



Commentary

A couple of weeks ago, NHK called, to see if I would be willing to appear on one of their programs. I agreed to the request and marked the date on my calendar, but over the next few days, as I started to prepare for the program, I wondered if I had perhaps bitten off more than I could chew.

You see, this particular program is different from others that I have appeared on to date; this is 'Shiten Ron-ten', the well-known 'commentary' program. There is no interviewer, and no other guests. You are completely alone - just one person, facing the camera, talking for the allotted time.

Now this should be an easy job - just arrive at the studio, sit down at the desk, talk about my work for a while, and then leave. Nothing to it. After all, I certainly don't have any problem talking about my printmaking to anybody who gets within earshot, anytime!

But it's not that simple. The timing of the program is clearly decided and very strictly enforced; you must talk for nine minutes and fifteen seconds, no more, no less. When chatting with an interviewer at home, I can answer any particular question at length, or in a compact form, as the mood strikes. But such a 'freewheeling' approach would not do for this program. The talk has to be 'structured' - start somewhere, develop a theme, and then finish in a logical and interesting way ... exactly as the countdown timer reaches 00:00.

The obvious solution is to prepare a script of the proper length. But this brings its own problem, one that I confirmed by viewing some previous episodes of the program. When the person reads a script, the 'life' is completely sucked out of the topic. If I were doing this in my native language, I think I could speak vividly enough to get away with using a script, but in Japanese ... it's a different story.

I can converse in daily life without too much trouble, but there is no way that I am a natural reader of Japanese; I simply don't do enough of it day by day to have developed much fluency. If even the native speakers gave boring presentations on this program, what chance would I have of doing any better? Not much, I thought. But without a script, it would be very difficult to organize the structure and timing. I began to regret accepting the offer!

During the time remaining before the taping, I tried a number of different approaches. I first prepared a 'skeleton script' made up of a list of major points I wanted to communicate. This had the benefit of leaving my speech 'natural', but had the downside that each time I tried a run-through, the sentences would go off in different directions, and the timing was lost. I would end up anywhere from two minutes short, to three or four minutes too long! No, I had to work to a more carefully defined script.

I tried writing a script in English, and then making a translation 'on the fly' as I went along, but just got tongue-tied too easily. I'm still a long way from having the skill of a United Nations interpreter!

Finally, I settled on a kind of compromise; I prepared a script that had some key sentences in written-out Japanese, interspersed with 'prompt' words and phrases in a mix of Japanese and English. I kept each page very short, somewhere around fifteen seconds of content. This seemed to work well during my practice runs - the tight structure of the script kept the overall timing in order, the full sentences kept my grammar sounding basically literate, and the unscripted sections kept things 'loose'.

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I sent it off to the producer to be prepared for the studio teleprompter, and got back to my printing work. Now that things were basically settled. I was ready to go ... lights, camera, action!

(to be continued next week)

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