

Hidden implications

言葉の裏

By Miriam Davis

Over a meal with my pastor's family I said to first year high schooler, Sasagu, 'You like English, don't you?' Expecting the answer 「はい、好きです」 I was a little surprised when he looked slightly embarrassed and made some undecipherable sounds. Mum, Hanna, explained 'If you say, 'I like English (or cooking, or whatever),' it automatically implies that you are good at it. It's best to add 「何々が好きですが、得意（とくい）ではありません。」 Japan is notorious for the concept of 「裏（うら）がある」 in communication styles but it seems that even the simplest exchange can be a pitfall for the learner unaware of its hidden implications or meaning.

'Do you expect the worst or the best this year? Are your expectations negative or positive? Are you expectations based on bad past experiences or faith in a faithful God?' A colleague was challenging a group on their expectations for the coming year. He used the Japanese word 「期待（きたい）」 exactly where he would have used English 'expect' only to discover afterwards, that 「期待」 cannot be used negatively.

English 'expect' は、良いことにも悪いことにも使うことが出来るようですが、日本語の期待はたいてい良いことにのみに使うようです。それで、「良いことが起こるか全く期待することが出来ない」といわずに、「良いことがあるように期待しますが、何が起こるか全く予想（よそう）できない OR 悪い事が起きるのを予期（よき）すること出来ない」などといえます。

Speaking on the characteristics of Moses' prayer in Genesis 18, I also discovered the pitfalls of words in

Japanese which are not complete translational equivalents of English. I looked up the word 'persistent' beforehand and discovered 「しつこい」. As I said 'and the next characteristic is that Moses 「しつこく祈った」, 'I heard church member and Japanese teacher sitting in the front row, suck in her breath and knew that I had used the wrong word. I hastily explained my meaning in other words as best I could and asked later what I should have said. 「しつこい」 is only used in negative contexts so 「忍耐強い（にんたいづよい）」 was the expression to use here.

Another example of overlapping but not matching fields of meanings in vocabulary items is 「暇（ひま）」 meaning 'free'. In English we say 'Please come over whenever you are free.' However, in Japanese to use 「暇」 in the same context implies that the other person is lazy. Since discovering this, I often hear people using 「暇」 in reference to themselves. So as a rule of thumb, keep 「暇」 for yourself but say when inviting others 「時間があつたらぜひ遊びに来てください。」

Feel depressed by the above? Well, here is a testimony from Diana Reuter of the Evangelical Free Church Mission Japan to touch and encourage your heart.

"I came to Japan in mid-life and found it very hard to learn Japanese. I studied on a part-time basis for a while when I lived in Tokyo, but couldn't use it. I didn't start to learn the language until I moved to Hokkaido and had to make new friends because not very many people here speak English. I took a class at OMF Japanese Language Center once a week for a year or so and now have a tutor coming to my home.

Even though I could not speak Japanese, I presented the gospel to a woman who was dying in the hospital. On a day appointed by the Lord, I used the Bible and gestures to tell her the good news. The woman received eternal life and was

completely healed. When she was released from hospital, she came to church, was baptized, discipled, and now disciples others.

I also had a goal of reading through the Japanese Bible. I really learned more and was consistent in my reading when I wrote a summary of the chapter I read, first in English and later in Japanese. I finished reading through the Japanese Bible and have written on every chapter in the Bible.

I am happy now that I can pray and present the gospel in a more understandable way. I was thrilled the other day when God spoke Japanese words through me. I visited my neighbor in the hospital. In the middle of my prayer, I said words that did not come from my thoughts nor were they my usual prayer vocabulary. I said, "Kami sama, anato no eien no inochi o ataete kudasai." My friend's body relaxed so completely that she slumped. She said afterwards that something came from me into her. I said it was not from me but that was God's Holy Spirit she received. This Japanese woman now has eternal life because the prayer spoken was from God.

A lot of the Japanese language still goes over my head, but I'm catching more and more words as they fly by. The more I learn, the less stress and more pleasure I find. I pray that the Lord will use me more and more for His glory and to save more Japanese."

“Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God.”

偉大なことを神に期待し、
偉大なことを神のためにな
そうと試みる
(William Carey.)

Miriam Davis came to Japan in 1975 from the UK and taught English in schools and universities in Nara prefecture, Nagoya and Osaka for 8 years. In 1986 she joined OMF International and moved to Sapporo to do church planting and English teaching. From 1990-2011 she was OMF Japan's Language Adviser