A Dialogue Between Two Lovers of Language — (2) —

Hidemi MASAMURA and Caroline E. KANO

5. “Clear the air” vs “clean the air”

Masamura: You say, “Open the window and clear the air” to mean “Open the window and let fresh air into the room.” don’t you? The first time I heard this expression spoken by an American actor, I felt uneasy about it. My uncomfortableness about the phrase came definitely from the word “clear”, used to mean to remove something unwanted from a certain place, and I was just wondering why you do not say “clean the air” instead, which I feel more suitable for describing the situation, since I understand “clean” signifies making some place free from impurities and since the desirable resulting situation is having “clean” air to breathe in, and not necessarily “clear” air to see through.

We are likely to be confused as to how to use “clear” and “clean” as is often seen in our vague and ambiguous understanding of expressions like “clear the table” and “clean the table”. The general definitions commonly given in dictionaries don’t help us to obtain complete comprehension of the distinction between the two. Let us, then, compare several typical examples using “clear” and “clean”:

She cleared the table.
He cleared his throat.
They cleared the street.

Will you clean my shoes?
Did you clean your teeth?
She cleaned the table.

If we compare the objects that come after each verb, we can see some characteristic difference between them. Grammatically, the direct objects of each example are “the table”, “his throat”, “the street” for the verb “clear”, and “my shoes”, “your teeth”, “the table” for the verb “clean”. But a closer look at these examples reveals that the actual things to be removed are not specified in the expressions. If we cast our minds over these unsurfaced quantities, we discover that those unmentioned after “clear” are things with three dimensions — such as dishes, phlegm, snow etc. — while those covert objects after “clean” are things two-dimensional, like a thin layer of dust or impurities on the surface of something.

Back to the phrase in question, its covert object exists in the air as a whole as floating impurities forming three dimensions. If I analyse the usage of the two expressions in this way, I am able to convince myself of the rightness of the phrase “clear the air”. How does this explanation sound to you?

Kano: It is very nice to be off now on part two of our project. I always find the topics with which you present me most stimulating. Of course, there are obvious grammatical and semantic problems which I know, through my experience of teaching English, inevitably dumbfound the majority of Japanese. Invariably, though, many of the questions that you put to me are not those which I would conceive to be an apparent source of confusion. This is, in fact, the case with the distinction between “clear” and “clean”, though the analysis of when and how each term is used certainly does provide food for thought. On the whole, I would say that your conclusion that the term “clear” is used in relation to three-dimensional objects, and “clean” with two-dimensional objects sounds very convincing, although it does not, in my opinion, quite hold with the expression “He cleared his throat (of phlegm)”.

I would, however, like to add one other suggestion, and that is that the term “clean” seems to require the application of some agent, which is of course unstated, in order for the action of “clean” to be executed in its true sense. In other words, the employment of some tool is implicit — as in the idea of “clean something with something”. Let me consider your examples one at a time:

In the expression “Open the window and clear the air”, the idea conveyed to me is that by opening the window a gush of fresh air will be admitted into the room, which will in turn force out any impurities or stagnant odours (not necessarily three-dimensional). If you clear a room of smoke, for example, it does become “clear” in terms of being able to see through it. A room full of smoke is certainly far from “clear” in this sense. The use of the term “clean the air”, on the other hand, is not entirely devoid of all possibility if we move the scene of our movie or
drama away from a room in a house or building to the hyper-hygienic laboratory of a chemical industries factory, for example. We can imagine here that before the delicate testing of a new product in the laboratory (perhaps a new drug or something), the air must first be thoroughly “cleaned”. Perhaps it would be sprayed with a disinfectant or a chemical containing cleansing properties. In other words, an agent would be applied to actively “clean” the air or purify it. Simply opening the window would not have the same effect.

In the case of “cleaning shoes”, an agent would similarly be applied. In order to make the shoes shine, this would be shoe polish. Or, if the shoes were muddy, water. If water were not applied in the case of muddy shoes, but the mud was just allowed to dry and then removed, the expression would be neither “clean” nor “clear”, but simply (or lengthily, as the case may be) to “brush the mud off”. In the case of “cleaning teeth”, either toothpaste, or just water, is applied. You could never conceivably “clear” your teeth!

