

MIND THE GAP!

On the Nature of 'Rabbit Holes' or Communication Gaps Experienced
by a Westerner on First Arriving in Japan

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要 旨

ロンドンの地下鉄では'Mind the gap!'「隙間に注意してください」(プラットフォームと電車の間隙間に落ちないように気をつけてください)という注意をよく耳にする。本稿は、ほとんど日本語の知識もないまま初めて日本に来たときに著者が出会った問題や体験、一つのコミュニケーションギャップが別のコミュニケーションギャップを引き起こすのを避けようとする試みに関わるものである。実際に、'隙間に注意すること'は自覚しているときでさえもしばしば難しいことであることが判明する。

不思議の国のアリスのように著者は'コミュニケーションギャップ'のウサギの穴によく落ちる。そして著者はピーターラビットのようにマクレガーさんのキャベツ畑、言い換えれば、日本で無力にも躓いている。

本稿ではコミュニケーションギャップの本質について定義され、さまざまな例が示される。われわれは無事に目的地に到着するまでにチャールズ・ディケンズ、競馬の騎手、自転車に乗った人、ドーナツとにんじんに出会うことになるであろう。

I Mind the Gap

In the inaugural lecture of the English Communication Society last December 20004 (Professor Kenichi Tamoto) we learnt that the term 'communication gap' was not to be found in various dictionaries.

A further check, this time in The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary (1993 edition) confirms this shortcoming. 'Communication' (by itself) is defined there as 'the transmission or exchange of

information', and under 'gap' only 'credibility gap' and 'generation gap' are listed as examples.

Professor Tamoto's enjoyable account of the alert London Underground employee who was able immediately to interpret 'Nottingham' as 'Notting Hill', reminded me of the often heard underground station taped warning 'Mind the Gap!' conveyed in rather threatening, ominous tones, I always think, compared with the Japanese subway announcements, which abound with polite intonation and a clutch of 下さい s or でございます s. Of course in Japan, I'm sure, there is no need for such a phrase as 'Mind the Gap', as there most likely isn't any 'Gap' in the first place. Doubtless, platforms have been carefully constructed so that people cannot fall accidentally onto the line when getting on and off trains, whereas in London they seem to have been constructed specifically *for* that purpose.

However, on arriving in Toyohashi one cold and windy March in 1998, I little knew how important that three - or four word warning would be when taken in its metaphoric sense of 'MIND THE COMMUNICATION GAP!' Rather like Alice in Wonderland - and Japan was indeed for me a new and mystifying Wonderland - I would suddenly and often find myself plunging down various rabbit holes of mis-communication, more often than not (to mix metaphors and authors) finding myself transfixed, powerless, caught *Peter Rabbit*-like, in an alien headlight, in a cabbage patch full of apparent foxes and Mr. McGregors.

Of course this was just my panic. What I didn't realise was that, to borrow a phrase from the 19th century French poet Baudelaire, I was 'both victim and executioner'. Communication by its nature involves a communicator and a communicatee. (Yes, you're right! This word 'communicatee' doesn't exist (at least according to the above-mentioned Oxford Dictionary, but I hope you can guess what I mean!). What *do* I mean? Well, I suppose I mean that it takes two people to fall down a rabbit hole. When mis-communication takes place, two people have a problem not just one. I was not the only victim. My poor communicatee or co-communicator was just as much victim as I was. For example, I might say, when ordering a sushi in a sushi bar: "シーチケン 二つ, 下さい", holding up *one* finger to make myself clear! The resulting rabbit hole was probably as embarrassing for my communicatee as it was for me! - And the foxes and Mr. McGregors? - Just my panicked imaginings, of course. Victims of my badly executed Japanese, who always, patiently and politely, did their best to understand and help me out.

Perhaps at this point it's worth considering the nature of rabbit holes.

