

One of the most important principles in linguistics is arbitrariness of meaning; it states that the relationship between a name and what it denotes is arbitrary, i.e., between them there is no necessary relationship. For example, for Japanese speakers, the part of the body which extends at the end of the arm is called “TE”. However, outside Japan there is no need that the body part should be called by that name. For those who understand and speak English, it has a different name, “HAND”. A thing and its name are so closely attached to each other that it is very difficult to accept that the thing could be called by any other name. Nevertheless it seems to be a truth. As Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* said on her balcony after falling in love with Romeo at the masquerade, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet!” We realize this arbitrary nature of name and thing even more when we become an actual name-giver and we give a baby a name. Just imagine that the name you think up for your baby will be attached to him/her for their whole life!

Having said that, a thing and its name *are* still closely attached to each other, and we can’t really think of anything without its name. When a university lecturer conducted a questionnaire in his class and asked his students, “Do you think you might have been a different person if you had been given a different name?”, half of them answered ‘yes’. One student wrote, “I was forced to be a strong person because my name is Tsuyoshi”!

Another thing to remember about names is “connotation”, ideas or images a word brings into your mind in addition to its main meaning. When you call a thing by one name in your language and others call the same thing by another name in their language, these two names may have different connotations in the two languages, even though their main meanings are the same. I once tried to translate the Japanese expression “Zasso Sedai” into English. What is meant by this Japanese phrase is a generation in which most people are mentally strong in the face of calamity or attack. In a conversation with a British friend I translated the phrase as “weed generation” and he started to laugh! What was wrong? “Well”, he explained, “when you say ‘weed generation’, it sounds like a generation of feeble people”. This mistranslation comes from the fact that even though both “Zasso” and “weed” primarily denote the same thing (something like “a wild plant that grows where it is not wanted”), they have quite opposite connotations when they are applied to describe a personal character. A “Zasso” type of person is strong, whereas a “weed” type of person is weak.

A name is such an interesting thing. It not only refers to what it means, but also evokes so many other images in our head. Despite the principle of arbitrariness of meaning, it is so difficult to separate a thing and its name!