

Being Different: Is it Always a Good Thing?



I have been living in Japan for the past few years. One of the things I have learned is to choose my words carefully, lest I get myself totally misunderstood.

Japanese tend to see the world in a very different way than people from other cultures, and how they use words and expressions is a reflection of their perceptions.

Even seemingly simple English words can have vastly different connotations in Japanese. This is especially true when it comes to American English. Americans are individualistic; Japanese are not. Theirs is a culture in which the individual matters less, and harmony, relations and communal interests reign supreme.

It is easy to translate English words for objects into Japanese; words for things such as a tree, water or spoon have relatively precise translations. However, conceptual words such as love, hate, passion, harmony, limit and the like are not so easy to translate.

As Americans, our main cultural values are based on individualism. Ours is a land of individuals from many cultural backgrounds, building a nation on a vast and open continent. Historically, we have viewed the world also as an infinite place with infinite opportunities, where man can—and perhaps must—control everything in a never ending quest to exploit nature.

To be sure, what has worked for us so well in the past, might not do so in the future. As we are rapidly depleting Earth's limited resources, it might serve us well to look into how we see things, and perhaps realize that our assumptions are key to finding (or missing) the solution to our common problems.

Is Being Different Good or Bad?

For example, take the word "different." In English, "different" has several meanings. It could mean "not the same." It also could mean something that is separate and distinct from common things. The sentence "*we need a different kind of person*" could mean "*we need somebody who can get things done.*" Being different can be a good thing—to us.



The general translation of the word “different” into Japanese is “chigau.” However, in the way Japanese see common reality, harmony can easily matter more than things such as efficiency. In Japanese, a common meaning of the word “chigau” is “wrong.” So, being different could obviously be not good at all!

“Chigai masu” in Japanese literally translates to “**It (or this) is different.**” However, it is nearly always used to mean “**This is wrong.**”

Time Flies?

The way we use words also shows the way we perceive reality. Let’s take something we all deal: time. We always can know what time it is, and constantly face the question of know what to do with it.

Time is all around us and we love to keep track of it. We put clocks on our walls and desks, have them in our cars and on our computers, next to our beds, on our phones and microwave ovens. We hear the correct time on the radio, see it on TV. And then, just to make sure we haven’t missed anything, we wear a watch.

But, knowing the right time is a little like weighing a box—without knowing what’s inside. The best we can know is that the box weighs, say, 5 pounds, without knowing what is inside.

We can precisely know what time **it** is. But, do we know what this “it” is?



We generally perceive time as an object. Time can “**belong**” to me, to you or to others. We can **make it, take it, give it, waste it** and sometimes even **kill it**.

Take a look at the following expressions:

I need **my own** time!

Can you **make** some time for me please?

I am sorry for **taking** your time.

Please **give** me 10 minutes.

All they do in the office is **kill** time.

We can buy time, sell it, spend it, save it, find or lose it, and for sure, manage it:

Taking the train, instead of driving, will **buy** us a lot of time.

You should **spend** your time studying instead of watching TV.

You can **save** time by being more organized.

I have **lost** a lot of time!

You need to **manage** your time better.

We can use time until it is finished:

Students should **use** their time wisely.

We are **out of** time.

Time is **up**!

There is **no more** time for discussions.

Instead of us moving through time, we stay stationary and time comes up and goes away:

The time for action has **come**.

Where did time **go**?

Many happy years **went by**.

Metaphors are Neither Real, Nor Universal

Our English sounds good when we think of time as a “thing”. But perhaps it is useful to realize that a metaphor is not a substitute for reality. We can own a lot of things, but time is really not one of them.

We give time wings, and then accuse it of flying away—maybe because we don’t like to blame ourselves for letting it “get away” from us. ...tick... tick... tick...

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