



Hello listeners,

This episode is all about **haiku** in English.

Just in case you don't know, *haiku* is a form of short poem, which originated in Japan.

During this episode I am going to read lots of haiku to you, in English of course.

Each haiku packs in a lot of meaning, imagery and feelings into just a few words.

Each one is like a little story, describing a moment in time.

Each one is a kind of short meditation which encourages you to stop and think for a moment.

And in fact, you could consider each one of these to be a quick test of your English, or at least an opportunity to learn some bits of vocabulary.

As you listen to this episode, consider these questions.

- Do you understand what each haiku means?
- What do they make you *think about* and *feel*?
- And do you know all the vocabulary used in each one?

As we go through these mini poems I will explain their meaning and the words and phrases used.

I will talk about what they make me think about and feel, and I will generally discuss this interesting and inspiring form of poetry, which is all about the economical and evocative use of language.

Four haiku as a taste of what's to come

To begin with, here are four haikus, just to give you a little taste of what to expect. There will be a lot more during the episode.

First, a classic Japanese one, translated into English.

“[First autumn morning]” by Murakami Kijo

First autumn morning

the mirror I stare into

shows my father's face.

I will discuss that later.

Now couple of more contemporary ones written by American writer John Stevenson.

*Thin winter coat
so little protection
against her boyfriend*

It's very short. Only a few words that paint a simple picture, but there are many possible interpretations, and as I said, it tells a little story, which expands as we imagine the context of this observation or moment of time that has been captured. Again, that one will come back later and I'll discuss it in more detail.

and...

*Seeing it her way
it must have been lonely
living with me*

Plus, one for true LEPsters

*A skeleton sits
headphones on, still listening
intro not done yet*

That last one is not up to the same standard as the others, but still, it's a bit of fun and I do have a set of haiku for LEPsters, which I will read near the end of the episode.

What do those make you think about?

I will talk about each one of them, and many more in this episode.

So, if you're ready, let's begin...

