

理学部見聞録

What brought you to RIGAKUBU?

第1回

楊泓 (Hong Yang)

(物理学専攻 修士課程2年生)

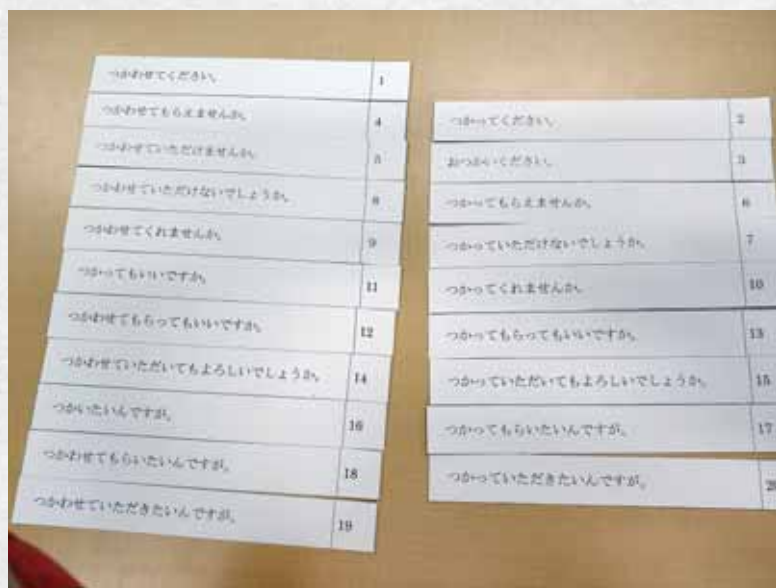
profile

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Bachelor of Science, Department of Physics, Beijing Normal University
2017 – Present

GSGC Program, Graduate School of Science, Department of Physics, The University of Tokyo

At the Foot of the Language Barrier



The same idea can be expressed in numerous ways which possibly encode subtle differences in politeness, attitude, etc.

When I was yet a newcomer to UTokyo, I was often asked, "What brought you to Japan?" This was really hard to answer. I didn't come here because of an enthusiasm for Japanese culture (this unique culture is often incomprehensible for me), nor because I'm willing to learn a new foreign language (English has already made me suffer a lot). To finish the embarrassing conversation as soon as possible, I always mentioned my dear supervisor, Professor Hosho Katsura: "His brilliance and great personality brought me here."

I can feel that UTokyo has been trying to make itself international. If you are an international student who is not good at Japanese, or even cannot speak it at all, you should feel very lucky if you are admitted to the Graduate School of Science (GSS), as there exists a policy in GSS that all lectures with international students attending should be given in English. However, merely entering GSS is not the end goal—choosing the right department in GSS also matters. You will be the luckiest person in the

world if you are admitted to the Department of Physics, as this policy is actually carried out there.

However, there are always so many exceptions in the world that even the luckiest people encounter some of them from time to time. In terms of the aforementioned policy, it is not applicable to graduate lectures which are also open to 4th-year undergraduates. In many cases, based on my own experiences, such lectures are given in Japanese. Many international students like me are unfortunately not international enough to understand lectures in Japanese. So many times in many ways, we shamelessly tried to negotiate with the professors to get them to deliver their lectures in English, though our kind requests were often kindly rejected.

UTokyo certainly understands the language barrier we international students are facing and provides free Japanese courses for us. I must say that for me the most difficult part of Japanese is to



The author at the foot of a hill.

read the air. For example, as shown in the picture on the left, one time in Japanese class we were told to distinguish the subtle differences between sentences. I still remember how hard the teacher was trying to explain the different *taste of air* of these sentences to students who had just finished learning hiragana and katakana one year ago. We were like gorillas listening to quantum mechanics. Unfortunately, many students who had registered in this Japanese course didn't have the chance to witness this incredible moment, as most of them quit within the first three weeks.

Nevertheless, my passion for learning Japanese was somehow inspired a little bit by this lecture on reading the air. I was eager to figure out the subtle emotion behind those sentences. So I showed the picture above to my friend, a native Japanese speaker, and asked him, "I spent the whole day learning these sentences, now what on earth are the differences between them?" He took a look at the picture, then looked at me with his innocent eyes and said:

"They are all the same."

空気読めないなあ、この人。

Footnote from the Editor :

From FY 2020, the Department of Physics is going to increase the number of lectures delivered in English for graduate and 4th year undergraduate students.