In order to “clean a table”, you apply some kind of cleansing agent, and you perhaps would only do this once in a while. The regular application of a damp cloth after a meal would simply be “wiping” the table. When you “clear” a table, you “clear it of something” — certainly three-dimensional. This “something” would generally refer to the plates and knives and forks etc. after a meal, but could also refer to whatever toys or other objects the children might have covered the table with before a meal.

“Clearing the street” could refer not only to snow or dead leaves, but also even to people, as in the case of a main street being cleared of people in order to make way for a parade or procession due to pass along it. Similarly, a pedestrian arcade would be cleared of cars on certain days or between certain hours. Were a street to be “cleaned”, it would have to have water applied to it, either by use of a hose or from a spraying vehicle.

As for the throat, a deliberate cough or hawk could “clear” the throat of phlegm, as in the force of fresh air from outside “clearing” the air within. The idea of “cleaning” a throat is just, at a stretch of the imagination, conceivably possible were a doctor, in the case of a sore throat, for example, to spray it with some antiseptic agent.

6. “I am sorry to be late” vs “I am sorry I am late”

Masamura: There once appeared an article by Mr. James MacDonald in the Daily Yomiuri about the above two expressions in which he wrote that he was not sure why, but it was a phrase that often confused Japanese. He claimed that our “Sorry to be late” should be replaced by “Sorry I’m late.” I know some native speakers who are of the same opinion as Mr. James MacDonald, and some who are not. I personally, was taught both expressions as alternative almost fixed ways of expressing apology for one’s being late for an appointment and have been using them interchangeably up until now with no cause for doubt.
The feeling of "unnaturalness" in the phrase "Sorry to be late" on the part of some people might be aroused by the fact that their inbedded or unconscious sense of the language asserts that "to be late" should be "to have been late". They might feel that the former structure "to be ---" implies an act to be taken or a situation to take place from then on, not describing an act or situation that has just taken place.

The point that interested me most about the above was not the usage but the fact that such a common, daily expression should be felt to be incorrect by one native speaker and to be quite right by another. This has probably never happened and will never happen with Japanese phrases, even though we enjoy various alternative phrases on such occasions, accepting them all as equal possibilities.

As for this usage in English, arguing which is correct does not make any sense, I believe, because either one or the other way of expression has been established in each person's sense of what is natural and right in the language, and the rules of grammar cannot interfere with this. But I am much interested in how you, Caroline-sensei, will respond to the above discussion.

Kano: I too read the newspaper article in question, and must admit that I was quite horrified! As a native speaker, I had not only always used the expression "I'm sorry to be late" myself, (varied at times, of course, with "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting" where appropriate), but had also taught it and, need I say, drilled it, with all the students I have so far been responsible for during my teaching career in Japan! I must admit that for one moment I really wondered whether I could possibly always have been wrong! I am only too aware that after a certain time in another country, with little chance to hear one's own native tongue, it is possible for one's own rendering of the language to become a little unnatural. This is particularly possible, I think, when one is up against the influence of "Japanese English"! I am, however, always doing my utmost to safeguard against this misfortune in my own case. I could not, therefore, really believe that I had gone so astray! Consequently, I was extremely relieved to read a follow-up to the said article a day or two later, decrying the fact that there was anything wrong with the expression "I'm sorry to be late".

To me, "I'm sorry I'm late" is, as you suggest, simply an alternative form of "I'm sorry to be late". The only slight difference is that the former has a definite informal feel to it. You further suggest that some people may not agree with the expression "I'm sorry to be late" because they feel the infinitive "to be" to be present or future in tense, and therefore not correct in the situation. I myself, however, feel that the present tense is appropriate here, in as much as the truth of the very present situation is that one is late. "I'm sorry to have been late" could only imply "the other day" or "so many times", for example. In fact, without an initial context where the other speaker refers to "the other day" — in terms of, for example: "It was very nice to see you the other day.” "Yes. But I'm sorry to have been late." — the expression would sound
very strange. It could not generally stand on its own, and certainly not when referring to the present here-and-now situation.