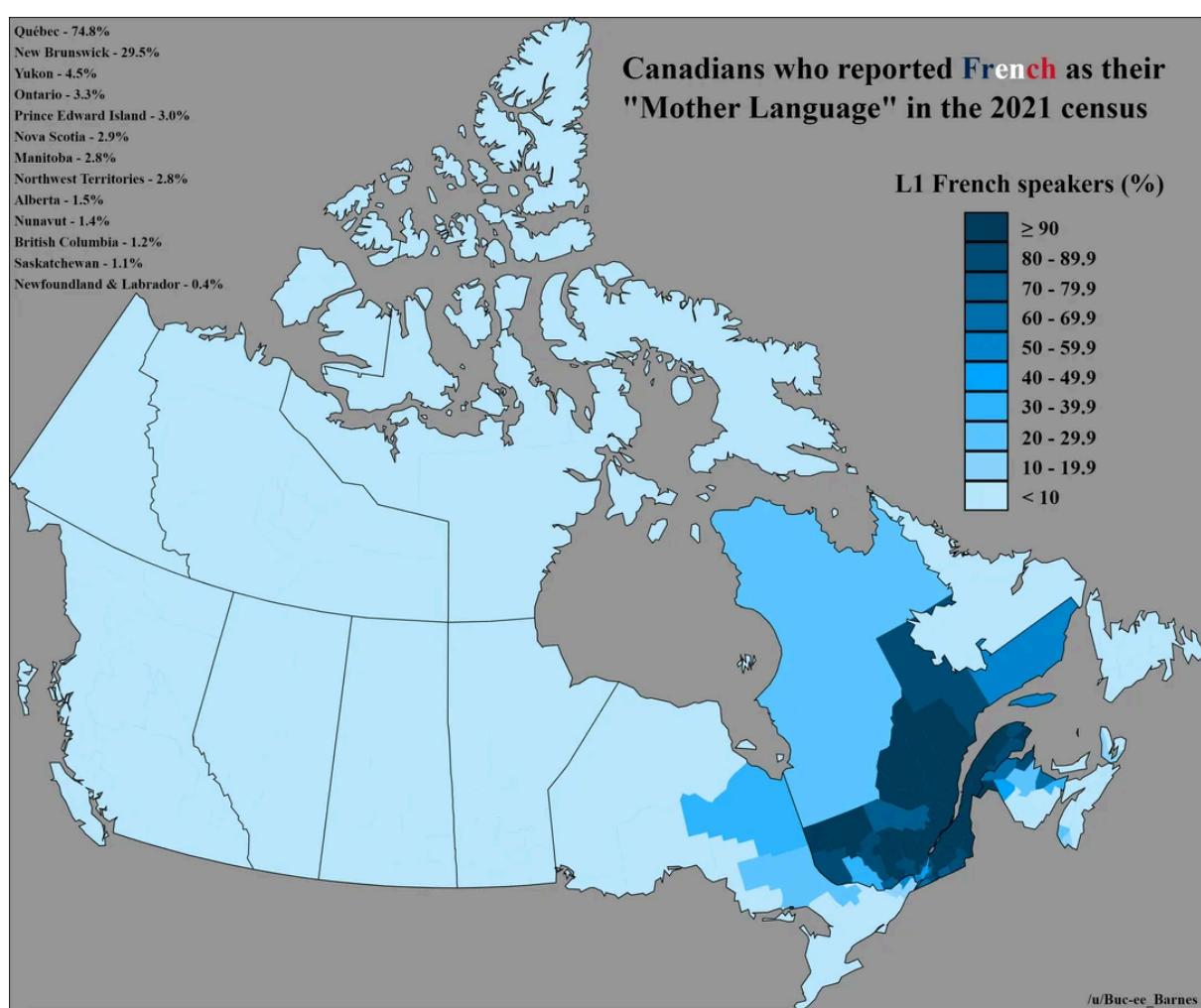


This all started with an email I got from a LEPster called Hélène Leclerc (Hello Hélène!) - quite a long time ago to be fair - sorry for taking ages to do this Hélène!

Hélène listens to the podcast from Quebec in **French-speaking Canada**, which means that French is her first language.  

Just a note about French speakers in Canada, like Hélène.

Of course most Canadians have English as a first language, but as you may know, about 20% of people there have *French as their first language* - mostly those living in the province of Quebec, but also parts of New Brunswick and other areas.



In my experience, even though French speaking Canadians live in Canada where a lot of their fellow citizens are native English speakers, people from Quebec don't always speak English at that level too.

Some people do, and there are lots of bilingual people in Canada of course, but it is perfectly normal for a lot of people in Quebec to spend their lives living in French and don't develop their English skills to the same level.

So, just a bit of context about French speaking Canadians there. Not all Canadians are native English speakers.

I do have listeners in French-speaking Canada.

Anyway, let me try to stick to the point here. Hélène wrote me a very nice email, sharing a lot of information. It started like this.

Dear Luke,

How are you today? I hope you're doing well. 

I discovered your podcast on Google last June, completely by chance.

I had just returned from my first trip to New York, and my goal was to stay in the NYC spirit! I wanted to learn a bit more about this city that I fell in love with.

I googled something like "New York stories" in the search engine.

One of the links that came up was your podcast, episode 872 (The Birthday Party).

Even though it wasn't exactly what I was looking for (it was, but I didn't know that yet!), I started listening to it.

I was really impressed by the clarity of your speech, not only your pronunciation but also the way you explain things.

Wow, I understood absolutely everything! You are a great teacher, Luke. Your passion makes your podcast compelling. I absolutely love your sense of humor!

I became completely addicted to your podcast, and several months ago, I became a premium listener. I have already listened to a lot of episodes! Thank you so much for all the work you put into these episodes.

You are welcome of course Hélène. It is always nice to hear from listeners and their stories of how they have discovered my podcast and if it has helped them at all, and I am always open to hearing people in different countries around the world tell me how wonderful I am.

But seriously, it is very encouraging for me to get emails from listeners, and I wonder if you discovered this podcast in a similar way, and if you have had a similar experience as Hélène who probably lives thousands of miles away from you in a completely different part of the world. Anyway...