To misquote Gertrude Stein: 'A rabbit hole is not a rabbit hole is not a rabbit hole'. Rabbit holes are many and various. There are *grammar* rabbit holes, *pragmatic* rabbit holes, *pronunciation* rabbit holes, *lexical* rabbit holes, *semantic* rabbit holes, rabbit holes that *appear* to be rabbit holes, but turn out not to have been rabbit holes after all... In fact, a vast warren lies mine-field-like ahead of even the most wary 外国人 .

In my case, however, I *was* somewhat wary. I thought, quite wrongly, as it turned out, that my first rabbit hole would most likely be grammar-oriented, as, despite a fashionable aversion to the grammar translation method, my 6 month, once a week, 2 hours study of Japanese at an evening class in Reading had turned out to be largely grammar-based. I now have great sympathy with our students, who, unless they are fortunate rare exceptions, have probably at school, been the victims of a teacher-centred grammar translation ordeal which has left them, to all intents and purposes, paralysed when required to put their oral knowledge to use in any real communicative situation.

I, too recognize that paralysis. That inability to apply the grammar I've learnt when required to produce an utterance. Particularly when under pressure. Prescriptive grammar teaching has much to answer for.

II Charles Dickens and Prescriptive Grammar

Indeed, this was also a view taken by Charles Dickens, in Book 2, Chapter 1 of the novel 'Our Mutual Friend', 1864-5. (Quoted in David Crystal's 'The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language,' ('95), p. 191).

In his novel, Dickens describes the scene between a school teacher, Miss Peecher, who has just been speaking to a Mr. Headstone whom she secretly loves, and Charley Hexam. These two have just left, and Mary Anne, who is her favourite pupil, and is helping her in the house, wishes to say something.

(It is important to note at this point that Mary Anne's unwise in mentioning the apparent beauty of a rival to Miss Peecher, causes her to feel the full force of Miss Peecher's pedantic insistence on correct grammar, even when *not* in a classroom situation!)

To quote then, from Dickens:

"The pupil had been, in her state of pupilage, so imbued with the class-custom of stretching out an arm, as if to hail a cab or omnibus, whenever she found she had an observation on hand to offer to Miss Peecher, that she often did it in their domestic relations; and she did it now."

"Well, Mary Anne?" said Miss Peecher.

"If you please, ma'am, Hexam said they were going to see his sister."

"But that can't be, I think," returned Miss Peecher: "because Mr Headstone can have no business with *her*."

Mary Anne again hailed.

"Well, Mary Anne?"

"If you please, ma'am, perhaps it's Hexam's business?"

“That may be,” said Miss Peecher. “I didn’t think of that. Not that it matters at all.”

Mary Anne again hailed.

“Well, Mary Anne?”

“They say she’s very handsome.”

“Oh, Mary Anne, Mary Anne!” returned Miss Peecher, slightly colouring and shaking her head, a little out of humour; ‘how often have I told you not to use that vague expression, not to speak in that general way. When you say *they* say, what do you mean? Part of speech, *They*?’

Mary Anne hooked her right arm behind her in her left hand, as being under examination, and replied:

“Personal pronoun.”

“Person, *They*?”

“Third person.”

“Number, *They*?”

“Plural number.”

“Then, how many do you mean, Mary Anne? Two? Or more?”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am,” said Mary Anne, disconcerted now she came to think of it; “but I don’t know that I mean more than her brother himself.” As she said it, she unhooked her arm.

“I felt convinced of it,” returned Miss Peecher, smiling again. ‘Now pray, Mary Anne, be careful another time, He says is very different from *They* say, remember. Difference between He says and *They* say? Give it me.’

Mary Anne immediately hooked her right arm behind her in her left hand - an attitude absolutely necessary to the situation - and replied: “One is indicative mood, present tense, third person singular, verb active to say.” “Other is indicative mood, present tense, third person plural, verb active to say.”

“Why verb active, Mary Anne?”

“Because it takes a pronoun after it in the objective case, Miss Peecher.”

“Very good, indeed,” remarked Miss Peecher, with encouragement. “In fact, could not be better. Don’t forget to apply it, another time, Mary Anne.”