Anyway, all we can say in conclusion, I think, is that those who “like” the expression “I’m sorry to be late” and those who dislike it will simply have to agree to disagree.

7. “resort”

Masamura: In today’s language education here, they teach the meanings of words as if one word in English corresponds precisely with one word in Japanese, and vice versa. This is the case with the teaching of such technical terms as are used in physics and mathematics, in which each word or term is designed to possess one definite meaning thus rejecting all ambiguity. But with the teaching of a “natural language”, should they continue to stick to this practice? Students are required and trained to memorize one established definition or meaning of each word in question by rote, without looking back upon how a certain definition or meaning has been acquired or what image is attached to the word, or what meaning it embodies and the like. Aren’t they too rash in wishing to harvest in the field of vocabulary? Total disregard of such processes in language learning or teaching can amount to killing words rather than nurturing them.

Hereafter, I am going to pick out some of the words taught in schools which show a neglect of any analysis, in order to show how we should mine the meaning of words. For today, I will deal with the word “resort” which has become almost perfectly established as hatahana-eigo since the leisure industries started using the term to activate their markets a couple of decades ago. We borrowed “resort” to mean “a place where people regularly go for holidays, like skiing resorts, health resorts etc.” English students, however, should not be satisfied with knowing only this definition. The general first definition of the word in the dictionary is “one who or that which is looked to for help: a refuge, resource, recourse” which apparently doesn’t have any link with its second definition of “an attractively situated town or village providing accommodation and recreation for holidaymakers”.

Should we give up trying to approach a word’s true identity and character, leaving the question as to why one word has two or more different or mutually unconnected meanings, unsolved or half-understood? We are liable to believe what is printed, especially that which is printed in dictionaries and swallow it as it is presented. However, we need to read between the lines of each definition so as to obtain the whole idea of a word, integrating seemingly unrelated definitions and/or meanings. This manner of approach works with better efficiency when the target language is a foreign one, because our daily lives fail to foster or reinforce our language ability as a whole.

Well, getting back to the word in question, I would like to see how definition #1 of “resort” can be combined or integrated with definition #2, to bring about a whole image. Suppose you
are troubled in some way, and you want to get away from the feeling of pressure on you. You try to seek someone or something to turn to in anger, for instance, to “force” in order to abate the tension or pressure caused by what is troubling you. Would you not then be “resorting” to force?

And suppose you are in business, and you are in or under some pressure from the work itself or from the people you work with, and you, again, want to get yourself out of such situations once in a while. So you look for some place to meet your need, which provides much pleasure so that you can forget the pressure or entanglement at your working place. This place would then be a “resort”.

This interpretation leads us to the understanding that the whole idea of “resort” is a kind of outlet or vent for one’s pent-up feelings.

How do you like this explanation, and can I have some pieces of advice, if any?

Kano: I think your analysis of the word “resort” sounds convincing enough. Though I felt sufficiently confident as regards my own understanding of the various meanings of the word, your reference to dictionary definitions stimulated me to refer to the dictionary myself. I was then reminded of two further meanings of the word. Namely (1) “to habituate” or “to frequent” in the verb form, and “a place much frequented” or “a haunt” in the noun form, and (2) “to throng to”, “to go in great numbers”. Though these meanings would seem to have little connection with meaning (3) “have recourse to” or “recourse” (noun), as in “a last resort” (which would generally be understood to be something which is by no means recurrent, but which on the contrary occurs extremely rarely, perhaps only once, as a result of the failure of all else — though I admit that it is perhaps the word ‘last’ here that sways the overall sense of the expression) it is also conceivably possible that it is in fact a combination of meanings (1) and (2), plus meaning (3) which originally gives us the idea of “a resort” — i.e. a place that great numbers of people frequent, when in search of some respite or refreshment, as in “a health resort” or “a holiday resort”. I would like to point out, however, that, although the actual use of “resort” as in “holiday resort” etc. would appear to be the same in ‘katakana eigo’ as it is in the original English, when used in English, this particular “resort” is conceived as a concept in its own right, without any apparent or necessary connection with other kinds of “resorts”, as in “recourse” etc. Where words in English have more than one meaning, they tend to be regarded as quite separate entities, taking on a different ‘feel’ or ‘atmosphere’ or ‘image’ according to the context. Without “recourse to analysis”, the possible relationship or otherwise between certain homonymys would not be called into question. The various “resorts” in English are all used unconsciously, and understood independently, each in its own different sense. The fundamental meanings of words, of course, only really become obvious when we make a conscious attempt to look at them objectively, as, for example, and as you suggest, when a
language is not one’s native tongue.

