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# Japan's emblematic English

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An analysis of 'public English' and (not) learning the language in Japan

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VISITORS to Japan, whether linguists or laymen, frequently come back with their own collection of quaint uses of English, gathered from public signs, advertising and so on, which vary from the odd to the simply incorrect: *Tasty Plaza* (a shop name), *Every Day's* (a restaurant name), *Prise Rist* (the heading for a list of hairdresser's prices). *Kansai Time Out*, a monthly English-language magazine for the Kansai region, actually features a section entitled 'Funny English', contributors earning a prize for any sample printed.

This may provide complacent amusement for the native speaker, but is not surprising or unique: Budapest airport until relatively recently sported a large sign reading *Welcome in Hungary*. What is especially interesting in Japan is not the mistakes but the puzzling function of many such signs. English words and messages are often combined with Japanese, so that, as a non-Japanese speaker, your eye is at first attracted then baffled, until you realise that the English is not aimed at you, a native speaker, but at native speakers of Japanese. But who among the Japanese is it aimed at, and why?

To answer this it is necessary first to categorize the various types of English commonly used in public in Japan. Leaving aside normal informational uses, such as recorded announcements on some public transport, signs in stations, and so on, there appear to be at least seven types of context in which English appears, most of them closely related to each other. These are:

## 1 Shop names, slogans, and signs in windows and inside shops

*Your: jazz and lunch – Curry and Bolognese – Coffee and Kitchen – Wish of fish – Sandwiches*

*and Café – Head and Aesthetic Salon – Living Shop – Snappy Oasis – 'We create a bright and affluent life' (estate agents) – Sale: to you who know true values (in Izumiya, a large department store)*

## 2 Advertising and brand names

*Viewt (the brand name of a small car) – Pocari Sweat and Calpis (both soft drinks) – National (electrical goods) – Kimono for Adult Love (a sign in Sapporo)*

## 3 Expressions on wrapping for food and other items and on plastic bags

*Hainas – this high quality soft roll tissue. Please your amenity life – Sparky Hangaer Human series (on cardboard wrapper for coat-hangers) – THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY CO-OPERATIVES IN TIMES OF CHANGE Support Study, Education and Research activities at a University and Contribute to the Overall Improvement of the University Community Nurture the Spirit of Cooperation and Strive to Improve the Life and Culture through the Cooperative Power Link the Life with Society, and Expand the Circle of Cooperation (on a bag) – I wish to have a special time with you by sharing fruits of the world (on a dried-fruits packet) – Soft and light pie baked thoroughly, as if time piles up (on a millefeuille cake wrapper)*

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#### 4 Clothing: messages and slogans on clothes, mainly teeshirts

*Frolic Cutie* (on a T-shirt) – *I am dead* (on a T-shirt) – *Just Flesh – we are the flesh foods eater Bears Honey rabbits carrot* (all on a woman's jacket along with pictures of vegetables) – *We went to spend time with our favourite pajamas* – *An enough silhouette is let us settle down also our mind* (on a men's pyjama label with the brand name *BURN*)

#### 5 Vehicles, drinks machines, domestic equipment: slogans and messages

*Into the Nature/LAND CRUISER/I've discovered a new natural world* (on an off-the-road vehicle's spare tyre) – *You meet the nicest motor-cycle life* (on a motor-bike cover) – *Active, refresh modern-your creative space* (on a vacuum cleaner)

#### 6 Residential building names

*Freaks – Forest – Lions Mansion – Towny*

#### 7 Official notices and posters

*Information and Store Guide* – single English words heading information provided in Japanese – *flower arrangement class* (the heading of a notice otherwise in Japanese)

### The functions of Japanese Public English

Most of the above examples are clearly commercial uses of language not dissimilar to the way French or German is sometimes used in English advertising. Both English and Japanese informants have suggested that English conveys a fashionable, desirable image, whether it is understood or not: indeed, the word *cool* is sometimes used by young Japanese speakers to describe the effect. Similarly, Western actors are commonly used in TV commercials for products such as shampoo, conditioner and cosmetics.

