aftermath of the abortive attempt to construct the Tower of Babel) without going to the extremes of insisting exclusively

either on universalism (as in transformational-generative grammar) or on relativism (as in structural linguistics).

The first incident which subsequently led me to a full engagement with the subject took place in the autumn of 1977. I had an opportunity of visiting a small city called Bayonne in southern France near the Pyrenees. The reason for my visit of this particular city was just curiosity. I had often heard that the language spoken by Basque people who lived in and around that area was a very isolated language, quite unlike its neighbouring languages, French, Catalan and Spanish, and like (and even more than) classical languages extremely rich and complicated in inflection. I was simply curious to know how people speaking a language like this looked like and how their language sounded.[1] Arriving at the city by train, I bought a map of the city at the station and at once decided to go to the Basque Ethnological Museum, which was located not very far from the station. In the main hall of the museum was exhibited a series of pictures which chronologically depicted the main historical events in the history of the Basque people and each picture was accompanied with a short caption explaining what the picture depicted. When I started to look, the very first picture took me by a totally unexpected surprise. In the middle of the first picture was depicted the Devil, Satan, apparently dancing and in his background a mountain which appeared to be very much like Mt. Fuji. The caption which accompanied the picture read (in French) "At first Satan was in Japan. Only afterwards he came to the land of Basque people." I was naturally very much upset. "How could Satan, the Christian devil have been in Japan?", I thought. I asked

[1] 1 At the time of this 1977 visit to Bayonne, I was not yet aware of the Basque tradition in which the Basque language was associated with the Devil. One type of legend on this theme was mentioned by the Danish grammarian, Otto Jespersen in his *Philosophy of Grammar*, published in 1922:

> At Béarn they have the story that the good God, wishing to punish the devil for the temptation of Eve, sent him to the Pays Basque with the command that he should remain there till he had mastered the language. At the end of seven years God relented, finding the punishment too severe, and called the devil to him. The devil had no sooner crossed the bridge of Castelondo than he found he had forgotten all that he had so hardly learned.

The existence of such legendary tradition in the Basque area, coupled with the fact that Francisco Xavier himself, as well as a number of other 'Spanish' missionaries who came to Japan, was of Basque descent certainly served to create a religious myth that the Devil had once been in Japan. Note also that Mt. Fuji, which was painted behind the dancing Satan, was a volcano, still active at the time of the missionaries' arrival: Cf. the German phrase 'Teufelsküche' ('Devil's kitchen') referring to the erupting crater.

some staff members of the museum what the statement really meant, but none of them was able to give me a satisfactory account.

Five years afterwards, that is, in 1982, I came across a copy of the special issue on Japan of *Time Magazine* which had just been published. Various aspects of Japanese culture were described and discussed in this issue and there was a full one-page section on the Japanese language. The title of this section, however, surprised me – it read "The Devil's Tongue". The Japanese language, in other words, was branded as the Devil's language! The title immediately reminded me of what I had experienced before at the Basque Ethnological Museum in Bayonne, namely the association of the Devil and the land of Japan. The article enumerated a number of features of Japanese which might strike the speakers of Western languages as peculiar – such features as "dozens or more forms" corresponding to the single first-person pronoun *I* in English, ambiguous and obscure expressions often indulged in by the speakers, foreign words imported, apparently indiscriminately, from a number of different languages, several different ways of transcribing one and the same spoken word, and finally, "a quasilanguage known as *haragei*, roughly translatable as 'belly talk', in which the Japanese communicated without any words at all".[2] These in fact represent some aspects of the image of the Japanese language popularly entertained by the speakers of Western languages.[3] The article, however, said very little about why Japanese came to be called 'the Devil's language'. It simply said, "The 'Devil's language' is the description generally attributed to St. Francis Xavier". St. Francis Xavier is known as the most prominent missionary who visited Japan in the middle of the sixteenth century, but nothing was said about why St. Francis Xavier chose to call Japanese the Devil's language.

[2] The word *haragei* (*hara* 'belly', *gei* literally 'art', rather than 'talk' as given in the text) refers to the art of having one's thought correctly guessed by the hearer through insinuating behaviours and/or by using maximally indirect ways of saying things. Nowadays the alleged art is generally regarded as something suspicious and hence the word is not commonly heard.

