

Japanese Language

Ever since I was little, I have always enjoyed listening to different languages and seeing its written forms. I was especially captivated when I first heard Japanese, from the way the words roll off tongues to the deep meanings to the differences to English when comparing the two side-by-side. This captivation led me to pursuing this language, which I have to opportunity of doing in my high school. During my three week trip in Osaka, Dr. Kuboi, a professor who had helped Connor and I throughout the entire trip, had said that “language is the essence of culture.” I agree with this and believe that the values of a culture can be reflected through its usage in daily life, from names to proverbs, or even common phrases in everyday life.

From long ago, people have used language to communicate with one another in order to improve society and their own personal daily lives. It was, and still is, a way to build relationships with others and to share information. Even if a person was unable to read, it was enough to be able to speak. Written language is used to more easily show the meaning of certain words or phrases. Kanji are Chinese characters in the Japanese writing system. Kanji is made up of pictograms, and so the meaning of a word can be seen through its shape, such as 山(mountain) or 川(river). Kanji is sometimes comical when the characters are deciphered one-by-one when they make up a vocabulary word such as a word I picked up within my 3 weeks in Osaka: vending machine (自動販売機). It is made up of characters that mean “self moving market sell machine.” Nowadays, it has been shortened to just 自販機. Because each character that make up words have a meaning, using those words to make up bigger words create a deeper meaning for words. The writing system in Japan helps to show its cultural ancestry, because kanji originated from China, a place closely tied to Japanese culture.

Another thing I found interesting was the use of honorifics when referring to people. The level of familiarity between two people can easily be recognized in a Japanese conversation through the usage of honorifics. If two people are not very close or are in a professional environment, ～さん will usually be attached to a person's name. A person's position can also be identified through the suffixes or honorifics when addressing a person. However, only the person with the "higher" standing would have an honorific attached to their name. For example, younger siblings would address their older sibling, attaching ～兄さん(brother) or ～姉さん(sister) after their name, making the relationship between the two people more clear. Another position that could be identified would be the addition of 先生(teacher) to the names of teachers or doctors. The usage of honorifics also reflect the social hierarchy which is rooted into Japanese culture, displaying the value of respect towards others and those of higher social class.

Names are important. They are used as a way of identifying people and stick to them for the rest of their lives. However, unlike English names, when Japanese names are being decided, parents or grandparents may decide on a name based on hopes they have for the child. These hopes can be geared toward their future, personality, or even appearance, so the characters that make up a person's name are positive with beautiful and deep meanings. Names were one of the topics that came up whenever I talked with various people during my trip in Osaka. I learned the meaning of the names of friends that I made. Sometimes, a girl's name will include a character for beauty, which could be represented by the kanji for flower. For example, the name Nonoka(希々花) is made up of the characters for hope and flower. The name of my new friend Ayumi(愛歩) consists of the characters for love and step. This name represents the hope that Ayumi will love all and be able to move forward one step at a time. Male names are usually representative of their morals as opposed to their appearance. The name Kouhei(恒平) means to always be peaceful, reflecting the hopes from the parents that he will be tranquil throughout his life. Japanese names can also consist of deeper meanings for the

world. Some names can be names of flowers, seasons, or other things from nature. These names can be representative of ancient Japanese beliefs such as Shintoism, which is a religion that believes that all things in nature consist of divine power. When I stayed with rotarians for two nights, I learned that some names also have numbers in them. If a couple has more than one child, they can put numbers in their children's names to "number" them, including their place in the family in their name. The name with the character for one can mean that the child is a first born, the inclusion of the character for two can mean that the child is a second born, and so on. The character for three was in the name of the rotarian I stayed with, and he had two siblings with the characters for one and two, showing that he was the youngest of the three. However, not all numbers in names represent birth order. For example, the name Chihiro(千尋) consists of the character for thousand. This does not mean that a couple has had a thousand children, but rather is part of the meaning of the name, which is a thousand fathoms in which the hope is for that child is to be smart.

On the second day of arriving in Osaka, Connor and I met a woman named Ayane and her friend Gai. Gai was very helpful throughout our trip, and I had a conversation with him about Japanese phrases while he was helping me with my Japanese. One of the phrases we talked about was 「いただきます」, a phrase used before beginning every meal, or even just a snack. He explained that the meaning of *いただきます* was to receive. The historical background of the phrase is representative of the Buddhist teachings of the past. People were taught to "lower" themselves and see others as "higher" than they were. It was a sign of respect. It translated to "thank you for allowing me to eat, even though I do not deserve it." Using *いただきます* expresses humbleness and thankfulness towards the emperor, gods, animals, and everything that contributed to the meal. Towards things that were not meals, I noticed that people in Osaka also used *いただきます* when receiving a gift, showing that the phrase can also mean to gratefully receive something while once again, lowering oneself while raising the other person.

Another phrase I paid attention to during my trip was 「お世話になりました」 . Prior to the trip, the previous student ambassadors had left some tips for Connor and I for our trip to Osaka. One advice was to say 「お世話になりました」 to our hosts before leaving. お世話になりました roughly translates to “thank you for taking care of me.” However, I would notice that whenever my host mother, Ms. Teranishi, is on the phone, she would use this phrase with a different variation after answering the phone. She would say いつもお世話になっております, which is a polite way of saying “thank you for always taking care of me.” Even though the caller did not necessarily do anything to receive thanks, Ms. Teranishi is grateful for everything the caller has done up to that point in time. Just like with いただきます, this is representative of the Japanese culture of being humble and grateful towards everything.

The trip to Osaka really helped me understand the Japanese language a lot better through first-hand experience and conversations with various people that have been helpful throughout the journey. It helped me gain a deeper appreciation for the culture and its ties to its language. I was able to connect Japanese to my prior knowledge of Chinese in order to decipher the deeper meanings of the language and the values of Japanese culture. Every person I have met on this trip has contributed to this discovery, and the memories of their hospitality and insights will stay with me throughout the rest of my life.