



Special Issue, Laughter: Give Me A Strawberry Cockroach

Description





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Author's Memo

"Give Me a Strawberry Cockroach" is the first article in our [2023 special issue on laughter](#) and tells a story of immersion in Japanese culture during my early days living in Osaka as a visiting English teacher (~2002). This short work of autoethnographic literary nonfiction uses narrative inquiry to explore how an American twenty-something approached the learning and performance of a new language, and the pitfalls, successes, and embarrassments that can often accompany such learning. Read my previous article about teaching in Japan, ["The Closet in the Classroom."](#)





Give Me A Strawberry Cockroach

As any learner of a foreign language knows, it is sometimes challenging to remember the meanings of words, not to mention the pronunciation. As a child I studied an array of languages, from the exotic sounds of Sunday school Yiddish, to the ever-practical ancient Hebrew for my Bar Mitzvah. As a teenager I studied Spanish and French with a smidgen of operatic Italian for good measure. But throughout my life I have always had a yen to study Japanese (I should be shot for that pun).

Before I actually leave the USA to relocate to Japan, I spend time on Ebay browsing a variety of books about Japan and the Japanese language. I want to get a sense of the country and its people through the eyes of foreigners, and I want to be able to communicate a little. I know words like *sensei* (from *The Karate Kid*), *arigatou* (from the song "Kilroy"), and other common words that I've picked up from popular film and music culture.

One of my friends sends me an email at work one day upon the news of my overseas plans:

"Hey man, that's awesome news! The only thing I know about Japan is that it is made up of islands and they use the Chinese characters in their language system. But actually, the languages are totally different. They also enjoy their beer and whiskey, and are very into traditions. Later, dude!"

...and this pretty much is all I know about the language before I actually start studying after my arrival in Japan. Of course I have the tapes and the phrase book, but this is for conversation, not for reading and writing skills.

I walk around for 3 months with flashcards memorizing sentences like "Watashi no namae wa Marlen desu" – My name is Marlen. I also have learned "Sumimasen" or "Excuse me", "Kudasai" or "Please" and I try to remember sentences like "good morning" and "good evening". But without actually using these on a regular basis it is hard to remember them. For a time, I am definitely more interested in learning about the language than learning the language itself.

I am also learning how to speak Japanese by carrying a notebook with me at all times and actively taking notes while talking with friends. This is an exciting process, but at times I learn too much and waves of embarrassment overcome me as I realize the horror of my many recent mistakes.

So, imagine my surprise when my new friend Chloe, who is from Atlanta, married to a Japanese man, and is living with his family here in Japan for a year while he remains in the US, tells me that actually there is not just one written system in Japan, like English, but actually three.

Three?

Can this be right?

Well, yes, apparently there is the Kanji – the ancient Chinese characters; the Hiragana – a syllable based Japanese written system adopted from components of Kanji; and Katakana – another syllable based Japanese written system adopted from components of Kanji and Hiragana and used for all foreign words.

Upon learning this, my head spins with thoughts like “My God these Japanese are masochistic,” though I’m sure the reasons for the current state of Japanese written systems have everything to do with centuries of cultural contact and literacy development. I often take part in drunken foreigner parties where we all firmly conclude that three systems is just too many and we could all get by much more easily if they eliminated two and just left one.

Upon Chloe’s suggestion, I begin by studying Katakana and use the study books she thoughtfully offers me. Chloe immediately seems like my long lost sister when she explains that Katakana is the best system to start learning because all foreign words are written in Katakana, and of course the most important words are to be found on menus. Yes, Chloe helps me to order food.

As I begin studying the Katakana workbook, I feel a new sense of accomplishment – I am making a cultural breakthrough into understanding why many Japanese have such difficulty with foreign pronunciation. Nearly every character is a consonant followed by a vowel. In English we separate our consonants and vowels, and most words end in consonants, but in Japan, words almost always end in vowels. So, “good” becomes “gu-do”; “dog” becomes “da-gu” and “salad” becomes “sa-ra-da”.

I am also learning how to speak Japanese by carrying a notebook with me at all times and actively taking notes while talking with friends. This is an exciting process, but now and then I learn too much and waves of embarrassment overcome me as I realize the horror of my many recent mistakes.

By far my favorite early language screw-up happens on an extremely hot summer day as I am walking around doing my Karl Lagerfeld impersonation, fanning myself with enough force that I’m sure my wrist must be permanently injured. I love that it is completely within gender norms of masculinity here to fan oneself. Of course, there are rules about what the fan should look like and how one holds it.

I am sitting on a train, on my way to work. The car is crowded and stuffy. Spring is quickly warming things up but the train hasn’t learned this, so the heating is still on. I look to my left and there is a pregnant woman standing with a baby in her arms. I immediately feel guilty and gather my things and rise to offer her my seat. I wonder why no one else has offered her their seats, but that’s not as important. I smile and point to my seat and say “Kudasai”. She looks at me as if I were speaking Swahili and so I repeat “Kudasai”. She doesn’t move, she doesn’t speak, she merely stares at me and cocks her head to one side. So I figure “to Hell with the words, I’ll just stick with the hand motions,” so I take a step back, put on my backpack and usher her into the seat which she finally understands is now hers.

A similar scenario repeats itself with a young woman carrying crutches who is nursing some kind of leg injury and an elderly lady wearing one of those white face masks and carrying a bag that advertises Bitch sportswear. Both occasions have similar outcomes – I say kudasai, no one moves, I step back and point to the seat after keeping silent, they sit down and I wonder what I am doing wrong.

Chloe explains that “Kudasai does indeed mean please.” Whew, relief, I’m not as dumb as I had

imagined..."it does indeed mean please, but," she continues, "please give it to me."

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Anyhow, I am with my friend Miho and she is going to introduce me to Japanese shaved ice, *kakigori*. I explain that actually shaved ice and syrup is a popular summer treat all over the world and she nods her head with a look as if to say, "Well that may be true but it is uniquely Japanese."

There is a small old man in a small old truck that has been converted into a little kiosk. We walk over and take a look.

I explain that actually shaved ice and syrup is a popular summer treat all over the world and she nods her head with a look as if to say, 'Well that may be true but it is uniquely Japanese.'

I've been practicing my Japanese and I'm learning many new words each day, so although Miho offers to order my shaved ice for me, I insist that I can do it on my own. We stare at the menu – Miho stares to read the list of flavors, I stare because I have no idea what anything says and I'm looking for some clue to help me remember what exactly I need to say because I've just insisted that I can order on my own.

When all else fails, forget the reading and look for sight clues. In this case I look at the colors of the syrup – purple, orange, green, red, and blue. I decide on red because I remember the word *ichigo*, strawberry. I step up to the little counter, I smile at the man, who looks about 117 years old, and in my best pronunciation, and remembering the proper usage of the word *kudasai*, I ask "*Ichigo gokiburi o kudasai*".

He immediately laughs, flashing toothless gums, and says something to Miho who is desperately trying to hide her delight at my blunder.

I stupidly and hesitantly repeat my request which just causes more of an uproar and I'm thinking that Japanese people are supposed to be kind and gracious and not acknowledge anyone's embarrassment.

Miho turns to me and manages to tell me through tears of laughter that I've just ordered a strawberry cockroach.

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