

My New Career in Dream Translation

Hayley Cox

I came to Japan with a knowledge of Japanese greetings and little else. In the seven months since arriving, I have devoted countless hours to studying. I can now understand a good deal, but speaking is still a struggle. I can engage in some small talk. I can offer a few complete sentences about very specific subjects. I can hold “almost-conversations” with great force of will and creative linguistic maneuvering.

Most of my sensei have some scrapings of English, but the assistant sensei, those with whom I interact the most outside the classroom, have next to none. This makes for stilted exchanges with many pauses to look up meanings on the internet and it usually devolves into me nodding and pretending to understand, but I am always touched that they keep trying. Even if it means they come to me for translations of things that defy translation.

A few weeks back, one such assistant sensei pulled me aside during a free period. I settled in, ready to for our usual round of phone dictionary-aided conversation.

But instead of the familiar dictionary app, she pulled up her voicemail and had me listen to two recordings of her 5 year old grandson. Her grandson who lives in America and had left messages to her in English. She played the first message and I quickly realized this kid was describing a dream. Great, this’ll be easy to translate.

Here is the gist: There was a monster, but not a scary monster (his mom asked and he very proudly declared he wasn’t scared). The sky “sparkled” and the big monster danced and it was “a lot of fun.”

The second dream featured a giant sun and giant parents that grew tall enough to touch the sky. This dream wasn’t so fun, but he made it clear that this was his own story from his dream, like the ones in the books but not actually from the books. His dream. Okay, understood.

Thanks to kid-speak and the audio quality of voicemails, I only understood about a third of what was said. This would definitely be one of those scenarios where I just look fascinated and nod along with the rambling youngster. But there was my sensei. Looking at me expectantly.

Big sigh. Where to start?

Well, let’s start with, “he is describing a dream.” If only I knew the word for dream... Pause for a quick internet search and discover “dream” was in fact the key word I were missing when a first grader asked me a question yesterday. But I digress. Turn back to sensei.

I convey the word for dream. Well, asks sensei (in Japanese), is it a sleeping dream or a life dream? Uh, sleeping dream. What’s the word for sleep? It’s basic, I learned it in, like, the first couple weeks. Why does all my vocabulary always run off at times like this? Oh yes, I remember now. I’ll add a little charade to ensure understanding. It failed. Let’s try again. Good, possible understanding reached. I’m never really sure.

Okay next, there was a monster. Cool, easy. My sensei heard her daughter ask the grandson if it was scary in Japanese. No, he said it was fun. Yep, that’s what he said. Yup, really. Oh did I mention the dancing? The monster. The monster was dancing. Monster. Dance. Was fun. (I’m not speaking in complete sentences, sigh.) Also the sky sparkled. What’s “sparkled”? Uh... sparkled, sparkled... Pause for another internet search.

So yes, the sky sparkled. Why? Really couldn’t tell you. Dream logic, huh? Wait, that’s doesn’t translate... Cue disarming smile!

Now we move onto the second voicemail with the second dream. Nope, I have no idea if they are related. Since they are separate voicemails I assume not- sorry. Too much English.

The parents (yes, I know that one!) grew (shoot, gotta look that one up) very tall and could touch the sky. Yes, that is rather funny, isn’t it. Except he thought it was scary. Yeah, he didn’t like it. Nope, no monster this time, at least not that I could tell. Also, the sun was very big. Don’t know how that relates, but all good stories need setting, right? Whoops, too much English.

Am I sure this is two dreams, not one? Absolutely not. But that will complicated things, so... Yes, two dreams. Definitely. Oh shoot, she understood when he mentioned books. No, this is not a story from a book, it’s his dream... but it is “like a book.” Don’t understand? Uh... did you notice my disarming smile?

By the end of this close to 20-minute exchange, I think I largely conveyed the heart of her grandson’s dreams. And though it got hairy in the middle, it was really rather fun. Talking past each other can be a real headache sometimes, but more often than not, it just lends itself to fond memories and funny stories.

