factiva
Dow Jones & Reuters

The New York Times

Foreign Desk; 1

**Some Japanese (One) Urge Plain Speaking**

By CLYDE HABERMAN, Special to the New York Times
998 words
27 March 1988
The New York Times
Late City Final Edition
English
Copyright 1988 The New York Times Company. All Rights Reserved.

TOKYO, March 26 -- Nearly two decades later, the words of Eisaku Sato still glisten in the annals of Japanese verbal befuddlement.

Nearly two decades later, the words of Eisaku Sato still glisten in the annals of Japanese verbal befuddlement.

As Prime Minister in 1969, Mr. Sato visited Washington to deflect American anger over a flood of textile imports from Japan, a hot trade issue at the time. The Japanese must exercise restraint in exports, President Richard M. Nixon insisted.

To which Mr. Sato replied as he looked ceilingward, ''Zensho shimasu.'' Literally, the phrase means, ''I will do my best,'' and that's how the interpreter translated it.

What it really means to most Japanese is, ''No way.''

Mr. Nixon thought that he had an agreement, however, and when Japan continued on its merry export way, he reportedly called Mr. Sato a liar.

The interrelated worlds of Japanese politics and business are chockablock with obfuscations of this sort, but a few Japanese have begun to demand a lifting of the linguistic fog.

One such person is Kazuhisa Inoue, a young member of the Japanese Parliament, or Diet, who recently called on the Government to form a committee of linguists and other scholars to study ways to purge parliamentary debate of especially dense phraseology.

Mr. Inoue, who belongs to the opposition Komei Party, says it is bad enough that ordinary Japanese cannot figure out what their leaders are saying. But with Japan now a global force, he says, obtuse language can only create mistrust and encourage overseas stereotypes of ''sneaky Japanese.''

''The Diet,'' Mr. Inoue said, ''is place for clear, logical language.'' Sanctuaries of Ambiguity

He has compiled a list of 51 troublesome expressions, many of which are Greek to ordinary Japanese but endure as sanctuaries of ambiguity for Government mandarins.

Take ''Eii doryoku shimasu,'' which means, ''We shall make efforts,'' and seems straightforward enough. When a Cabinet member says it, most of his listeners in the Parliament know that he intends to do nothing.

The same goes for a minister who announces that he will accomplish something ''kakyuteki sumiyaka,'' or ''with the greatest expedition possible.'' Be assured, Japanese say, that that is a call for tortoise-like action.

Some high-ranking bureaucrats like to say they will take ''shoyo no gutaiteki sochi,'' or ''necessary concrete measures.'' Invariably, the concrete fails to harden. Takeshita's Vagueness

Mark A. Harbison, an American who translates Japanese literary works into English, enjoys when a Japanese businessman tells an associate, ''Kangai sasete kudasai,'' or ''Let me think about it.'' That, Mr. Harbison says, ''is almost 100 percent 'no.' ''

For some politicians, editorial writers and other opinion makers, this matter of elliptical language acquired new life after Noboru Takeshita became Prime Minister last November. Mr. Takeshita, a disciple of Prime Minister Sato, is an open admirer of his mentor's political style, which seems reasonable enough since Mr. Sato's caution helped him to stay in power for nearly eight years, longer than any other postwar Japanese leader.

It is often hard, many Japanese say, to fully grasp what Mr. Takeshita is trying to say in speeches and at news conferences. It is not that individual sentences do not make sense. But when strung together, they can be unfathomable. A newspaper columnist questioned in print whether it is the Prime Minister's ''underlying desire to wear a mask of dullness in order to promote indifference to politics.'' A Preference for Haziness

''His ambiguity has gone too far even for Japanese people,'' a senior member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party agreed.

He worried that, while Mr. Takeshita is popular for now, ''he might in time come to be mistrusted.''

An underlying problem, one that is familiar to foreign businessmen who have slogged their way through negotiations in Japan, is that most Japanese share the Prime Minister's preference for haziness. Americans, trade negotiators included, tend to demand yes or no answers. ''But Japanese like the gray areas,'' an American official said.

It is not always that way. Some Japanese are quite capable of wielding words like clubs. But most rely on indirectness, avoiding hard-and-fast positions and coating their speech with thick overlays of politeness and honorifics that make even the simplest sentence seem freight-train long. Language of Emotions

''Japanese is a language that depends more on emotions and feelings,'' said Tatsuya Komatsu, who is president of Simul International, a translating service. ''To be specific, to be concrete, is one of the weaknesses of Japanese people.''

Many Japanese are convinced they can communicate with each other without words at all. ''Haragei,'' it is called, or ''belly language.''

Because of the country's cultural homogeneity, it is argued, Japanese somehow can convey their intentions through penetrating stares, casual glances, occasional grunts and meaningful silences. As a rule, foreigners are beyond such communication, and Mr. Komatsu says that younger Japanese are losing the skill.

To at least one former Cabinet member, however, much of this is mumbo-jumbo. ''It's not a question of political language but of style of political leadership,'' he said. ''Any civilized language is ambiguous because in human relationships you cannot be terribly blunt.'' 'Forget It'

And because that view is prevalent here, Mr. Inoue's anti-blather crusade does not seem destined to go far.

The Government's main spokesman, Keizo Obuchi, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, agreed that parliamentary debate can be overly vague.

But in classic style he avoided direct comment about the proposal for a special panel of linguistic arbiters.

At least, for Mr. Inoue's sake, he did not say that it was difficult. In Japan, if someone allows that something is difficult, it is a safe bet that he is really saying, ''Forget it.''

Photo of Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita, an admirer of Eisaku Sato's political style, speaking beneath the rising sun of the Japanese flag (AP)

Document NYTF000020050427dk3r01avi

© 2006 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva). All rights reserved.