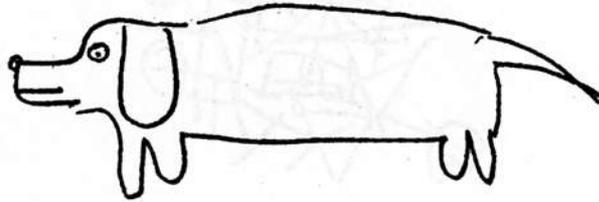
Perhaps now, we should turn to my own experiences and those of other 外国人 in Japan regarding communication gaps. Given Mary Anne’s linguistic failures (and she was a native speaker), you can imagine my fears. I felt the victim of a two-pronged attack. I was being assaulted visually as well as orally. Not only was I unable to understand a word that was said to me, but I was confronted with three ‘alphabets’ - hiragana, katakana and kanji, that were totally alien and unlike

any letters of the Roman alphabet.

III An American Perspective on the Difficulty of Learning Kanji

Dave Barry, well-known American journalist and author had similar problems, when attempting to learn Japanese for a brief 3-week visit. He remarks as follows:

“Learning to speak Japanese isn’t so bad (not that I ever came close), but learning to read it is insanely difficult... The major Japanese writing system consists of - why not? - *Chinese* characters, which represent words, not sounds. So for each word, you need a different character, which means to be even moderately literate you have to memorize thousands and thousands of characters. This wouldn’t be so bad if the characters looked like what they’re supposed to represent. For example, if the character for ‘dog’ looked like this:



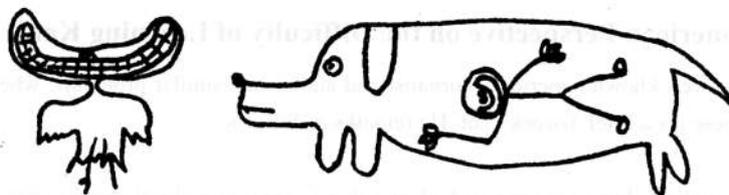
And ‘bird’ looked like this:



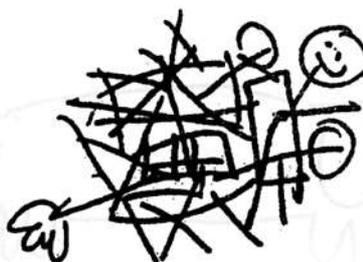
And ‘politician’ looked like this:



Then you could form a simple sentence like this:



And even a child would understand the meaning. ('The bird smiled when the dog ate the politician.'). But the Japanese / Chinese characters don't look anything like the concepts they're supposed to represent. They all look approximately like this:



"And every one of those marks is important. If you put one teensy little line in there wrong, you could change the entire meaning of the character from something like 'man holding broom' to 'sex with ostriches.'" (Dave Barry Does Japan, Dave Barry, Random House, New York, '92, pp. 21-24).

More a communication abyss than a communication gap!

However, to return for a moment, to the apparently easier matter of *speaking* Japanese, Dave Barry's problems much mirrored my own. He had trouble with even the simplest and most basic of words. Like me, he decided to start with the word for 'Thank you'. Although, *unlike* me, he found himself travelling to Japan first class on a JAL flight, and after quite a lot of wine, to give himself confidence, he took the opportunity to try the word out on the cabin attendants. He continues, and I quote:

"According to *Japanese at a Glance*," the way you say this is:

DOH-moh ah-REE-gah-toh

For some reason - again, it could have been the wine - I found this almost impossible to remember. I tried practicing on the cabin attendants, who continued to come around every few minutes with complimentary items.

“Di-moh ah-bli-GA-toh,” I would say.

Or: “DE-mi AL-le-GRET-oh.”

Or: “DA-moh o RE ga-noh.”

All of these seemed to work pretty well, but I think the cabin attendants were just being polite. I was worried about how I would do with regular Japanese civilians, especially in the light of the following stern warning from *Japanese at a Glance*.

“Take long vowels seriously; pronouncing a long vowel incorrectly can result in a different word, or even an unintelligible one.”

