

BEHIND AMBIGUITY

## When muzukashii means more than 'difficult'

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I wish I had a share of Google stock for every time I have heard a Japanese person tell me that their language is "aimai *na gengo* (an ambiguous language)." How did this bizarre notion originate, and why do many Japanese entertain it? And what's more, can a language itself be ambiguous, apart from the people who use it?

Consider the following situations in which seemingly ambiguous words or phrases are used.

You, a non-Japanese, are at a party with your spouse. A Japanese acquaintance is there too, and you approach and greet him. Then you ask, "Okusama *wa?* (Where is your wife?)."

"Aa, *kanai wa chotto* (Oh, my wife is a bit . . .)" he replies, nodding knowingly.

A bit what? A Japanese might tell you that there is a definite *aimaisa* in this answer, making it difficult for a non-Japanese to understand. Undaunted by vague replies, you persist.

"I understand that you like Canadian films," you say. "Why is that?"

"Ma, *suki desu ne. Nantonaku* (Well, I do like them. Somehow.)"

Somehow? Now how would that be? Still not prepared to give up on what appears to be an exceedingly blurry-worded individual, you home in on him for the kill with a final question, determined to get at least one concrete answer out of him.

"So," you say, squinting piercingly at him, "how about that job for me? Are you going to hire me as your *eikaiwa no sensei* (English conversation teacher)?"

"Ya (Hmm)," he says, scratching the nape of his neck, "muzukashii

*desu ne* (It's difficult, I think)."

What's difficult? Is English too difficult for him? Now you are so hopelessly in a *gorimuchu* (fog) that you throw up your arms in despair, smile (which is always a vague way to get out of sticky situation) and make a beeline for the *kappamaki* (a roll of cucumber-stuffed sushi) on the buffet table.

Now, not a few Japanese will tell you that you have come up against traditional, garden-party variety Japanese ambiguity. They will aver that any Japanese would understand implicitly that the man simply does not want to commit himself as to why his wife is indisposed; that his preference for Canadian cinema is a natural liking, the reason for which he cannot put his finger on; and that *muzukashii* doesn't really mean "difficult" in that context, it means "No way, Jose."

Be all that as it may, in the above cases it is not the language itself but rather its user that is being equivocal.

I am frequently told that Japanese people share *ishin denshin*, or a kind of telepathic silent communication. A wink here, a smile there, a bit of tongue sucking thrown in and you've got all the information you need to write "War and Peace." Actually, this facility exists in many cultures.

If there is a difference between Japanese and, say, most Westerners, the Japanese may be more apt to pause and remain silent. A Japanese person may typically shy away from making vehement statements of like and dislike, particularly if they think it might offend someone.

Instead of telling you that you are not going to be hired to teach English conversation, the person uses *muzukashii* to soften the answer.

Actually, Japanese is by no means an ambiguous language; and furthermore, when two people understand each other, no matter how vague-sounding their words may be, they are communicating in a totally concrete fashion. If non-Japanese do not pick up on the meanings, it is not because the language is ambiguous, but probably because they are unfamiliar with the customs and social conventions of Japan, where *enryo* (restraint) and *kikubari* (sensitivity to the feelings of others) are virtually considered national virtues.

A Japanese who answers like the man at the party is no doubt

speaking "ambiguously" for a very solid reason. Whether you can guess that reason or not depends not primarily on your linguistic abilities but on how profoundly you understand the speaker's culture, personality and psychology.

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