
Introduction by Michael J. Hacker

So, my good friend Jun Akiyama has asked me to write a column on the Japanese language and how it has affected my study and understanding of Budô. Considering Jun's own qualifications in that department, I'm very flattered. As Ben Stein often says, "I shall do my best."

My purpose in writing what I hope will become a series of articles is not to teach anyone conversational Japanese, proper grammar, kanji stroke order, or Tsugaru-ben [1]. There are many fine book and CD sets available [2] to those ends (with the possible exception of Tsugaru-ben). I aim, instead, to help the interested reader delve into Japanese as a Budô-specific technical language. I am not a Budô teacher, nor do I consider myself an expert on the Japanese language. There are many people with educated, highly-qualified opinions on these topics; I welcome their input and corrections.

After a week or so spent pondering what I should cover in my inaugural article, the following thought occurred to me: "Why not just begin at the beginning?" So, from the beginning I shall begin by posing the following question: *Why bother?*

"I don't need to learn Japanese... My native language is [insert native language here]."

I hear things like this all the time when I bring up the topic of learning Japanese in conjunction with the study of Budô. While it is very true that one can study Budô quite fruitfully without needing to learn Japanese, I believe some knowledge of the language that shaped the thoughts of those who created one's particular art can greatly enhance the experience.

A basic knowledge of the lexicon can serve not only as a mnemonic for a particular technique, but can also facilitate training or communicating with someone from another country. At higher levels, a deeper pondering of the Japanese language and kanji (characters) can help the Budôka explore layers of understanding of that which those who came before have left behind.

Following, are two examples of how an understanding of Japanese has helped me recently:

Case #1 ("new" insights): Last year, my friend and I were preparing for a demonstration. One technique, *mae otoshi*, proved especially difficult for us to accomplish correctly. It wasn't until I really pondered the name of the technique, *mae otoshi*, that the answer became clear to me. OTOSHI comes from the verb OTOSU, which means "to drop (something); to allow (something) to fall." That was the answer: *I wasn't allowing my partner to fall.*

In other words, he wasn't falling because I was holding him up. So, rather than continue to do what I thought looked right, I listened to what the language was trying to communicate. The effect was immedi-

ate and dramatic; my overall technique changed almost instantly. *Sarumo ki kara ochiru* [3].

Case #2 (communication): I recently joined an online Russian-language Aikidô discussion group. While I had never attempted to talk about Aikidô in Russian before, I ended up having much less trouble than I'd expected because of my knowledge of basic Japanese terminology. While the words may look and sound slightly different, "sensei" is "sensei" and "dojo" is "dojo." (Although, my online translator did try to define "dojo" as "Sambo school.")

Of course, the choice to (not) learn Japanese to whatever level you (don't) want is still yours. If the glossary on AikiWeb or in your student handbook is enough for you, then this series of articles will likely hold no interest. But for those who hear a calling to explore other levels of meaning, this column may be of interest.

It is my sincere hope that we can learn something together through this experiment. With that, I open the floor to you. What do you want to discuss? Please contact me with any questions you may have; I will use them to decide what to write in future columns.

[1] a dialect heard in northern Japan

[2] I recommend the VocabuLearn™ series

[3] "even monkeys fall from trees"

Michael Hacker began his study of Aikidô in Japan in 1990, and has been very fortunate to get his hands on many skillful teachers in his short time on the tatami. His primary Budô influences are Donald Moriyama, Amano Shigeko, Saito Morihiro, C.E. Clark, and Stan Connor. He has also had limited exposure to Kôdôkan Jûdô, Mugai-ryû Iai-Hyôdô, Shôrin-ryû Kishaba-juku Karate, Hapkido, Tae Kwon Do, Tai Chi, and various Chinese martial arts. Among his other loves are songwriting, his Chet Atkins nylon-string, techno-geek stuff, his world famous Bad Budô video collection, studying languages, and Swan (if he knows what's good for him). Michael is a student at the Jiyushinkan in Tempe, Arizona.