So I tried hard to take my long vowels seriously. The last thing I wanted was to try to thank a bellhop (young boy in uniform who answers the bell and runs errands in a hotel) and instead, because of a vowel problem, ask for his hand in marriage. After a solid hour I was still not at all confident in my “Thank you”, and most of the other phrases in *Japanese at a Glance* were even worse... The result of this language training program was that I arrived in Tokyo speaking Japanese at essentially the same fluency level as cement. I never did get much better while we were there. The only word I became really good at saying was “beer”, which is pronounced “bee-roo,” unless you want a big beer, in which case it is pronounced “BIG bee-roo.” (ibid, pp. 29–30).

IV The Writer’s Experiences in Kyoto

Dave Barry’s experience with beer was happier and more successful than my own. Early in my stay in Japan I found myself in Kyoto after a conference. However, having already grappled unsuccessfully with sushi, sashimi, observed fish and crabs, lobsters etc. still wriggling on the plate in proof of their freshness, and encountered other Japanese delicacies that gave me pause for thought... I decided to eat Italian. しかたがない, I’d had enough. However, I decided to start with a beer.

This shouldn’t have been difficult. I knew that the Japanese for ‘beer’ was almost exactly the same as the English except that you had to add a ‘-ROO’ on the end of the word. I even knew that there was a large rabbit-hole awaiting me - in fact, the very one mentioned in Dave Barry’s book *Japanese at a Glance*: - the “LONG VOWEL” RABBIT HOLE! If I wasn’t careful, and didn’t pronounce my long vowel long ENOUGH, then I was in danger of being brought a *building* rather than a *beer*. However, I thought this unlikely. Context is everything. Even the politest Japanese waiter, I thought, would not go to the trouble of bringing me a *building* even though I was an honoured おぎやくさま. But when I asked for my beer, the waiter looked puzzled. “Jockey?” he said, stretching his arms out wide and vertically, apparently to indicate large size. This presented me with several problems. It seemed that I was not going to receive a beer. I was going to receive a jockey. A man who rides horses. But this would be no ordinary jockey. No. I was an honoured guest, so I was to receive an extremely large jockey. Either that, or possibly a very large

building containing maybe not one jockey, but many jockeys, all of whom (owing to my position of honoured patron of this establishment) would be of giant sumo-wrestler-size proportions. And we both began our descent down the rabbit-hole.

However, as is almost always the case in Japan, things turned out well. My jockey proved to be a horse of a different colour. Not a jockey at all, but an enormous mug of delicious, ice-cold Japanese beer.

In other words, a non-rabbit-hole. An example of a rabbit-hole that looked as if it was going to be a rabbit-hole, but turned out not to be one after all.

V Getting Lost

As well as love of beer, Dave Barry and I have another thing in common. We both get lost. Or more accurately, we both get lost in Japan. In his case, he was lucky enough, (or so it at first appeared) to be able to carry around with him a card on which were written “THE 32 MOST USEFUL JAPANESE PHRASES.” However, who determined that they were the most useful, and what you are supposed to do after you have pronounced them is not specified. Barry writes:

“Fortunately, my inability to learn Japanese was not much of a problem, thanks to a little pocket-sized reference card that came with *Japanese at a Glance*, entitled THE 32 MOST USEFUL JAPANESE PHRASES. I carried this card everywhere. On the left-hand side, the card told you how to pronounce these phrases in Japanese. Here, for example, with no exaggeration, is how you’re supposed to pronounce “I’m lost”:

“*Mee-chee nee, mah-YOHT-teh shee-mah-ee-mah-shtah!*”

Even reading from this card, it would probably take me fifteen minutes to pronounce this successfully, and I’m not sure how much good it would do me. Let’s say I actually managed to say to a Japanese person, “Mee-chee nee, mah-YOHT-teh shee-mah-ee-mah-shtah.” The Japanese person would probably respond with something like, “na-go--wah-ME-yoh -nah-mah-TSOY-yah-ska-wo-mah,” meaning “I see.” And then I’d need *another* phrase, requiring another fifteen minutes to pronounce. In terms of time management, it seemed more efficient to remain lost, which is pretty much what we did for the whole three weeks.” (pp. 30–31).

