

A Trip to the Past

I first came to Japan in 2012 as an exchange student. Although I originally intended to only stay for one year, a lot of things happened in my life, and last year, I actually naturalized – I became a Japanese citizen. During my exchange, I was already in my third year of study at Damascus University. However, the civil war in Syria meant that I couldn't return home. So, I decided to pursue admission to a Japanese university as a regular student. I was successful, and so I began my undergraduate studies anew in 2014.

As the civil war in Syria escalated, it began to garner global attention, as did the plight of millions of Syrian refugees heading to Europe. The refugee crisis made it difficult for Syrians to travel, as many countries worldwide were hesitant to admit even travelers who held Syrian passports. In fact, a few years ago, I was denied entry to England, even though I had been invited by a very prestigious institute to give a lecture about my translation work. Some of my friends also invited me to visit them in New Zealand a few times, but I was never able to go. It also made it difficult to visit family, who were by this time already spread around the world. For instance, I have a brother in Abu Dhabi, a sister in Doha, and another brother in Germany.

In the end, I wasn't able to meet my family in person for almost ten years – thankfully, advancements in technology allowed as to stay connected, though. As I mentioned earlier, last year I was granted Japanese citizenship. My new passport has made it a lot easier to travel, and gave me the opportunity to finally reunite with my family. I booked a flight to Doha, to stay at my sister's place. My brother planned to come from Abu Dhabi to meet me.

When we were finally reunited, I had a bit of a shock. I realized how challenging it had become for me to communicate, and to express myself perfectly in Arabic. It didn't used to take so much thought to convey what I wanted to say, but now it was a bit of a struggle. I found it frustrating, but it wasn't the only thing that had changed. I also noticed there was a difference in my mindset and approach to life than during the time I lived with my family.

We always used to talk about serious topics, but this time I felt a clear disparity in our conversations about politics, and about homosexuality. It was shocking to me to hear that members of my family viewed homosexuality as something close to a disease. In fact, my brother even said to me, if he were the president of a country, he wouldn't allow gay people to live there, or that they would at least have to be 'cured' first. This disturbed me, but then I remembered that Islam forbids homosexuality, and living in an Islamic society certainly shapes your way of thinking to align with those beliefs. Some other members of my family seemed to have become a bit more progressive in their beliefs, although still not entirely open – my sister, for instance, said that she was okay with gay people, and took a 'live and let live' stance. However, she mentioned that she would not be happy if one of her children came out as gay.

Taking a step back, and reflecting on the conversations we had, I was reminded that I, too, once had a similar way of thinking. However, since coming to Japan, studying at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and living in an international environment, surrounded by people from all over the world, people with different ways of thinking, my own perspectives on many things has changed. Coexisting with people of many different backgrounds and lifestyles kind of forces people to become more empathetic.

Reuniting with my family was a kind of trip to the past. It gave me an opportunity to reflect on my past self, and also to see how much I've grown over the last ten years. I'm quite glad for my experiences in Japan, and the friends I've made here – Japanese friends of course, but also speakers of many different languages, and with many cultural backgrounds. It's certainly made me more open-minded, and engaging with people in my three different languages constantly offers me opportunities to question my own worldview, and to explore others'.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

1. Do you think the narrator is proficient in Japanese?

Answer: Very likely, yes.

Hints/Clues: After studying in Japan as an exchange student, he was successful in gaining ‘to a Japanese university as a regular (=正規) student.’ This does not *always* require strong proficiency in Japanese, but often it does. Also, he later mentions that he was invited to give a talk in England about his translation work (presumably Japanese to another language, given he lives in Japan) – something that requires a high degree of linguistic proficiency.

2. The narrator talks about speaking (at least) three different languages. What do you think these are?

Answer: Arabic, Japanese, and likely English.

Hints/Clues: The narrator specifically mentions Arabic, likely his mother tongue, and expresses surprise at the difficulty he had in using the language. His proficiency in Japanese was established in Question 1. Finally, hints that suggest proficiency in English include his friends inviting him to visit New Zealand (a predominantly English-speaking country) – although his friends may be proficient in Japanese – but also, that he was invited to give a talk in England, which would almost certainly have been in English.

3. Why do you think the narrator had some difficulty conveying his thoughts in Arabic?

Answer: He may not have used the language daily for a long time, or he may have been talking about topics in Arabic that he didn’t use to when he lived with his family (answers may vary slightly, but credit should be given for well-reasoned answers).

Hints/Clues: No specific clues in the text itself, but inferences can be made to the above due to his length of stay in Japan, for instance. This question might also be a good starting point for a discussion about bilingual language use, and how language proficiency even in the mother tongue can shift and change over time, or that proficiency in language is often determined by who an individual engages with in different areas of life (see Grosjean, 2010).¹

4. Do you think the narrator is a believer of Islam?

Answer: Probably not.

Hints/Clues: Although it appears that his family at least align with Islamic values, i.e., through the expression ‘living in an Islamic society certainly shapes your way of thinking to align with those beliefs,’ the narrator seems to recall this like a distant memory – ‘but then I remembered that Islam forbids homosexuality.’ If the narrator was a practicing Muslim, he would likely not have forgotten this aspect of the religion.

5. What country does the narrator’s sister live in, and from what country did his brother visit?

Answer: Qatar and United Arab Emirates, respectively.

Hints/Clues: These can be easily determined by the respective references to Doha and to Abu Dhabi.

6. In the latter half of the text, the narrator uses the expression ‘live and let live.’ In your own words – Japanese or English – what do you think this means?

¹ Grosjean, F. (2010). *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Harvard University Press. See also, グロジャン・フランソワ (原著) 西山教行・石丸久美子・大山万容・杉山香織 (2018) 『バイリンガルの世界へようこそ—複数の言語を話すということ』 勁草書房.

Answer: Answers will vary, but should be something like ‘自分自身の生活をし、他人の生活も尊重しなさい.’

Hints/Clues: Hints can be drawn from the narrator’s sister having a more ‘progressive,’ attitude towards those who have different lifestyles..