To cut a long story short, Hélène explained in her email that she is really into **haiku**, both in French and in English. She writes haiku in French and more and more in English, and in fact her journey with English is closely connected to her love of haiku.

We will come back to Hélène a little bit later in this episode to continue her story, but this does bring us to the main topic of this episode. Haiku.

What is haiku?

Here is some information from [Wikipedia.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiku)

Haiku (俳句; in English: /'haɪk.u:/,^[1] Japanese: [hai.ku(↑)])^{①[2]}) is a type of short-form **poetry** that originated in **Japan**.

Haiku originated as an opening part of a larger Japanese genre of poetry called **renga**, and over time they began to be written as stand-alone poems.

Haiku was given its current name by the Japanese writer [Masaoka Shiki](#) at the end of the 19th century.^[6]

I think haiku has travelled around the world and is known everywhere now, and is probably written in different languages. You can let me know.

- Do you have haiku in your language?
- Have you ever read any, or indeed, written any haiku?

Haiku or haikus? Plural or singular?

By the way, “haiku” is the name of the art form - so, “I love haiku” and “What is haiku?” are correct sentences, when referring to the art form. This is equivalent to saying “I love poetry” “or I love comedy”.

But what is the plural form? Is it haiku or haikus?

Actually, both are correct, with the two forms having slightly different connotations.

1. Haiku (The Traditional Way)

In Japanese, nouns do not typically change form to indicate plurality. Therefore, the word "haiku" functions as both the singular and the plural. This is the preferred form among poets, scholars, and traditionalists.

Example: "Matsuo Bashō wrote many beautiful haiku."

2. Haikus (The Anglicized Way)

As the word has been integrated into the English language, it has adopted standard English pluralization (adding an "s"). This version is widely accepted in casual conversation and is listed as a valid plural in most modern dictionaries, including Merriam-Webster and Oxford.

Example: "The students wrote three haikus for their homework assignment."

So, you will see or hear both being used.

What about the structure of haiku. It is quite specific (a bit like English sonnets).

Traditional Japanese haiku consist of three phrases composed of 17 [morae](#) /'mō:ri/ (these are called *on* in Japanese - they are like syllables in English) in a 5, 7, 5 pattern;^[3] that include a [kireji](#), or "cutting word";^[4] and a [kigo](#), or seasonal reference.

So...

- A type of poem with three lines.
- 17 syllables (in English versions) in the whole poem
- In a 5, 7, 5 pattern. So, 5 syllables in the first phrase, 7 in the middle phrase, and 5 in the final phrase.
- A cutting word - a word that somehow breaks or interrupts something else in the poem - or the idea of one thing being interrupted by something else.
- A seasonal reference - something that describes or refers to nature and particularly the changing of seasons.

But these “rules” or elements are often broken...

Haiku by classical Japanese poets, such as [Matsuo Bashō](#), also deviate from the 17-on (syllable) pattern and sometimes do not contain a *kireji* (cutting word).

(So the form is a bit *flexible*).

Originally from Japan, haiku today are written by authors worldwide. [Haiku in English](#) and [haiku in other languages](#) have different styles and traditions while still incorporating aspects of the traditional haiku form.

Non-Japanese language haiku vary widely on how closely they follow traditional elements (the traditional “rules”).

Additionally, a minority movement within modern Japanese haiku (現代俳句, *gendai-haiku*), supported by [Ogiwara Seisensui](#) and his disciples, has varied from the traditional of 17 on as well as taking nature as their subject.

So, non-Japanese haiku often break the rules but there are also Japanese haiku authors who have also broken from tradition and write haikus with more or less than 17 syllables, and about all kinds of things - not just on topics relating to nature.

In Japanese, haiku are traditionally printed as a single line, while haiku in English often appear as three lines, although variations exist.

There is a lot of minimalism in haiku and also discipline involved in the writing of haiku.

A bit like 100-word stories, which I have talked about before on this podcast, the strict limitations of this form require a lot of discipline from the writer, but sometimes strict limitations somehow open the door to creativity.

When you have only a few elements to work with, it can force you to be very economical with words, getting straight to the point, and the results can be quite powerful.