And that’s pretty much what I’ve done for the last 6 years. However, I still remember the first occasion most vividly.

Having been installed with the help of my Japanese colleagues in an apartment just five minutes from the university. I had no choice one day but to actually leave the flat in order to go out to buy something to eat and drink. A simple operation at home, this took on, here in Japan, the proportions of a major battle campaign.

The first step was to try to remember how to get to the nearest supermarket. As streets in Japan have no names, and houses, shops etc. have no numbers (taxi drivers seem to find their way around by telepathy) - and even if roads did have names, I was in no position to be able to read them, I was immediately in trouble. A thoughtful colleague, however, had drawn me a map. The supermarket was about five minutes' walk away, so after about an hour and a half I located it. Then my troubles really started. I had a shopping list, but I soon realised it was useless, as I had no idea which kanji represented which item on the list. If the kanji had been of the Dave Barry type (bird smiling at politician eating dog) I would have been OK, but I was limited to anything that had a picture illustration on the packet of what was inside, or anything that I could actually recognize, or thought I could recognize. (e.g. an egg is an egg is an egg). But even then, you can go wrong. This is because the products themselves don't actually like being bought by foreigners. They don't want to end up inside a 外人. Anything might happen. It could be dangerous. In fact, I could even hear them talking anxiously to each other on the shelves about the approaching danger:

"Look out honourable Tea, "Coffee would whisper anxiously, I think he's coming over here."
 "Oh, no!... Phew, that was lucky!", Tea would reply, "He's just knocked over all those toilet rolls... Those 外人 are so clumsy!" "Lucky for you, they are!" Coffee would reply.

"Watch out, Natto!" Bread would call. He thinks you're a doughnut with raspberry jam inside! You'll end up half-eaten in the ごみ bin!"

"I say, Salt!" Sugar would call out, "Better be careful! He thinks you're me! You're going to end up in a cup of that awful English tea!"

Finally, with a much reduced shopping list, over half the items of which later proved to have no resemblance whatsoever to what I thought they were, I exited the supermarket.

Finding my way back should have been a piece of cake. I had found my way there - OK, it had taken me about one hour twenty minutes more than it should have - but in the end, I had done it. Now all I had to do was exactly the same but in reverse. (I don't mean actually walking backwards, although come to think of it, that method might well have proved more successful). Actually, I never had a chance from the start. The conversations, sometimes whispered, sometimes more blatant, between Mr. Tea, Mr. Coffee, Mr. Natto, and their friends had un-nerved me. That, plus the fact that four or five helpful shop-assistants were dancing around between my legs, bowing and smiling and attempting to restore the Fuji-san-sized mountain of toilet rolls to its original form, caused me to overlook one vital fact. The supermarket had TWO EXITS. If I had managed to go out of the exit/entrance that I had come in by, I might have stood a chance. But of course, TANAKA'S LAW OF SELECTIVE CATASTROPHE, which, as you know, states that: 'In Japan, given two choices, a Gaijin will without fail catastrophically select the wrong one' immediately came into operation. I walked out of the 'wrong' exit.

It was a Sunday evening, about 8.00 p.m. The streets were deserted. So no-one to ask. Every now and then, as I wondered aimlessly around, my heart would suddenly leap with hope. I was sure I had seen that telegraph pole before! But no. A telegraph pole, is a telegraph pole, is a telegraph pole. But, wait! There's my LAWSON! But, no again. A totally different LAWSON. And so it went on. Darker and darker. Windier and windier. Colder and colder. A desert in a metropolis.

And then, in the distance, literally, a ray of light. An elderly man was approaching very slowly on a bicycle. We saw each other at about the same time. My heart filled with joy, his with gut-clenching apprehension. I had found a potential saviour. He had found potential trouble. What had he done to deserve me?! Perhaps in another life he had unwittingly stepped on a beetle, and this was his reward.