During a discussion among English teachers at an EFL Publishers' Book Fair in Japan in 1998, an American commentator claimed that even the mistakes in written uses of English are a deliberate marketing policy to attract attention, but this idea was rejected by several Japanese teachers. In Category 1, in particular, English in a catering context seems to connote non-Japanese cuisine (such as Indian and Italian), or it connotes a non-Japanese style or service of some kind, as with hair-dressing, which offers young

people extremely non-traditional dyeing, shaving and other decorative hair styles. The common use of French names for bakeries where croissants and patisseries are sold seems to bear this out, and it is seems clear that Categories 1 to 3 are intended to increase sales and indicate type of product to the consumer.

This cannot however explain all occurrences. English on T-shirts, as elsewhere in the world, may be a fashion, but it may also indicate the wearer's wish to identify with some aspect of the culture associated with that language. Permanent messages, as on domestic items, clothes, labels, and so on, are not for public display, but perhaps continue to assure the user of the object's quality. In both cases, the use of English goes beyond the need to attract the customer's attention or indicate a Western product.

Sententious semi-moralistic exhortations or messages, as on the Co-operative bag, some drink machines, and various wrappings, are even stranger and more difficult to interpret. Trying to understand them as meaningful communicative messages in fact, leads nowhere. Taking the dried-fruit message (*I wish to have a special time with you by sharing fruits of the world*), the *I* and *you* which in natural language are deictic (context clarifying who they refer to) here seem to have no obvious referent (Is it the dates themselves which are speaking?), while the cosy vocabulary (*wish, special, share*) are manifestly the wrong register. All we need here is information, perhaps where the fruit comes from, and possibly some assurance that it is worth buying, and we certainly don't want anyone's wish about anything. Perhaps, then, not only the use of English but also the use of a certain type of sentimental language (to those who 'understand' it) activates the desired associations. In some cases, these associations seem to go beyond such ideas as 'fashionable', 'good quality', and 'modern', and take on a moral or even romantic colouring, as with the Co-op bag, the off-road vehicle tyre, and other slogans. The choice of words suggests, if vaguely, romantic, environmental and internationalist concerns.

Yet since the frame and context preclude anything that can be taken for a proposition, this is a form of language which is only superficially English: emblematic rather than communicative.

A further pervasive feature of this type of Japanese English is collocational oddness,

where words that do not usually go together are linked: sometimes this is a modifier/noun combination (*Living Shop, human series, motor-cycle life*), sometimes a phrase with *and* (*Fresh Bakery, Coffee and Kitchen*). Since collocation is in principle on a scale of relative strength or weakness, rather than right or wrong, these usages are comparable to the pragmatically odd message on the dried-fruit packet (above): they are ‘misuses’ of language at some deeper, more fundamental level than simple grammatical errors.

### Some linguistic background

The incorporation of English and other Western languages into Japanese is of course nothing new. There is a relatively long history of contact between, for example, English and Japanese, in the course of which Japanese has borrowed many words. Most of these loans have, since the end of the Second World War, been written in *katakana*, one of the Japanese phonetic syllabaries, the purpose being to aid literacy, but as Loveday (1996) points out, the result inevitably is to make a clear visual distinction between Japanese (in Chinese-derived *kanji* characters) and foreign words, and perhaps thus endow them with some kind of symbolic nature. However, in phonetic terms, most of these words are practically indistinguishable from Japanese, from the point of view of the non-Japanese speaker, having been thoroughly ‘japanesified’: when you hear words like *hoteru, esukerator, miruku, teberu, basu, naifu*, (‘hotel, escalator, milk, table, bus, knife’), you are not aware that you are hearing ‘English’ words (and this has implications for the Japanese learner of English).