[3] Cf. Chamberlain (1891): 'This one example may suffice to show how widely divergent (compared with European) are the channels in which Japanese thought flows. … In accidence also the dissimilarity is remarkable, Japanese nouns have no gender or number, Japanese adjectives no degrees of comparison, Japanese verbs no person. … Another negative quality is the habitual avoidance of personification. … Poetry naturally suffers more than prose from this defect of language. No Japanese Wordsworth could venture on such metaphorical lines as

"If Thought and Love desert us, from that day
Let us break off all commerce with the Muse: …"'

Chamberlain, incidentally, was the Englishman who taught at Tokyo Imperial University as the first professor of linguistics.

I was naturally curious to know what had actually happened. At the same time, I was a bit bothered, too – bothered by the fact that Japanese was given an uncomplimentary and even dishonourable name like this and this prompted me to do some research, inquiring into how it had all come about.

Now the Tokyo University Library stored a sizable number of books on Japan published in Europe in the nineteenth century and I started to check these books to see if I could find any reference to the notion of 'Japanese as the Devil's language' in them. I was in fact able to find a few references, the earliest of which dated back to 1859. In a book with the title, *Japan and Her People*, written by A. Steinmetz and published in London, I found the following description in the first paragraph of Chapter VII: LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, SCIENCE, MUSIC, PAINTING, SCULPTURE, MANUFACTURES:

> One of the old Jesuits, Father Oyanguren compiled a grammar of it [i.e. Japanese], but utterly declined to explain its mode of writing, which, he said, had been invented by the devil to perplex poor missionaries, and impede the progress of the Gospel.

The 'mode of writing' mentioned here presumably refers to the ideogrammatic characters which had originally been borrowed from Chinese but had since been thoroughly naturalized into the Japanese language. There are hundreds of such characters in daily use and many of them are quite complicated, consisting of more than ten strokes and requiring well over five seconds per character in handwriting. It is easy to imagine how perplexed at these uncouth characters the Jesuit missionaries were who knew only the Roman alphabets. Incidentally, Father Oyanguren, mentioned in Steinmetz's book, is known to have been a real person. He is also known to have been the author of a Japanese grammar, of which only two or three copies have survived to this day. It is known, however, that his grammar was a very imperfect one, the author, Father Oyanguren, himself never having been to Japan. Legend has it that the German philologist, Wilhelm von Humboldt once thought of studying the Japanese language and consulted the grammar edited by Father Oyanguren. But Wilhelm von Humboldt found Father Oyanguren's grammar so incomplete that he, in the end, gave up all hope of pursuing his study of Japanese.[4] It is also interesting to note that in the article in *Time Magazine* we saw first, the name 'Oyanguren' is

[4] On the Japanese grammar compiled by Father Oyanguren and its effect on Wilhelm von Humboldt, see Kameyama (1984).

replaced by 'St. Francis Xavier'. The latter is a much better known name than the former and as we know, a legend, in its later development, tends to become associated with a popularly better known person than the one it was originally associated with.

Thus I now know how it came about that the Japanese language came to be associated with the Christian Devil. But this is not the end of the story. More than ten years afterwards, I came across a further reference to 'the Devil's language' when I was reading the book, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (1997[1993]) by the well-known Italian semiotician, Umberto Eco. Referring to a seventeenth-century Jesuit named Athanasius Kircher, who is also characterized as "the father of Egyptology", Eco notes that hierographic languages like Egyptian, Chinese and languages of the native Americans were alike stigmatized as 'diabolic' by Kircher. Of these languages, however, Egyptian was considered exempt from criticism because the signs in the Egyptian language were known to serve a religious function, each sign referring to something which went far beyond what its pictorial form suggested. In the case of Chinese characters, Kircher found their limitations in that each character was "monogamously bound to the concept it represented", thus functioning only as "a prosaic instrument of everyday communication". But when it came to "the Amerindian signs", Kircher found that they were "not only patently denotative", but that they also "revealed the diabolic nature of a people who had lost the last vestige of archaic wisdom". Thus, "[t]he Americas, by contrast, were designated as the land of conquest; here there would be no compromise with idolaters and their low-grade species of writing: the idolaters were to be converted, and every trace of their original culture, irredeemably polluted with diabolic influences, was to be wiped away. 'The demonization of the native American cultures found here a linguistic and theoretical justification' ." (p.162) Eco's description brings to the fore a dark insidious side of the notion of 'the Devil's language'. One couldn't possibly dismiss the notion simply as a funny piece of fiction created by linguistic prejudice. It was, in fact, not at all a joking matter. It rather had a very sinister implication. Stigmatizing the language of a nation as 'the Devil's language' might very well have served as an excuse for conquering and colonizing the land of the nation, freeing the people from paganism and converting

them into Christianity. Japan was really very fortunate in not having been subject to this scenario.[5]