The light from his bicycle came nearer. There were no side-roads. He couldn't escape. To be honest, I would have been worried, too. To see a deranged 外人 wandering around in the dark, clutching two plastic bags, with a look of total desperation on his face was not what he had been expecting. True, the 外人 hadn't been expecting it either, but あぶない, ですね!

The first rabbit-hole proved to be one of those illusory ones. I thought I would have trouble explaining that I had got lost, and was summoning up the courage to produce a Dave Barry-esque:

"Mee-chee nee, mah-YOHT-teh shee-mah-ee-mah-shtah!"

Clutching my hand-drawn map in my teeth (both hands were occupied with heavy shopping) probably didn't help my pronunciation very much and must have given me a particularly terrifying aspect. Stepping up to the unfortunate man, I produced a long string of unintelligible sounds which scared him so much that he wobbled to a halt almost collapsing, plus bicycle, onto the road in front of me. If I hadn't tried to smile at the same time as speak what purported to be Japanese through clenched teeth, it might still have been OK, but my attempted smile completely finished him off.

In actual fact, it wouldn't have been necessary to say anything. Any fool could see I was lost. So, of course, I simply made things worse by attempting to explain the fact. My pronunciation was so bad that probably I had only managed to say something like:

"Excuse me, I've just escaped from a lunatic asylum, and I can't find my way back. Could you help me?"

To give the man credit, he did very well. And he seemed to be gifted with telepathic powers beyond the imagination. In my desperation, I continued to mumble in incomprehensible Japanese (incomprehensible both to me and to him I would have thought) yet he appeared to understand everything I was saying! Every time I paused, to check he was still with me, he would nod violently and let forth a volley of "Hai"s. Not just one "hai", but a machine gun's worth. - Just to make sure I

was in no doubt that he understood every word I was saying:

“Machee-nay, mochee- gotchee shee- mah -mah-ee- machee - mochee-shee-mah-ee- hah-shtah.”, I would say anxiously.

Immediately: “Ah! Soo! - HAI, HAI, HAI, HAI, HAI !”, he would machine-gun back. I paused. Then:

“Cheeeeeeeeeeezu! Cheeeeeeeeeeezu! Harry gah-toh. Doh moh, doh-moh. Harry-gah-toh!” I continued, putting the shopping down, and taking the map from between my clenched teeth. (More confidently, actually, for I was certain, due to an earlier unfortunate experience in a book shop, that the Japanese for ‘map’ was in fact ‘cheese’).

Again a volley of ‘Hai’s. He was still with me. And things were looking good.

However, I had now exhausted my Japanese, so I was forced to revert to English, and I knew I had to keep it simple:

“Way back(ee)? My house (ee)? You know(ee)?” I shouted, knowing, as all foreigners do, that if they shout, their chances of being understood are doubled, or even trebled. Just to make sure, I also added a few ‘ee’s on the end of my words, just to help him out a little with my own added Japanese accent.

Even this did not discourage him:

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Soooooooooo desuuuuu kaaaaa! Hai, hai, hai, hai, hai, hai, hai!”

I was a fraction discouraged by the “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Soooooooooo desuuuuu kaaaaa!”, which I hadn’t come across before, but the “Hai”s were still coming thick and fast. However, I then had a terrible thought. Could it be that the simplest word in the Japanese language, the word that all foreigners learn first, actually didn’t mean “Yes” at all? The thought was staggering. Every respectable (and some not so respectable) Japanese/English dictionaries, invariably give the translation of “Hai” as “Yes”. Could I have stumbled across a terrible error which had incredibly gone unnoticed for perhaps hundreds of years? COULD IT BE THAT THE WORD “HAI” DID NOT MEAN “YES”? It was too horrible a thought to contemplate. But I decided to test it, all the same: I would try him in German:

“Entschuldigen Sie, bitte”, I said, ‘ich habe mich verirrt. Könnten Sie mir bitte, helfen? Könnten Sie mir bitte den Weg nach Hause zeigen?’

