

Two Trivial Matters

Kato Shuichi

Two Trivial Matters

Kato Shuichi

Translation by Kyoko Selden

One is a signboard that says “Many accidents,” which, when I am driving, often appears before my eyes at a cross-section or elsewhere. Sometimes that message is followed by “Warning!” but not at other times. In either case, the signboard was built not by general users of the road who wished to reduce accidents, but by the superintendent thereof.

In order to cure a disease, the ground rule is to find its cause (if possible). If one eliminates the cause, the disease goes away. It is the same with traffic accidents. What is the cause? If one can suppress the cause (if possible), accidents must decrease.

.....

If an appropriate officer put up the signboard that says “Many accidents,” how did that officer consider the cause of an accident? The cause, of course, must be complex with a variety of factors being combined. But, if there are more accidents at one place than at other places, it is clear that the reason is not with ordinary drivers. It does not seem likely that many drivers look away all at once when they come to that spot.

The reason that that spot is more dangerous than others must be due to conditions particular to that spot (for example the lack of unobstructed view of the road), not just due only to drivers’ situations that should be

common at all places. The good or bad of the condition of the place must rest with the supervisor of the road, not with drivers who pass through that area.

So, what should supervisors do? Before warning drivers to “watch out because it is dangerous,” should they not improve the road condition making it less dangerous? To placidly put up a sign saying “Many accidents. Beware!” and to be clear-minded with no shame—is it not extremely odd and totally anachronistic?

Long ago, Japanese citizens were not the sovereign of the country but its “vassals” (shinmin). That tradition may be still alive. But it is not limited to tradition and social practice that had been nurtured over a long period of time. There are also phenomena that went into fashion and spread widely in a relatively short period of time, yet a mere look suffices to know the meaning behind them.

For example, I choose a channel wanting to view the news on the TV. The screen shows a row of three or four, or four or five, middle-aged men, all clad in black, standing side by side. Their torsos are all deeply bent. On a narrow table before them are a number of microphones. Because their bow is so deep I cannot see their faces. None of them has spoken yet.

.....

The approximate situation, however, can be imagined at a single glance. The men in black are a company’s “Eraisan” (VIPs), to use the late Oda Makoto’s naming, who are about to make some kind of apology or a gesture of

apology. Perhaps they too are good fathers at home and able businessmen at the company. What happens when those standing in a row side by side stretch their backs like crows just before taking flight?



Executives bow in apology

Or rather, what did these men in black do in the first place? They did corner-cutting construction work, disguised the producer of food, or camouflaged the “consume by” dates—in any case they tried to make money by skillfully deceiving buyers. Is that good or bad? Not simple, because the answer would differ depending upon the standpoint of one who answers. I will not go into that here.

What I wish to discuss somewhat here is what one of them, representing the “Eraisan” on TV, says next. What will he say and to whom? My interest is in their Japanese usage; in other words this is a linguistic issue.

There are two similar expressions: (1) “We will make efforts with utmost sincerity so that such a thing will never again occur (ga okiru)”; (2) “We will make efforts with utter sincerity so that we will never again generate (wo okosu) such a thing.”

In expression (1), the word “occur” (okiru) is an intransitive verb, and its grammatical subject is “such a thing.” The influence of the speaker on whether “such a thing” will or will not occur is implied. Expression 2 replaces “occur” with

“generate,” whose grammatical function is transitive. “Such a thing,” in expression 2, is not the subject but the object. The subject of the verb “generate” is hardly ambiguous but is clearly the speaker and his fellows, except that it is omitted. The difference between these two expressions, however, is subtle.

.....

According to expression 2, whether or not to generate “such a thing” is determined by the will of the company president. Accordingly, he has the responsibility for the determination. In the case of expression 1, it is unclear to what extent the company president will affect whether or not “such a thing” will occur. The degree of that responsibility, therefore, is not clear, either.

Moreover, through a press corps, the president (and his fellows) appeals to “the public” (seken): “We have no excuse for having stirred the public.” Unlike that of “the press corps,” the definition of “the public” is vague and slippery. Thus what those gentlemen in black are thinking about is hidden behind double curtains.

From “generating” an incident to an incident “occurring,” from a transitive verb with a clear subject and object to an intransitive verb that clarifies neither—the smooth rhetorical conversion here can only be said to be outstanding.

Once an argument was made that, because Japanese grammar permits omission of the subject, “subjectivity” did not develop in a society that uses Japanese. This argument is of course flawed. Japanese grammar “permits,” not “requires,” the omission. Not only that, it enables the speaker to clarify the subject if necessary and omit it if unnecessary (or self-evident).

Moreover, that grammatical difference is

extremely minute and subtle. This too is perhaps one tradition of Japanese culture. Whether or not it is a tradition to be proud of depends upon what we use the language's rich ability of expression for.

These two trivial matters: how are they connected? Both are deeply related to traditional culture. Both can function as background for an irresponsible society. Or, they may not be unrelated to the shared values that respect "harmony" (wa). I know all these are no great national affairs, merely trivial

matters, but. . . .

Kato Shuichi is a critic and writer whose many books include A History of Japanese Literature: The First Thousand Years.

This article is an installment from his column Sekiyo mogo (Random sunset talks) which appeared in the Asahi Shinbun on November 24, 2007. Published at Japan Focus on December 23, 2007.

Kyoko Selden is a senior lecturer in Asian Studies, Cornell University and a Japan Focus associate.