Also there is a zen-like sense of meditation about haiku - a way to capture both a sense of calm and a moment of realisation or change, and the connection between changes in the natural world and similar changes in our own personal inner-world.

I think my description doesn't really do justice to the this artform, but I guess that is ok. If you know more about haiku, then please feel free to add your comments if you have any. Japanese listeners, perhaps, will be well placed to bring any light to this subject.

A selection of haiku that everyone should know about

At this point I should start reading out some examples of haiku in English, and I'll explain what they mean, what they mean to me, and some of the vocabulary.

There will be a lot of haiku throughout the episode. I'll give them numbers and you will find them written on the episode PDF, link in the description.

If you want to comment on them, you can give the number as a reference, so we know which one you are talking about.

Some of these haiku might not “grab” you, but others will. So, let us know which ones you like and why you like them. I want to encourage you to write your thoughts in English in the comment section.

As we go through the episode, I think the haiku will get more and more interesting - from quite profound and poetic ones, to funny ones, and then some which will definitely make sense to you if you are a true LEPster.

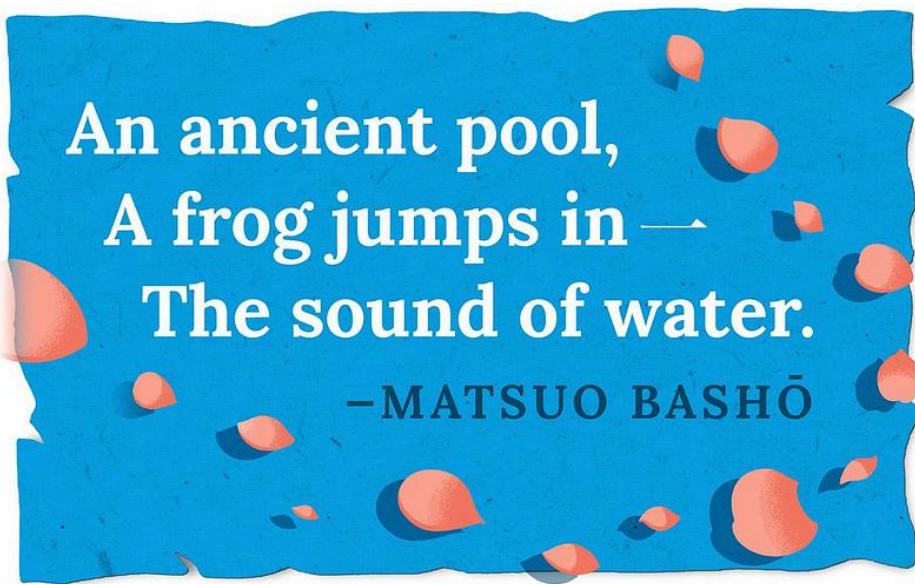
Here we go with my first set. Here are some examples of traditional Japanese haiku translated into English, some Japanese haiku that break from the rules, and also some English language ones which also break away from the traditional structure.

I found these, with their explanations on a website called [Reedsy.com](https://reedsy.com/discovery/blog/haiku-poem-examples-everyone-should-know-about) in a blog post called **40 Haiku Poem Examples Everyone Should Know About**

<https://reedsy.com/discovery/blog/haiku-poem-examples-everyone-should-know-about>

“The Old Pond” by Matsuo Bashō (is this the most famous haiku ever?)

1.



An ancient pool,
A frog jumps in —
The sound of water.

—MATSUO BASHŌ

Obviously, something is lost in translation here. The English version appears not to have a cutting word and doesn't follow the 17 syllable rule.

I am sure it is nearly impossible to translate this from the original Japanese, and any translation will take something away from the original version. If you've ever done any translating or interpreting work, you will know that you often have to make various choices as you try to find the best and closest equivalent in the target language. Whoever translated this obviously had to work hard to capture the spirit of the original.

I have seen other translations that take a slightly different approach like this one translated by Harry Behn.

An old silent pond...

A frog jumps into the pond,

splash! Silence again.

That manages to use 17 syllables, and there's a cutting word (splash) but the word pond is repeated, which isn't great.