“Aaaaah! Hai, hai, hai, hai, hai!” he nodded enthusiastically. This was a little worrying. Did he

know German? I decided to try him in French:

“Excusez-moi,” I said, “mais je ne sais pas où se trouve mon appartement. Est-ce que vous pourriez m’aider?”

HAI! Hai, Hai, Hai, Hai, Hai! He volleyed, nodding almost twice as fast, and throwing in a little bow. Apparently French was his favourite language. However, it was still just possible that he was actually competent in English, French and German. The clincher had to be Swedish. If he understood Swedish, he was definitely Japan’s leading polyglot.

“Ursaehte mig”, I said, “men jag vet inte precis hur jag ska komma till mit hus. Var so god och hjaelper mig.”

Again a volley of “Hai’s”. The man was clearly a genius. But as we continued, it became apparent that we had entered a rabbit hole of ever-widening proportions. On the surface, we were communicating to perfection. Not only in Japanese, but also by some miracle, in English German, French and Swedish! But it was all a charade. In Japan, land of ambiguity, it should have come as no surprise to me that “Hai” sometimes means “yes” and sometimes does not mean “Yes” at all - at least, not in the way that it is used in the West to signify assent or agreement. It all seems to come down to cultural politeness. It is polite to use “aizuchi”, to show the listener that you are attending carefully to what he / she wishes to convey. Of course, we do this in English, too, but nowhere to the extent that it is done in Japan.

My unfortunate polyglot was merely politely trying to convey to me that he could HEAR what I was saying. That he was ATTENDING CLOSELY to my conversation. The fact that he was unable to understand a single word, was quite unimportant. He was obeying the rules of polite conversation, even when being confronted by a mad 外人 .

I tried to learn from this experience.

VI Hospitals and Hairdressers

After some time I became the proud owner of a Japanese driving licence, and one day, a Japanese lady asked me if I could give her a lift to hospital, as it was on the way back to my flat. “No problem”, I said. “Jump in!” She gave me various directions, but on the way she suddenly stopped me and asked me to pull up in front of a lady’s hairdresser’s.

I know that ladies like to look their best at all times. Perhaps even particularly before an important appointment - or a stay in hospital. But from past experience I’ve learnt that ladies in hairdressers take a long time. Often as long as 2 or 3 hours. I wasn’t in a particular hurry, but I hadn’t been planning to spend three hours waiting outside a beauty salon, and then I don’t know

how long driving from there to the hospital. But, apparently, the lady was ill, so I would have to 'gaman'. However, she noticed the expression on my face change slightly (we Western 外人 are not very good at hiding our feelings) and enquired anxiously: “だいじょうぶですか。” I replied with a volley of 'hai's' worthy of the man on the bicycle, and settled down to wait.

Luckily, she noticed I was waiting, and came out of the hairdresser's again to explain. How many communication gaps can you spot, I wonder?

- 1 Yes. Our old friend the long vowel. 'byouin' in Japanese is hospital, but the short vowelled 'byoin', as I now know, means - hairdresser's. All the time she had only been asking me to drop her off at the hairdresser's.
- 2 My concern for the lady was probably misplaced. A 'hospital visit' in the West, is usually a pretty serious matter involving a stay of some days, or weeks, or even months in hospital. Equivalent to the Japanese 'nyuinsuru'. But if my friend actually had had a 'hospital visit' it would most probably just have been a routine check-up at a doctor's surgery. Lasting half an hour. No big deal!!

So, long vowels do matter.

VII Lonely Sushi

Perhaps I can give one last example (it really happened to me) of a rabbit hole that by some miracle I somehow managed to avoid.

I had formed the habit of regularly visiting a sushi- bar. Not that I liked sushi. I didn't. Raw fish? Ugggggggggh!! However, I had found one item that I could not only eat, but really enjoyed eating. Sea-chicken- or tuna. In fact, I had become quite famous for my 'shee-chicken' as they pronounced it. I became very good at saying: “Shee-chicken futatsu, kudasai.” In fact, I only had to put my head round the entrance of the restaurant door, for the whole staff to beam with delight, nearly deafening me with “Irashimase”s.

