

How Many Are There??
An Annotated Excerpt from
John-san No Eigo No Atama Wo Tsukuru Hon

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Introduction

The following is a translation—more of a rough paraphrase—of one section of my book “John-san No Eigo No Atama Wo Tsukuru Hon”, literally translated as “John’s Book for Making an English Mind”, and more freely translated as “Thinking English” (with the double entendre fully intended). Chapter One is headed with the personal observation: “Sometimes I feel that I must constantly be slaying sacred cows—refuting assumptions by Japanese about English and how English speakers do or don’t think.” This also holds true for stereotypical pronouncements by Japanese about their own country and culture. This section has been translated for those unable to read in Japanese, and has been amended and appended accordingly.

English Is a Stickler for Singular and Plural

English demands to know how many...

How many white birds are there??

When comparing cultures with others, I have not a few times encountered the following statement: “John, let me tell you how Japanese think.” Or: “This is the way any Japanese feels about that.” One might think that every Japanese was programmed to have the same notions about the world.

Such sweeping, stereotypical statements naturally grate upon this American, coming from a country composed of diverse ethnic groups where individualism is generally enshrined as a national virtue. After all, Japanese surely have personal viewpoints and insights. Can we ever really speak of “absolutes” when talking about culture?

The following is a simple experiment I have carried out to introduce the notion of number while also challenging the idea that all Japanese will have the same interpretation of a given set of data.⁽¹⁾ I distribute a handout with three short poems: two well-known haiku in the original and a Mother Goose rhyme translated into Japanese. The haiku are “白鳥は 哀しからずや 空の青 海のおおにも 染まずただよふ” by Wakayama Bokusui and “静けさや 岩にしみ入る 蟬の声” by Matsuo Basho.⁽²⁾ The first of these speaks of (a) white bird/s flying against the blue sky over the sea, and the second appears below in two translations.

My rationale for selecting these three is that each speaks of a specific animal species: white bird/s in the first, cicada/s in the second, and sheep (plural) in the last. The handout is a simple questionnaire asking students to make judgments about the number of each: is there merely one, a few (a small number), or many (what one would consider a large number)? Typical reactions have been that the first of these is definitely singular—that there is only one white bird flying against the blue sky, and that the second will be interpreted as speaking of many cicadas. The version of Little Bo Peep is taken from a Japanese translation. This is included because I know that the answer is in the plural, and am curious to see the same inductive process at work regarding English. Here, too, I have been told with convictions that there must be only one sheep because it has gotten lost, as a personal pet might.

The result of the experiment is presented below.

文学作品の単数複数——ルーテル学院大学2年生56名の答

	One	More than one	Many
白鳥は 哀しからずや 空の青 海のあおにも 染まずただよふ	15 (27%)	19 (34%)	22 (39%)
静けさや 岩にしみ入る 蟬の声	20 (36%)	15 (27%)	21 (37%)
かわいいボーピープ 羊がまいご	40 (71%)	10 (18%)	6 (11%)

(1995年調査)

Of a total of 56 native Japanese speakers (first and second year college students), the wide range of answers is both surprising and insightful. This sort of trick quiz serves to dispel notions that “all Japanese will think alike” and introduces the concept of number as something that clearly alters the meaning.

Notes

- (1) The Japanese language has few inflectional plural markers, and these are normally used for persons, not objects or animals. The language does have an elaborate system of counters for specifying precise numbers. The problem of singular and plural appears to remain even for the most advanced learners, as I have found in my 15+ years of proofreading.
- (2) The version is from a published collection of Mother Goose; I acknowledge that there could be problems with the translation, and

that another version might more clearly specify that there was not only one sheep. As the English version with the plural forms is presented on the page opposite the Japanese version, there surely was no confusion on the part of the translator:

Little Bo-peep has lost her sheep,
And can't tell where to find them;
Leave them alone, and they'll come home,
And bring their tails behind them. (Kishida, 1976, p.44)

- (3) How have the above poems been translated by professionals? Two versions of the "Cicada" haiku serve for comparison, both presenting plural interpretations. The first, perhaps one of the earliest English translations by the noted Japanese scholar R.H.Blyth, is rendered as:

The silence:
The voice of the cicadas
Penetrates the rocks.

In his notes, Blyth offers the following interpretation: "Basho's verse gives us the quietness revealed by a few cicadas in the distance." (Blyth, p. 229)

A more modern translation by Steven D. Carter reads:

Ah, such stillness:
that the very rocks are pierced
by cicadas' drone.

References

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