

## **“One”**

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*One, un, ein, een, ichi, 1. When it comes to summing up the idea of “a single thing”, a single, straight line seems like a pretty good, easy to understand choice. 1 is 1 is 1? Not quite. There are two obvious ways to write a single straight line: 1 or -. As it happens, the Romans chose “1” and in the lands of the rising sun, “-” was adopted. It is often said how different Japan’s culture is from that of the west. Is this summed up by the fact that even “-” is written as differently as it can be? During my year and a half in Japan I have come across several different things which seem to be as different as they possibly can be from the English equivalent: exact opposites. It might seem that if something is an exact opposite the difference would be obvious, so immediately recognizable that no problems would arise. This is not the case. It is obvious that something, somewhere, is causing a misunderstanding but it can take a while to figure out what.*

*One of the best examples of this is the one so ably demonstrated by Ken and Tom in those New Crown textbooks: the hand signal for “come here”. In England, we use exactly the same hand signal, but it has precisely the opposite meaning: “go away”. I have been caught out by this on more than one occasion. The first time was during the school cleaning time when a student was beckoning to me to come and join in the cleaning groups’ “hanseikai” – the after cleaning group meeting. We stood at opposite ends of the hallway for about a minute, him gesturing “come here”, me trying to gesture “what’s the problem?” whilst attempting to figure out why this student at the other end of the hall so badly wanted me to go away.*

*Telephone conversations with Japanese people (in English) have also provided some puzzling moments. I often found that when the conversation seemed to be over, there would be an uncomfortable silence: both people trying to say goodbye but neither hanging up. (Incidentally, there is a brilliant word in Japanese to describe just such a silence – “shiiiiin” It’s the perfect description of the response you get when you ask a roomful of sannensei for “any volunteers?”) Back to the phone: why the silence? It has taken me all year to figure this one out. It turns out to be because of opposite customs of phone etiquette. In England, if person A says goodbye first, usually person B says bye then waits for A to hang up. In Japan, it is considered slightly rude to be the one to hang up, so if someone is calling you, they don’t want to be the first to hang up – they consider it polite to wait to let you do so. So if, according to the western custom, you say goodbye then wait for the other*

*to hang up, all you get is that awkward “shiiiiin”.*

*A third example of opposite meanings I stumbled across after diligently checking a pile of students papers. It turns out the English mark for “correct” looks exactly like the mark used in Japan for “wrong”. Whoops.*

*People in Japan often ask if I had any problems adjusting to Japanese life. Of course, many things are different, but it is those things which happen to be exactly opposite which are often the most surprising, precisely because they are so deceptively familiar. The same symbol has been chosen to represent opposite ideas.*

*As for “one”- “1” or “- ”: here the same idea is represented by “opposite” symbols. “Which is correct? “1” or “- ”? Come here or go away? They’re just different. Learning the differences has been an interesting aspect of my job as an ALT!*