One particular thing impressed me. I didn't only get 'shee-chicken'. I also got decoration in the form of two or three thin and beautifully carved slices of cucumber arranged artistically on top of the tuna. Then, one day it all changed. As I entered the shop I sensed something was wrong. The “Irashimase”s were there, but they sounded different,. Just a fraction less enthusiastic. I sat down. And then I saw that the personnel had completely changed. The shop had been taken over. It was still a sushi-bar, but now a different chain. “Oh, well”, I thought, “a sushi, is a sushi, is a sushi!” But it wasn't. When my shee-chicken arrived, it was shee-chicken, all right, but where was my artistic decoration? There was NO CUCUMBER!

Now, I had a problem. Perhaps through misconceived notions about Japanese politeness, I felt I couldn't just say: 'Give me cucumber! It seemed so rude - even if in Japan, the customer is king. How could I communicate my problem, without appearing to be rude? I would have to try to do what I tell my students to do in such situations. If you don't know how to say something one way, find another way to express it. So, having recently learnt the word for 'lonely' in Japanese', I came up with:

“Sumimasen ga, shii-chicken wa chotto sabishii mitai , desu ne!”

I seemed to have got lucky. Everybody laughed, and I got my cucumber!

VIII Doughnuts, Carrots, Underwear and a Wedding

Perhaps, to conclude, it would be interesting for you to see if you can spot the communication gap in these remaining examples. Some I can vouch for - they actually happened, although others may be apocryphal.

The first (which, I actually heard myself) is a little similar in type to the famous mistake made by President John Kennedy when visiting Berlin. At the time it was still under threat from the Russians. Kennedy's purpose in going to Berlin was to show that America stood firmly behind Berlin and would protect the city against any Russian threat.

One memorable day, speaking in German, he produced, before a huge crowd of West Berliners, the unforgettable sentence: “I am a doughnut.” (In German; ‘Ich bin ein Berliner!’). He, or probably his unfortunate translator - I hate to think what might have happened to him/her afterwards - had added one vital word ‘ein’ (‘a’) in front of ‘Berliner’. This had the effect of changing the meaning from: ‘I'm a Berliner’ (I consider myself a citizen of Berlin), to ‘I am a doughnut (a ‘Berliner’ is a special kind of doughnut found only in Berlin).

The similar example I'm thinking of is as follows: An American was travelling on a subway in Nagoya during the rush-hour. Many people were standing, but no-one would take the only remaining empty seat - which was next to him. Rightly or wrongly he felt discriminated against. Finally he could bear it no longer, and as he got off the subway he shouted out the equivalent in Japanese of;

“I AM A CARROTT! YOU'RE CARROTS, TOO! WE'RE ALL CARROTS, OK?”

Naturally, the Japanese passengers were mystified. What do you think he wanted to say? Can you find the gap?

On another occasion, an English friend of mine was in the vegetable section of a supermarket. He

hunted, but couldn't find what he was looking for. Finally he went up to a pretty young assistant and asked her the equivalent in Japanese of:

"Excuse me, but where do you keep your underwear?"

Can you spot the gap?

Finally, (and not very good for American/Japanese relations), what should have been a romantic wedding ceremony was taking place between Brad and sweet little Kumiko. The big moment arrived. The priest uttered the Japanese equivalent of:

"DO YOU TAKE THIS WOMAN TO BE YOUR LAWFULLY WEDDED WIFE?"

The American hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"NO WAY!" (Dillon, 01, 83).

Had he changed his mind at the last minute? Or was this a rabbit hole that marked the end of their relationship?

If you should ever go to England some time in the future, and find yourself on the underground - in Piccadilly Circus - or perhaps Notting Hill, please pay special attention to those three magic words **"MIND THE GAP!"** and be prepared for anything!

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