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「久しぶり」 and 「しばらく」 in English

I often encourage students to ‘think through language.’

This means thinking about how language works ... thinking about something in Japanese ‘*in Japanese*’ and then thinking about it ‘*all the way through to what it is in English*.’ Same thing for something in English ... think about what it ‘*means*’ and ‘*how it is said*’ in English – and then think it through in Japanese. Here is a good example of this as a learning exercise.

In English, 「久しぶり」 and 「しばらく」 most commonly become ‘**long time, no see.**’

### Start: Gestures for Meaning

Let’s begin this journey with gestures: show the meaning of ‘**long time no see**’ using gestures. You would possibly *spread your arms out wide* and use your hands to indicate *a long span of time*, followed by making *an X sign* with your arms to indicate some negative aspect of that ‘long time,’ followed perhaps by pointing to yourself and the other person, either with pointing to the chest or maybe focusing on the eyes, as in to ‘see’ or to ‘meet.’ This would be a good example of non-verbal communication: *long time + negative aspect regarding meeting or seeing*. Would these gestures be the same in a Japan and Japanese context?

### Next: An Explanation Approach

So, let’s look at another approach – a communicative approach. Imagine that you have a foreign friend who speaks Japanese very, very well, but for some strange reason (*you have to imagine*) doesn’t know either of these terms: *hisashi buri* or *shibaraku*. How would you ‘explain’ these expressions, using Japanese in clear and complete language – one well-constructed sentence, for example. Remember, this foreigner speaks Japanese very well ... except for these two phrases.

Mine would probably be something like:

「久しぶり」と「しばらく」は、「長い間に会ったことがない」の状況に対しての挨拶です。  
*Hisashi buri to shibaraku ha, nagai-aida ni atta-kotonai no jyogyo ni taishite no aisatsu desu.*

If I tried that in English, it would go something like: ‘*Long time, no see*’ is a greeting that we use in the situation when we haven’t seen or met someone for a long time.

So, they are both 挨拶: greetings. They are ‘based on a particular condition or situation’ 「状況に対し

て」. That condition? Notice what is in the middle part of this explanatory sentence: 「長い間に会ったことがない」: ‘*when we haven’t met or seen someone for a long time.*’ This then is the essence of these greetings, explained in simple terms.

### Following This: Vocabulary Transparency

We could also begin by ‘*deconstructing the terms*’ so as to be able to ‘*see what is inside them.*’ In the case of Japanese kanji, we have [ 久 ] and [ 久しい ] = ‘*long*’ and [ 暫く ] = ‘*for a while.*’ So, I suppose we could translate these as ‘*it has been a long time*’ or ‘*it has been for a while.*’ The word [ ぶり ] refers to an interval of time. Thus, in their combinations, these convey the meaning of ‘*it has been quite a long time since we last met.*’ A big part of this is based on an individual perspective in describing the situation through either a positive sentence structure (*It has been a long time since we have met*) versus a negative sentence structure (*We haven’t seen each other in a long time*). I am not really sure where the negative structure 「長い間に会ったことがない」 is in the Japanese expressions ... but then my Japanese is very weak and limited to only a few expressions with very little potential for making variations. The Japanese seems to be based on ‘length of time,’ as in ‘*it has been a while*’ and ‘*for a while.*’ But there is no reference to ‘*what*’ it has been a while about is ... or ‘*what*’ for a while is referring to ... 「会ったこと」. But then, please see my admission about my Japanese level.

In the case of English, we have perfect transparency: *long time* constitutes the time reference and *no see* provides the ‘*what*’ content. I can literally understand the meaning by virtue of a direct and concrete link between the language and the meaning.

### And Next Again: A Connection between Expression and Sentence?

Finally, let’s think about the language aspect ... the expression ‘long time, no see’ in English originated in pidgin English, likely influenced by Chinese speakers. The phrase is said to have been adapted from the Chinese expression 「很久不见」, which translates directly to ‘*a long time not see.*’ Interestingly, the original Chinese – and the English that it was translated to – matches up pretty well with the proper English sentences for this situation ... because it includes both ‘*long time*’ and ‘*not see.*’

**I haven’t seen/met you for a long time.**      **We haven’t seen/met each other for a long time.**  
*not see(n) + long time*                                  *not see(n) + long time*

**It has been a long time since I have seen/met you.**  
*long time + (not seen?)*

**It has been a long time since we have seen/met (each other).**  
*long time + (not seen?)*

**(It has been a long time that I haven’t seen/met you.)**  
**(It has been a long time that we haven’t seen/met each other.)**  
*long time + not seen*

[this extended full sentence pattern would not be very common]

## And Finally: Polite Forms

So, we recognize that 'long time, no see' as an expression that serendipitously reflects the longer and more complete sentences provided above. Does this give a clue about polite forms in English?

Let's begin with a very general observation that, in most cases, the longer an expression or a passage of content is – particularly when spoken – the politer (or *more polite* ... which seems easier to read, to say and to hear) it becomes. Think about 'I'm Bob' versus 'My name is Bob' versus 'The name that my parents chose for me and that I have used for my entire life is Bob.' We went from something that is very casual to a fairly complex and – in some ways – formal explanation.

Well, going from 'long time, no see' to more polite forms in English simply requires extending from the reduced form of 'long time, no see' to the 'I haven't ...' to 'We haven't ...' and 'It has been ...' forms that were introduced above. Notice that this a shift from the 'I' form to the 'We' form and then onto the 'It' form represents a fairly complete coverage of the politeness range for this greeting.

In Japanese (if I understand correctly), the elevation in politeness is from *hisashiburi* and *shibaraku* to *gobusatahiteorimasu* (ご無沙汰しております). So not only does Japanese have two phrases for the same greeting, once you elevate the politeness, you have another term to deal with.

## The Final Step: Foreigner's Strange Japanese

So, keep in mind that when a foreigner is speaking Japanese – and especially when they cannot remember a word like *gobusatahiteorimasu* – they might use the rules of English in Japanese. This means that once I elevate from *hisashiburi* and *shibaraku* through slightly expanded sentences using preceding phrases like [*honto ni ohisashiburi desu ne*], I will wind up using the English rules and create a full sentence versions that would be something like: *watashi-tachi ha honto-ni nagai-aida ni atta-kotonai desu ne*. In my English world, this represents a very formal and polite greeting, by virtue of it being a complete and complex form of the core meaning. I have applied the rules of English to Japanese ... how does that 'polite greeting' sound?

**Remember** ... if you have any comments or questions about '*anything English*', hurry up and mail me at <telesamori[at]gmail.com>

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