

The void of English

TERRY P. CAESAR*

I can't write Portuguese. So my words must be translated in order to reach a Brazilian audience. However, I can teach English. My words must not be translated in order to reach a Japanese audience – otherwise it wouldn't be teaching, or at least teaching English.

Teaching is not writing. Students in a classroom are not readers in their solitary rooms. And yet the English teacher in Japan, if he is a native, finds himself in a condition whereby his language continually disappears. How to characterize the space into which it disappears? One way: the Japanese language. Another way: a void.

The historical and cultural reasons for this disappearance would take us far afield. They range from the fact that Japan was separated from the rest of the world for over two hundred years, through the ways the study of English was first introduced on the model of learning Chinese, to the enduring examination system, whereby English abides as a subject to be studied for educational or vocational advancement, rather than a language to be spoken. Hundreds of Japanese, nevertheless, manage to learn to speak English anyway, especially after they leave Japan. Millions more, though, never learn. These are the ones for whom the

prospect of English in any form—embodied in a native speaker, set on a classroom syllabus – yawns like, well, the very specter of the Void.

But they have a culture to cover it over, beginning with how English is taught in Japan. Japanese teachers of English teach Japanese, exclusively. That is, teach in Japanese, and, even more decisively, teach English as if it were Japanese. Hence, the overwhelming majority of Japanese teachers of English speak exclusively in Japanese in their classrooms, and spend all their time translating English texts into Japanese, while students scribble equivalent words in the margins or copy whole sentences into notebooks. The study of English is justly described in this way on every level, from elementary school to doctoral programs. I've been teaching in the graduate program of a Japanese English department for over three years. Elementary school kids throughout Japan are probably more alive to the English language.

How to describe how utterly dead Japanese college students are to the study of English? Some days I still stagger away from the classroom in disbelief. I include my colleagues as well as students. The last time I visited Brazil, I was in the company of a college



* * **TERRY P. CAESAR** is teacher of North American Literature at Mukogawa Women's University in Nishinomiya, Japão, and author of several books, including critical studies of the university system in the United States.



professor of English, who at one point wondered out loud about the English equivalent of the word, *carinhoso*. It seems that neither "sweet" nor "tender" captures a certain plaintive quality in the Portuguese. Fresh from Japan, I was shocked. I've never heard a Japanese professor muse about such a fine point. Never. The two languages, English and Japanese are kept remorselessly apart – always. The only reason they are ever brought together is so that the one can be translated into the other, period. Thereby, English becomes a kind of exotic variant of Japanese.

The vacant gap between Japanese and English can be located in the comparisons Japanese never make, or the play between the respective languages in which they never delight. Why study another language if you cannot turn individual words in and out of your own language, savoring the differences or teasing out the respective nuances? Granted, hardly any Japanese professor known to me speaks English as well as the Brazilian professor, *above*. But she's learned so well for the reasons exhibited in a casual moment. She has a feeling for English because she is engaged by its poetry, rather than merely its grammar or syntax. The reason Japanese learn English so poorly is because the historical, cultural, and social logic through which they learn it is stripped bare of poetry.

Teaching English in Japan? To a native speakers - Japanese fetishize this all-knowing figure as another means of keeping their distance from English - the experience becomes a repeated enactment of that famous Zen koan about the sound of one hand clapping. There is one person speaking – you. Others listen, often in an admiration that is virtually audible. But of course they never speak themselves. They cannot. (Except in the

performance of consensus-building, occasioned by questions such as "what is your name?", that topples the atmosphere into comedy.) They dare not. (No more than the pupil presumes to usurp the place of the master.) They should not. (Lest speaking spoil the spiritual discipline necessary to undergo the learning of English in the first place.) In pedagogical terms, the sound of one hand clapping in the English classroom is just what it is, or aims to be, at the Zen temple: a direct perception of the all-encompassing Void, as far as any outer context – not to say, metaphysics - regarding English is concerned.

Perhaps just as well known as the Zen koan is the Nietzsche dictum to the effect that if you stare at the void long enough, the void will stare back at you. How does this work out teaching English in Japan? First of all, it means, if you're a native English speaker, you either begin learning Japanese or else speaking English like Japanese. The foreigners who pepper their native language with Japanese words or phrases are mirror reflections of Japanese who do the same thing with English. It takes a while, though, to learn to do this. On the other hand, it takes less time for native speakers to slow down, avoid contractions, purge idioms, and utter English sentences in the same deliberate, patient, formal ways that they speak to their Japanese students or that their students (usually when class is over) speak to them.

Did I say that English disappears? A perception or intuition of the void, as we learn from monks well as philosophers, is almost impossible to sustain in the circumstances of normal life; indeed, life may be "normal" to the extent, more than anything else, that the void is effaced – not to say repressed – with words. English as it is spoken in the countries



native to it quickly comes to appear too snappish, flippant, in a word, vulgar, as spoken, or rather, practiced, in Japan. The Japanese way with language, as with everything else, is formulaic, ceremonial, and hierarchical. No wonder English exists to be examined here, but not uttered. No wonder that English must either be kept apart from Japanese or else made equivalent to Japanese through the exercise of translation. No wonder also that as a native speaker you might forget how your own English suffers its own moments of vanishing, becoming haplessly stilted or anxiously literal-minded, as you teach your classes, do your daily errands, and see your friends.

But of course not even English in Japan disappears completely. Its social life, such as it is, is less intimate with the Void than its pedagogical life. Take the other day at the gym, where I've been working out. The first day, I met a genuine (if painfully limited) English speaker! How to explain the miracle? Simple: the student, just graduated, had spent eight months in New Zealand. But the effects were wearing off insofar as speaking English was concerned. Perhaps she was happier – linguistically – to see me than me her. Since then, I've tried not only to speak to her a little but to introduce precious new words into our conversations. Awhile ago, while each team member stepped up to lift weights, the rest of ski team was chanting,

"gambatte!" Seiko translated as, "cheer up." But this seemed too light for the strenuous occasion. I wondered out loud if the ubiquitous American pop slogan, "Go for It," might not be a better translation. Seiko wasn't sure. But she loved this particle of real living English. I tried to coach her on the right tone, at once casual and enthusiastic. "Go for It," she intoned, like a chant.

Afterward, I tried to check the translation with a couple colleagues. It seems gambatte can have many possibilities in English. "Go for It" is acceptable, both judged. Neither had any interest, though, in teasing out the nuances – either the ones substituted by the English phrase or the ones lost from the Japanese injunction. So why was I so enthralled by these same nuances? After all, they weren't so profound. Could it be precisely because there's no cultural or social context for comparing them in Japan? Was it the Void again – either me looking at it or it looking at me? The sound of one hand clapping? In a sense, Seiko and I hear the echoes together. Brave girl! If only she had some context in which to speak English. (Japan only offers ritual occasions, speech contests or "international" discussion groups.) But she doesn't. The sound of English in Japan is ultimately the sound of a word uttered, and then another, and another. None of them add up to a discourse, and each of them addresses, more than anything else, an encompassing silence.