So far, I have discussed under the heading of 'Japanese as the Devil's language' a case of what may be called 'linguistic prejudice', i.e. a case in which the speakers of one language entertain a biased view of a language spoken by the speakers of another culture for reasons which cannot necessarily be justifiable in the eyes of the third party. Now the second question I would like to address in my talk is the following: What can modern linguistics say to this? Is there anything modern linguistics can contribute to help to overcome the problem? There is, however, one point of which we all need to remind ourselves and about which we must agree to have a common understanding. Every one of us knows that language is something special for us humans and that this applies in particular to one's native language. We say we use language just as we say we use tools. Language, in other words, is conceptualized by us as a kind of tool. But we all know very well that language, especially, one's native language, is far more than a tool. A tool functions indeed as an extension of our body, but it is still conceived of something extraneous to our body. The native language, which each of us has acquired to ourselves since birth, is not at all like a tool in the sense just mentioned. One's native language can rather be conceived of nearly as part of our body – something internalized. We can use it at will just as we can move our hands and arms freely to achieve certain goals we have in mind. Our native language comes to us so naturally. The result is that we take for granted the way our native language functions. We somehow convince ourselves that our own native language offers us the most natural ways of encoding what we experience. It is thus only natural that when we encounter a speaker of a different language encoding a situation in a different way from the way we do, we almost intuitively feel that there is something unnatural in the way the speaker of a different language behaves. The same can

[5] Only in the autumn of 2007, i.e. forty years after my first visit, was I able to find an opportunity of revisiting the city of Bayonne. The Basque Ethnological Museum was still there all right and I was very much excited over the prospect of seeing the Devil again who had once been in Japan. But, alas, the museum had been thoroughly 'modernized' in the meantime, offering no room for religious mythology. I talked with the head of the museum and he told me some such stuff might still be kept in the storehouse. I asked him to let me know any relevant information he might find out. So far, however, I have not heard from him. During my second stay in Bayonne, on the other hand, I learned through library materials that the area around had once been under the Calvinists' control and that there was rife witch-hunting and a large number of cases of inquisition remained recorded.

in fact be said about any cultural differences and language is of course part of culture. What I want to emphasize, however, is that although language is part of culture, language occupies a unique position in the whole culture in the sense that it is so naturalized in us, almost as part of our body. It is probably for this reason that the sense of incongruity about the use of language can readily be escalated – escalated eventually into prejudice against other languages and against people who speak other languages. And prejudice often engenders contempt and hate, as the case may be. How can we forestall such prejudice – prejudice which appears to be emotionally rather than reasonably grounded?

We all know from experience that when we are annoyed by someone's behaviour, we will feel a little relieved if we are told what exactly motivates the behaviour of the person in question. Now the traditional approach to language tended strongly to engage itself exclusively with language *per se* (especially its structural features), putting aside persons who constantly interact with language. In this perspective, language structure is viewed as something 'arbitrary' (i.e. language is so structured because it is so structured) – something simply to be described and not something to be explained. Cognitive linguistics, the latest development in the discipline of linguistics, has a different view of the structural features of language. It claims that the structure of language is not at all 'arbitrary'; on the contrary, it is 'motivated' – 'motivated', that is, in the sense that the structure of language must be such that it is adapted to the functions to which language is put by the speaker. It thus assumes that the structure of language is explainable – explainable in terms of the functions associated with it. To give just one simple example, we all know that polite ways of saying things tend to be longer: 'Would you mind opening the window?' is longer and sounds more polite than 'Will you open the window?' and the latter, in turn, is longer and sounds more polite than "Open the window!" Using a longer sentence means doing more labour and we feel that doing more labour for the sake of successful communication implies a larger amount of consideration being paid to the interlocutor and hence behaving politely.

