



Moshi Moshi

Before I came to Japan I took a short course in the language at my local university. It was an evening program, a couple of times a week, and the students were a mix of regular university students and 'mature students' like me from off-campus, who were basically auditing it.

Although the course did help me get a basic understanding of how the language worked, it didn't help much with actually communicating with anybody, because it was all 'textbook grammar', with no actual conversation. I didn't really get any practice at speaking Japanese until we actually moved here (in 1986), but even then, as I was surrounded by English every day because of my job running language classes, progress was very slow.

Since those days I have gradually become more adept, but although I now have few problems in day to day life, I still wouldn't describe myself as being 'fluent' in the language - there are just too many words and expressions that I don't know. Every now and then, I have an experience that reminds me of this - sometimes very strongly. And one such experience had a New Year connection, so perhaps it will be suitable for today's little episode!

It's December of 1998; I'm living alone in Hamura, as my children went off to school in Canada a couple of years earlier. I'm extremely busy - the long 10 year Hyakunin Isshu project will be finishing in a couple of weeks, so there are requests for interviews coming in, and I'm trying to get the upcoming exhibition organized, in addition to of course finishing the final print.

One morning just a few days from the end of the year the phone rings, and the person on the other end asks for me. When I identify myself, he does the same, but uses an expression that I don't understand. Is he from the media, a potential collector, or perhaps even one of the current collectors? I have no idea.

Most of the people calling usually have something to ask me: "Will you be available for an interview?", or "Where can I get your prints?" ... things like that. This call was different; rather than *ask*, he proceeded to *tell* me something, in a voice that sounded much like a kind of announcement. But his language was really quite strange to me; not like 'normal' Japanese at all. I understood nothing.

Now when having a conversation with somebody in Japanese, it's a normal part of the stream of communication to nod your head now and then, and interject such things as "Yes, I see ...", or "Ah ha ...". These are mostly to let the other person know that you are following along. If you fail to make such 'sounds', the other person gets the impression that you are not communicating, and they will stop. So I have learned that even when I don't clearly understand, I have to keep issuing such sounds, in order to keep things moving. Usually, you then start to catch the meaning bit by bit.

But this time, no matter how much I 'nodded' and made the appropriate sounds to keep things moving, understanding didn't come. His language was so different and difficult! What on earth was he talking about?

He then paused, obviously waiting for my reaction. I was totally at sea and could only mumble something like, "*So desu ne ...*", trailing off into silence, to encourage him to speak again.

Even in the face of my lack of active cooperation in the conversation, he was nothing if not polite, and he continued to speak, clearly explaining something to me. After a minute or so, it seemed that he had told me

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all that was necessary, and closed off the conversation. I understand such 'closing sounds', so made the appropriate responses, and then hung up. Who, what, why ...? I was still completely in the dark.

The mystery was revealed a few days later. The postman knocked at the door, with a Special Delivery Registered letter for me. He bowed as he delivered it. I looked at the envelope, but was none the wiser; the return address was written with kanji I hadn't learned yet. 宮内庁.

Ten minutes later, with the assistance of my dictionary, I understood. The letter was an invitation from the Imperial Household Agency offering me an invitation - in the name of the Emperor - to attend the upcoming New Year Poetry Ceremony. I was to be the third foreigner to be invited since the ceremony had first been held in 1267.

And of course, with this understanding came the realization of how impolite I must have sounded on the telephone during the earlier call. But there was no way to 'go back' and apologize; all I could hope is that they would attribute my impoliteness to my poor language ability. But I think they'll never be asking me again!

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