



Accepting the Osaka Award at the 2015  
Japanese Language Speech Contest

*I interviewed Hassan Awaisi for the February 2016 issue of the JIC's monthly newsletter in conjunction with the upcoming Japanese Language Speech Contest application deadline on February 16. Mr. Awaisi is a recent graduate with a Master of Arts in Religion from the University of Chicago who is now pursuing a pre-medical program at Tufts University in Boston. He was awarded the Osaka Award last year, provided by the Osaka Committee of Chicago Sister Cities International, which enabled him to visit Osaka, Japan for two weeks.*

**AK: Tell us a little about yourself and your background. For instance, how did you become interested in Japanese language and culture?**

HA: In the 1950s, my grandfather took the bold step of leaving his birthplace of Pakistan to start a new life in post-war Japan as an import-export businessman. After working for a few years in Osaka, he relocated with his family to the cosmopolitan city of Kobe where a significant South Asian diaspora lives to this day. My mother and her siblings attended English-medium international schools, but gained fluency in Japanese language and traditional culture thanks to their at-home nanny whom they affectionately referred to as "Oba-san."

I was born in Kaisei Hospital in 1989 and lived in Japan for three years before immigrating first to London, and then Boston. While I soon lost what little *nihongo* (Japanese) I had picked up at my Kobe nursery school, I always maintained a strong connection to Japan through food. Even now, my family's dinner table often serves scrumptious dishes such as *yakimeshi* (fried rice), *inari-zushi* (sweet fried tofu), and *chicken katsu* (breaded cutlet). I am also a long-time connoisseur of Japanese stationary, especially Pikachu-themed notebooks and pens!

During my second year as a graduate student in Chicago, I finally plucked up the courage to take a formal course in Japanese. I was instantly taken with the ornate script and exhilarated to finally be able to read all the food labels I encountered during my regular trips to Mitsuwa, a local Japanese supermarket.

**AK: What are you studying in school now? What are your future plans?**

HA: Shortly after completing a Master's in Religion this past June, I harbored second thoughts about continuing on the academic track toward a doctoral degree. My research had focused on the psychology of good and evil in wartime and what religion can teach us about being ethically responsive to images of human suffering in the media. Yet I felt as though the countless nights I spent in the library writing papers for a very limited readership simply did not translate into the real-world impact I wanted to have.

Then I stumbled upon *The Oath*, an award-winning autobiography of Chechen war surgeon Khassan Baiev, which inspired me to pursue a career in health. This past month, I enrolled in a pre-medical program at Tufts University. One day, I hope to work with international organizations like Doctors without Borders to serve the victims of violent conflict. I am attracted to reconstructive and trauma surgery and look forward to exploring further the nexus between religion, medicine, and healing.

**AK: What were your reasons for applying to last year's Speech Contest at the JIC? How did you prepare for it?**

When I heard the announcement for the Speech Contest with its grand prize of a roundtrip ticket to Japan, I was eager to give it a try! Nothing appealed to me more than the opportunity to travel back to the country of my birth, equipped this time with newly minted Japanese language skills.

Each of my five speech drafts incorporated comments and edits from my dedicated Japanese professor. Once I had a final version in hand, I took to committing it to memory. While this seemed like an uphill struggle at first, I began feeling increasingly comfortable the more I practiced. In the month running up to the Contest, I did around 50 full-length run-throughs, reading aloud the text to myself whenever I had a free moment: walking across campus, riding the bus, or even just relaxing in my dorm room. I found it immensely helpful to recite my speech in front of a native speaker—in this case, my mother—who could alert me to appropriate pronunciation, intonation, and pauses.

While driving to the Japanese consulate on the morning of the big day, I flawlessly recited the speech one last time under my breath. But to do the same on a stage in front of so many people is quite another matter! I stumbled twice during my delivery, temporarily forgetting my lines. Thanks to the hours of memorization I had put in earlier, however, I was able to recover my place within a few seconds. I would advise future contestants most of all to remember to breathe and give every syllable its due weight!



*Giving a presentation to students at a high school in Osaka*

**AK: Have you been continuing Japanese?**

HA: Due to my limited grasp of *kanji*, I keep up with Japanese mainly through television and film. I am a big fan of Hayao Miyazaki, especially for his powerfully depicted themes of environmental degradation and resilience in such works as “Spirited Away.” I also watch Japanese dramas including the highly acclaimed 1980s-era “Oshin,” which explores the erosion of traditional values in modern Japanese society. It so happens that “Oshin” was a favorite of my grandmother too who in her early days of living in Kobe used to watch the televised serial regularly with “Oba-san” to learn Japanese. Having studied Spanish, Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Russian, and now Japanese, I have come to appreciate the value of listening comprehension and sound memory in mastering a foreign tongue. In my experience, writing out the dialogue of a movie or lyrics of a song in the target language is often the best way to retain new words, idioms, and grammatical structures.