Let me conclude my talk by picking up and discussing just one type of linguistic features in Japanese which are often described as strange by the speakers of other languages who happen to encounter Japanese. In the context of shopping, you often hear the Japanese speaker saying (the Japanese equivalent of) "CAN I HAVE ABOUT TWO APPLES?", "GIVE ME THREE OR SO ONE HUNDRED YEN STAMPS, PLEASE" and the like. The speaker of other languages

will certainly be puzzled by the use of approximative words in conjunction with numerals referring to such small numbers as two and three. It does seem indeed as if the Japanese speaker was here intentionally behaving in order to sound ambiguous. And to behave ambiguously will very well be interpreted that the speaker is trying to hide his/her true intention – something which a dishonest person does. This, however, is not at all the logic of Japanese. The Japanese speaker, by not specifying the exact number of the things he/she wants, in fact leaves the decision to the person who sells, implying something like 'I want two/three, but if for some reason you find it more convenient to sell me one/two or three/four, I am ready to accept. By putting the seller before him-/herself, the customer is in fact paying due respect to the seller. Hence the ambiguous way of saying is here a sign of politeness.

Cognitive linguistics tells us that the speaker of any language has the ability of construing one and the same situation in different ways and encoding it differently. Cognitive linguistics also tells us that although one and the same situation can be construed and encoded in more than one way, the speakers of different languages may differ from each other in that the speaker of one language prefers one way of construing and encoding, while the speaker of another language prefers another way of construing and encoding. (Thus referring to someone who lost his life in the war, the English speaker says, "He was killed in the war", using the transitive verb in the passive, while the Japanese speaker says (the equivalent of) "HE DIED IN THE WAR", using the intransitive.) But the number of alternatives available to the speakers across different languages will never be infinite, since they all are constrained by the cognitive capacities of the humans. And if they are indeed constrained by the human cognitive capacities, which are presumed to be basically common to all humans, then there is good reason to believe that any of the alternative ways of construing and encoding can be explained (and understood by the speakers of those languages who prefer other alternatives) in terms of the cognitive working of the human mind which motivates the particular way of saying in question.

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Abstract

The paper begins with a personal account of the author's encounter, first, with a puzzling picture on Japan exhibited in the Basque Ethnological Museum in Bayonne, France in 1977 and second, with an article entitled 'The Devil's Tongue' in the special issue on Japan of the magazine *Time* in 1982, followed by an account of the author's own research into the origin of the strange idea of 'Japanese as the Devil's language'. (The idea was 'strange', because Japan traditionally had nothing to do with the Christian Archenemy.) The paper then presents the author's findings and the first part of the paper is concluded by referring, above all, to an insidious political plot nicely cloaked in the whole idea of 'the Devil's language'. The second part of the paper discusses, from the point of view of cognitive linguistics, the latest development in language research, how we, as speakers of different human languages, can most reasonably come to terms with the diversity of human languages (allegedly the aftermath of the abortive attempt to construct the Tower of Babel) without going to the extremes of insisting exclusively either on universalism (as in transformational-generative grammar) or on relativism (as in structural linguistics).

Japonų kalba, kaip „Velnio kalba" – Esė apie lingvistinius prietarus

Santrauka

Straipsnis prasideda autorės prisiminimais pirmiausia apie Baskų Etnologiniame muziejuje Bayonne mieste, Prancūzijoje, 1977 m. pamatytą eksponuojamą gluminantį paveikslą apie Japoniją ir, antra, apie straipsnį, pavadintą „Velnio kalba", išspausdintą „Time" žurnale, specialiame leidinyje apie Japoniją 1982 m. Pateikiami ir pačios autorės tyrimai apie šios keistos minties, kad japonų kalba yra velnio kalba, kilmę. (Mintis atrodė „keista", nes tradiciškai Japonija niekaip nesusijusi su didžiausiu Krikščionybės priešu). Po to pristatomi tyrimo rezultatai ir pirmoji straipsnio dalis apibendrinama akcentuojant užmaskuotą politinį sąmokslą, gražiai pridengtą „velnio kalbos" idėja. Antrojoje straipsnio dalyje aptariamas kalbos tyrimų vystymasis iš kognityvinės lingvistikos perspektyvos: kaip mes, žmonės, kalbantys skirtingomis kalbomis, galime priimti kalbų įvairovę (po nepavykusių pastangų pastatyti Babelio bokštą), nesilaikant vien tik universalizmo (kaip teigia transformacinė-generatyvinė gramatika) ar reliatyvizmo (struktūrinė lingvistika).