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Too polite for Words A Japanese colleague the other day was talking about a meeting with a man whom she abruptly described using the English word "jerk". I thought she was toning down her Japanese for my benefit, so I asked her how to say "jerk" in Japanese. "Theres no such word." she answered helplessly. "we have to use jerk ". Heaven knows its not as if there are no jerks in Japan. But the Japanese language is just not made for sniping at people. At first, I thought maybe my Japanese teachers had been too polite to teach me the real lingo, so watched to see what Japanese drivers would say to each other after a accident. It turned out that they say: "Im sorry."

Gradually I came to realize that there is perhaps no language so ill suited to invective as Japanese. Linguistically, these guys are wimps. Take the vicious Japanese insult "kisama," which is deeply offensive. It means "your honorable self." Thats right. Instead of using all kinds of dirty words, the Japanese insult each other by frowning and growing: "Your honorable self." Likewise, a nasty expression for a woman is "ana," another term not to try with the nice woman at the sushi restaurant. But literally it means "nun" Sure, sarcasm may be intended, but still most women would probably prefer to be characterized as a nun than as a female dog. Since people are least inhibited when they are shaking their fists at each other, insults offer a window into a culture. Ive been interested in such terms ever since I

arrived in Cairo a dozen years ago to study Arabic and discovered that my name was a curse. "Nick" sounds very much like the imperative of an extremely vulgar for sex. I would introduce myself in Arabic, and my new acquaintance would flee in horror. There's no such danger in Japanese. There are explicit terms for sex and for body parts, crude as well as clinical, but they are descriptive rather than insulting. There is one exception. One of the meanest things one Japanese child can say to another is: "Omaeno kaachan debeso." That means: "Your mom's belly button sticks out." This has no deep Freudian meaning. It simply means that your mother is rude and ugly.

1. The Japanese woman used the English word "jerk" so as to make it easier for me to understand her. A. Right B. Wrong C. Not mentioned

2. The Japanese people cannot fully demonstrate their anger because their language is not suitable for sniping at people. A. Right B. Wrong C. Not mentioned

3. From the linguistic perspective, Japanese drivers are cowards. A. Right B. Wrong C. Not mentioned

4. The Japanese insult each other by showing their respect in an ironic way. A. Right B. Wrong C. Not mentioned

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