There's this version too.

An ancient pond

A frog jumps in

Splash!

Let's not get too hung up on the rules of haiku, especially in English. With all due respect to the great haiku masters, rules are made to be broken, aren't they?

Some comments about this haiku from the blog post on Reedsy.com

One of the four great masters of Japanese haiku, Matsuo Bashō is known for his simplistic yet thought-provoking haikus. “The Old Pond”, arguably his most famous piece, stays true to his style of couching observations of human nature within natural imagery. One interpretation is that by metaphorically using the ‘pond’ to symbolize the mind, Bashō brings to light the impact of external stimuli (embodied by the frog, a traditional subject of Japanese poetry) on the human mind.

A frog jumping into a lake as a metaphor for the nature of consciousness and the human condition.

This is very zen, isn't it? The stillness of the water, the interruption of the frog, then the stillness again. In the meditative state, the water is your mind. The frog is an interruption. Then your mind naturally reverts to its calm state again.

2.

"A Poppy Blooms" by Katsushika Hokusai

*I write, erase, rewrite
erase again, and then
a poppy blooms.*

In this piece, Katsushika Hokusai draws similarities between life and his writing – both processes of repetitive creation and destruction. Neither are linear or smooth, and both demand constant work and perseverance. However, the reward of his perseverance is something undeniably beautiful.

3.

"In the moonlight" by Yosa Buson

*In pale moonlight
the wisteria's scent
comes from far away.*

Buson invites the reader to share in his nostalgia with elements from nature such as 'pale moonlight' and the 'wisteria's scent' triggering our visual and olfactory senses — the fact that the scent is coming from far away adds a transportive element to the poem, asking us to imagine the unseen beauty of this tree.

Thought: This is the sort of thing that comes to you if you leave your phone alone, and just sit for a while and drink in the atmosphere of what is going on around you.

You can find peace, and inspiration from stillness. You might notice things, or have realisations, if you stop the endless stimulation of your device, and give your mind and senses a chance to reset.

4.

"The earth shakes" by Steve Sanfield

*The earth shakes
just enough
to remind us.*

Penned in English, poet Steve Sanfield's only haiku is a quiet reminder of our mortality, inviting us to consider what may be important to us before it's too late.

Luke: I have experienced earthquakes. They can be frightening of course. But they are also little (and sometimes big) reminders that all of this is temporary and we have to appreciate the moment and

the things we have right now, and that we should probably keep some bottles of water and biscuits and a first aid kit under the kitchen table, just in case.

5.

“The Taste of Rain” by Jack Kerouac

*The taste
of rain
– Why kneel?*

Yep, the iconoclastic author behind *On the Road* also wrote haikus! As one of the Beat Generation's leading figures, he was part of a movement that produced some of the 20th century's influential poems.

This particular haiku signifies finding profound spiritual experience and beauty not in formal religious settings, but in simple, everyday moments, suggesting that stillness and wonder are universally accessible through direct sensory experience, reflecting his Beat Generation ethos of spontaneous, unmediated living.

It challenges conventional ideas of spirituality, proposing that the divine or meaningful can be found in the ordinary, like the simple sensation of rain on one's tongue, and that kneeling in church is not the only way to have a profound spiritual experience.

6.

“Haiku [for you]” by Sonia Sanchez

love between us is

speech and breath. loving you is

a long river running.

“Haiku [for you]” acts as a warm, comforting hug. The poet draws similarities between the nature of their love and that of ‘speech’ and ‘breath’ – natural and unforced. If someone whispered this to you, wouldn’t you feel love, too?

7.

“O snail” by Kobayashi Issa

O snail

Climb Mount Fuji,

But slowly, slowly!

Issa was renowned for shining a spotlight on smaller, less-than-glamorous creatures like grasshoppers, bugs, and sparrows. In “O snail”, he gently reminds the determined snail that while there are important things to do in life (like climbing

mountains), there's more to life than speed! The mountain isn't going to go anywhere, is it?

8.

“JANUARY” by Paul Holmes

Delightful display

Snowdrops bow their pure white heads

To the sun's glory.