I would think that in the teaching of English in Japanese schools, it is considered to be less confusing for the student to offer only one meaning for a word as it appears in a given context. In my conversation classes, it can sometimes be of interest at a more advanced level to make the students aware of the various possibilities of meaning pertaining to a particular word, and, again with more advanced students, this can facilitate a broader understanding of the usage of the specific word and possibly a concomitant increase in passive vocabulary, but generally speaking it is my experience that such a practice serves only to hold up the proceedings, halting the flow of the conversation, and hindering the understanding and usage of the meaning of the word in question as it is contained in the subject matter of the particular conversation. But it is certainly true that when words of English origin are taken into Japanese as *katakana-eigo* they often tend to acquire one fixed — and not infrequently wrong — meaning. I do not think that this necessarily creates a problem within the Japanese language itself. The problem arises when a native speaker of English then uses these same words when speaking to a Japanese in English. So often — unless the Japanese speaker of English has a particularly advanced understanding of the subtleties of English nuance, that is — the correct interpretation of these words is not grasped. This can not only be frustrating on the part of the native speaker, who is well aware that the sense of what he or she has said has not been understood as intended, but it can often lead to a misunderstanding on the part of the Japanese listener of the attitude of the native English speaker — a consequence which can in some cases be rather undesirable. With full awareness of this situation, I am sorry to say that I “frequently have to resort” (I would seem to be employing a contradiction here!) to applying great caution in my choice of words, often going out of my way to avoid the very ones I most want to use, and which feel instinctively most appropriate and comfortable in the context. The words “expect”, “lucky”, “give up”, “smart”, “accessory”, “arrange”, “gorgeous”, are just a few such examples.

When I use the word “expect” in English, I use it *not* in the sense of “look forward to” but in the sense of “anticipate”. Therefore, if I say: “I’m not expecting him/her (to come)”, I do not mean: “I am not looking forward to his/her coming”. I simply mean that, under the circumstances, as I know he/she is very busy at the moment, for example, I do not think the possibility of his/her coming is very great. I am not in any way expressing my feelings concerning the person. I could actually be very sad indeed about his/her not coming. When I say: “I feel extremely lucky to be able to teach at our college.” I do *not* mean that I simply regard my having been given my job as a bit of good luck. I mean that I really do consider myself to be extremely “fortunate”, and in so saying I am in fact at the same time expressing my gratitude. When I talk about having “given something up”, I simply mean that I have “stopped” doing whatever it is. I do *not* mean that I could not cope with it, and was therefore compelled to abandon it. When I tell someone that they look very “smart”, I do *not* mean the Japanese idea of “slim”, nor do I mean the American English idea of “clever”. I simply mean that they look very
attractively and well dressed — the Japanese idea of “Oshare”, in fact. As a woman, when I talk about “accessories” in English, I am referring to handbags, hats, gloves, scarves and belts. Necklaces, rings, bracelets, brooches and earrings are all, to me, jewellery. When I talk about “arranging” a party, I am referring to “organizing” it. I never quite feel this meaning gets across somehow. And finally, when I say that something is “gorgeous”, I mean that it is absolutely “wonderful”, as in “a gorgeous day”, “a gorgeous dress”, or even “a gorgeous person”. These are just a few examples to demonstrate my point.