**AK: Tell us about the Osaka Award. What was your itinerary like and what activities did you participate in? What did you most enjoy from your trip?**

HA: I thoroughly enjoyed my two-week stay in Osaka, not least of all because of the delectable cuisine. Among my first-time eats were *kare udon* (curried noodles), *okonomiyaki* (savory pancake), and *takoyaki* (fried octopus). I even once ventured into a Pakistani restaurant with a few Japanese friends to dine on authentically prepared *nan* bread and chicken *tikka*, a testament to Osaka’s unique international flavor.

The Osaka Committee graciously arranged a diverse range of programming including guided tours of the Osaka Museum of History, Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Museum of Fine Art, Osaka Castle, and Osaka International Peace Center. I think the Abeno Life Safety Learning Center, which featured a fire-extinguishing lesson and 7.2 Richter-

magnitude earthquake simulation, stands out to me the most! I also had the privilege of meeting one-on-one with Public Affairs Officer Keith Lommel at the Kansai American Center to discuss U.S.-Japan relations and daily life as a member of the Foreign Service. My welcoming and down-to-earth Japanese host family took me on weekend excursions to Nara to see the famous Buddha statues, pet the park deer, and attend an evening Okinawan music concert.

I gained some of my most valuable insights into Japanese culture at the Fukai Elementary School where I not only observed classes from kindergarten to grade six, but also served as an assistant to the highly animated English teacher. Boggled by the idea of an *indo-jin* or “Indian” from America studying Japanese, the children were naturally very inquisitive. Their most popular questions for me were “What is your favorite Japanese food?”, “How old are you?”, and “Do you have a girlfriend?” I was particularly struck by the etiquette and maturity with which they approached their mandatory duties, from lunch distribution to hallway clean-up (unthinkable in most American public schools). Later on, I visited the Minami High School to give a presentation on Islam to an advanced English class. Contrary to my expectation, the students were unafraid to express themselves and asked me some very thought-provoking questions. The personalized thank you notes each of them handwrote to me in an endearing mixture of Japanese and English are among my most treasured souvenirs from Osaka.



*Practicing calligraphy in front of elementary students*

**AK: Was there something that you learned during your time in Japan?**

HA: Before coming to Osaka, I did not understand just how different the Kansai dialect is from Standard Japanese both in terms of vocabulary and pronunciation. I always carried around with me a pocket notebook, which locals were delighted to help me fill with lingo like *okini* or “thank you” and *honmani* or “really.” To me, *Kansai-ben* sounds more smooth and laid-back than the Japanese spoken in the Kanto region. Equally

fascinating were the unspoken geographically differentiated rules for standing position on escalators: left side for Tokyo, right side for Osaka.

**AK: Have you faced any challenges in life? If so, how did you overcome these?**

HA: I have had a speech impediment since the age of ten. If I feel anxious or under pressure, my lungs tend to constrict, rendering certain sounds difficult or near impossible to pronounce. Growing up, I often used to avoid participating in class so as not to stumble over words and embarrass myself in front of my peers. Yet junior year of high school—when the stresses of stuttering were beginning to adversely affect my academics—saw a paradigm shift in my approach. I started probing why I stammered so heavily over the phone or before an audience, though not at all when I sang, whispered, or spoke English with a goofy accent. I realized that this condition—both neurological and psychological in nature—was not a permanent part of me. It stemmed from my own internalized fear of failure in situations of uncertainty.

Today, I see stuttering as one of my greatest assets. I have learned how to navigate speech troubles through positive self-talk (“Yes, I *can* say this word if I try hard enough”) along with slow, measured, and deliberate enunciation of problematic sounds (especially “b,” “p,” “d,” “t,” “k,” and “s”). All this has inadvertently made my voice sound more calm and composed—or so people tell me—despite what I may be thinking inside. When it comes to foreign languages like Japanese, there is an added bonus to taking my time to form sentences: I usually make less careless grammatical mistakes! Most essentially, stuttering has taught me that confidence is not a goal to be achieved at some fixed moment, but a constant work in progress cultivated by perseverance and determination in the face of life’s challenges.

**AK: Do you have any quote, phrase, or advice you’d like to share?**

HA: I believe no one summed up the importance of polyglots in our world more eloquently than Nelson Mandela: “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in *his* language, that goes to his heart.” Google translate can never substitute for the time and effort spent in learning how to converse and connect with different cultures. It is no coincidence that the above quote came from the man who oversaw the seemingly insurmountable task of peaceful reconciliation in South Africa after decades of oppressive apartheid rule. A foreign language is not just for embellishing the “skills” section of a resume—it enables one to transcend the politics of identity, build bridges of mutual understanding, and humanize that which was once seen as Other.



*A favorite meal from Osaka*