This haiku is a part of Paul Holmes' A Year in Haiku Poem, where he attempts to capture the essence of each month of the year. Holmes does so fittingly, using vivid imagery to depict the seamless changing of the seasons— as the snowdrops bow their ‘white heads’ to make way for the sun’s glory.



9.

“[snowmelt–]” by Penny Harter

snowmelt–

on the banks of the torrent

small flowers

By placing the river's powerful torrent next to a delicate flower, Harter captures how all of nature's diverse elements coexist beautifully. While the torrent certainly paints a more aggressive image than most haiku, it's balanced by the idea of the snow melting and the delicacy of the flowers emerging from spring.

10.

[meteor shower] by Michael Dylan Welch

meteor shower

a gentle wave

wets our sandals

Another non-traditional haiku that eschews the 5-7-5, Welch's entry here is a snapshot of a rare moment shared between the speaker and someone else. The order of the three images creates a sense of the poet lowering their eyes from shooting stars in the sky, before settling on a strangely intimate image of sitting or standing on the beach. With all the wonders of the

universe, nothing compares to a moment shared with someone close to you.

11.

“After Killing a Spider” by Masaoka Shiki

*After killing
a spider, how lonely I feel
in the cold of night!*

Masaoka Shiki’s “After Killing a Spider” is a prime example of haiku’s ability to capture the minutiae of life. Filled with loneliness and regret, After Killing a Spider depicts exactly what it says on the tin. But then it goes further into the speaker’s emotions after the incident – because after killing his only companion, the speaker is left alone in the cold of the night. What’s also interesting is that the first break comes after the word ‘killing’, emphasizing the brutality the speaker felt on performing the act, even if it was just a spider.

12.

“[I kill an ant]” by Kato Shuson

*I kill an ant
and realize my three children*

have been watching.

If you haven't had your fill of bug-killing action, here's a haiku from Kato Shuson. As with "After killing a spider", the speaker doesn't feel remorse at having ended a life – but perhaps regrets allowing their kids to see their savage tendencies. Though short in length, this haiku imparts a powerful message: be the person that you want your children to see.

13.

"Over The Wintry" by Natsume Sōse

Over the wintry

forest, winds howl in rage

with no leaves to blow.

One can easily imagine the person represented by the metaphorical wind in this haiku: someone in their winter years, who has spent their time railing against the world, only to be left with no one left to listen. While spring often represents the idea of hope in poetry, winter surely is the season of regret.

14.

"[The lamp once out]" by Natsume Soseki

The lamp once out

Cool stars enter

The window frame.

This is a classic by Natsume Soseki, a widely respected novelist and haiku writer. You might read it literally, thinking that one can marvel at the night sky in all of its wonder as soon as the light of the lamp on the street goes out, or you can also interpret the lamp as an active mind — only when we manage to quiet it can we access a deeper, wiser source of light, represented by the stars.

15.

“[The snow of yesterday]” by Gozan

The snow of yesterday

That fell like cherry blossoms

Is water once again

As you might have noticed, the art of writing haiku demands an almost superhuman level of observation. Aida Bunnozuke, also known as Gozan, speaks about the impermanence of our surroundings by noticing how snowflakes turn into water in very little time. This theme of the ephemeral nature of life is

emphasized by the cherry blossoms, which only last for about a week after peak bloom.

16.

“[First autumn morning]” by Murakami Kijo

*First autumn morning
the mirror I stare into
shows my father's face.*

Born in Tokyo in 1865, Murakami Kijo helped with the founding of Hototogisu, a literary magazine responsible for popularizing the modern haiku in Japan. In this particular piece, Kijo uses the simple act of looking into the mirror to convey one's struggle with mortality.

17.

“[Just friends:]” by Alexis Rotella

*Just friends:
he watches my gauze dress
blowing on the line.*

A gauze dress is a lightweight, breathable garment made from gauze fabric, characterized by its soft, airy texture, loose weave, and comfortable feel. If it is single layered, it can be a bit transparent or see-through.

Contemporary poet Alexis Rotella knows how to tap into common human experiences – like, for instance, a friendship that gets in the way of love. In an instant, we can feel the frustration for a potential that won't be expressed (he won't express his true feelings), and a desire that won't be satisfied

They are just friends, and so he won't express his desire for her – but she sees it and feels it, in the way he watches the dress on the line, moving in the wind, and there must be other sexual tension too.

18.

“[losing its name]” by John Sandbach

losing its name

a river

enters the sea



As the river gives up its very identity to contribute to the sea, it reminds us of the importance of selflessness. After all, “no man is an island” and we are all parts of a bigger whole, aren’t we?

 A reminder to drink some water 

Question 

**When does water cease to be water,
when you drink it?**

Answer: Most water molecules leave your body exactly as they entered—as H₂O—via urine, sweat, or breath.

Only a small percentage "ceases to be water" by being chemically dismantled to help your body harvest energy or repair tissues. So, unlike a river which dies when it enters the sea, most water molecules survive being drunk by a human and live to tell the tale, perhaps making their way into a river, getting a name, and losing it when they eventually join the ocean, where it probably started anyway.

Back to the email from Hélène in Quebec, Canada, which inspired me to do this episode



Hélène wrote about haiku very passionately, explaining that she has been a Haiku writer since 2005 (I am assuming in French) with five published collections, and she has helped people translate their haikus from English to French.

Getting in touch with fellow haiku enthusiasts in English helped to boost her confidence, and then she attended a haiku award ceremony in NYC at the UN International School where she left copies of her haiku book for French teachers.

As a result of that she was contacted by a French teacher in Manhattan about assisting in some haiku workshops, and this idea really boosted her motivation to improve her spoken English - presumably in order to take part in the workshops more effectively, and also to make the most of her time in New York where the work was to be done.

So this is a listener who has found a great source of inspiration for learning English, through the world of haiku poetry and the social scene around it, both in French and in English, and it reminds me that there are many inroads into the world of English, and exploring your passions and hobbies can take you into situations in which you have to use English.

What's my point here?

I suppose Hélène's case is an example of how a narrow focus can be a great way into a wider world of English. Starting with one specific interest and exploring it deeply, in English, often opens the door to broader English language exposure. Sometimes English just grows sideways as a result of following a thing you love.

Anyway, Hélène went on to say how she met Japanese translator Hiroaki Sato and American haiku poet John Stevenson in NYC.

I hadn't heard of John Stevenson before, but Hélène raved about his writing and gave me some examples.

She thought this might be a good topic for the podcast, and so here we are.

Here are some amazingly simple haikus by John Stevenson.

We'll start with ones from a book called *My Red, selected haikus by John Stevenson*, Brooks Books Publisher, Illinois, 2021.

I really like these ones. I think they are my favourites, out of all the haikus in this episode. I find them well-observed, quite poignant without being overly pretentious, and they are humorous in some cases.

19.

**checking the driver
as I pass a car
just like mine**

20.

**home for Christmas
the toaster
I grew up with**

21.

**on the subway
a woman with sheet music
moving her lips**

22.

**a deep gorge...
some of the silence
is me**

23.

**complicating
my love of music
her urge to sing**

24.

**banquet table -
just out of reach
the good conversation**

More in a few moments...

Hélène: He is amazing, isn't he? I don't know if you can feel it, or how much you know about haiku. Since you lived in Japan for two years, maybe you are aware that this (form of) classic Japanese poetry has spread all over the world now.

Let's read some more haikus from John Stevenson.

I agree with Hélène. I think these are great. I like the way he uses (and adapts) the haiku form to make evocative observations about every day life, including very specific or intimate feelings which occur in little moments that we probably all experience.

There's also humour. At times, it feels like observational comedy - which also is the art of pointing out funny little details in every day life.

25.

never touching
his own face
tyrannosaurus

Acorn - Number 27, 2011

26.

embarrassed
by the lavish praise
I imagine getting

HPNC Contest, 2006

27.

reversible jacket
the side
I always show

Geppo - November/December, 2006

28.

cold moon –
a moment of hesitation
years ago

The Heron's Nest - December, 2006

END OF PART 1

I will continue this episode at a later date...

Certificate & Medal Award