The phenomenon of borrowing can be seen as part of a wider context of how two languages impinge on each other, which also includes how the foreign language is regarded by the society. There have been many ups and downs in the Japanese attitude to English. In the late 19th century, for example, the perceived need to catch up with Western development led to a movement for the romanisation of Japanese script, and even, at the extreme end, to a proposal for English to become the national language, an idea which resurfaced, in a different mood, in post-war Japan, where for some the Japanese language was seen as ‘an impediment to cultural development’ (Loveday). Before the war, naturally, English tended

to be suppressed. However, increased contact of all kinds in recent years with a world in which English is the dominant international language, and an enormously increased rate of borrowing, has not, it seems, led to closer contact or familiarity, for most people, with the language itself. It still holds what Loveday describes as ‘a socially remote and academized’ position.

This history of language contact indicates that Japanese extensively uses loanwords as part of the language while still explicitly marking them as foreign, and perhaps the chunks of English we are discussing can better be seen as, in some way, part of Japanese rather than as English. Such an approach, at any rate, precludes any necessity of judging these uses by normal linguistic standards, as some native speakers of English attempt to do.

### Native-speaker and Japanese attitudes

Language is always a potentially emotive topic, not least when it is a question of others’ use or misuse of one’s own native tongue. In a letter to *The Daily Yomiuri* (one of the principal Japanese English-language newspapers), Tracey Bretag complains bitterly of what she calls ‘the appropriation and bastardization of my language’ in Japanese advertising, pointing out that it is language rules that allow ‘one person to speak meaningfully to another’. On this last point she may be right, but where she errs is to look for meaningfulness in the wrong place. Moreover, in terms of the realities of international English, she shows a Canute-like arrogance in her assumption that there is only one variety which can be maintained worldwide.

Moralistic comments are useless, and it is more interesting to try and understand, through a sociolinguistic approach, why English, and some types of English in particular, have acquired their particular connotations in Japan. On this point, it is worth quoting the Japanese correspondent whose earlier letter to *The Daily Yomiuri* Ms Bretag takes such exception to. She is discussing the use by Japanese Railways (JR) of the form *traing* in their advertising:

...When using English, they usually want to create a vivid image in viewers’ minds in a way that cannot be achieved through the usual worn-out word order or usage. When they use

'traing', they are constructing an image from material – English words in this case – even if they are not linguistically correct in doing so. ... They probably thought everyday Japanese words would not evoke the same freshness.

At least two important points emerge from this newspaper debate: first, that English can be seen as a source of material to convey an image rather than an exact meaning (and is indeed emblematic); second, that the Japanese viewpoint is likely to be very different from that of a native speaker. After all, these uses of English are not aimed at native speakers at all, but at the Japanese.

### **EFL or ESL in Japan?**

Concern about Japanese English might be more properly directed to the field of English learning in Japan, since how English is used in Japan does matter. I would like to consider two related questions:

- 1 Can we regard emblematic English as a distinct variety of English, as in fact Japan's ESL?
- 2 To what extent does the ubiquitous presence of emblematic English affect or reflect the way English is learnt in Japan?

The issue of English in Japan as a second rather than a foreign language was aired at the book fair referred to above, at which an elderly Japanese professor asked the panel of distinguished EFL course-book writers what they thought of the difference between EFL and ESL in Japan. There was some bafflement, until one panel member evasively repeated conventional wisdom about the difference between EFL and ESL, and then another gamely described his taxi-driver in Nagoya as qualifying as a speaker of English as a second language, in that he frequently had the opportunity, and took it, to use English with his fares.

In addition, the term ESL as used by American speakers can have a wider reference than in the more specific British sense. It would in fact be hard to make a case for ESL in the narrower British sense in Japan except in the very limited contexts of international schools, foreign companies with Japanese employees, and the like. I have been told that it is a reality among the Japanese returnees and their families, and for bilingual families, but these are not a large group within the society as a whole. Yet why should ESL in Japan seem such an odd

idea, considering the quantity of English around? One possible answer must be that most of this English is not used by people to communicate, to carry out any of their life's business. It is purely emblematic.

Nevertheless, more recently the idea of making English a thorough-going second language in Japan has re-emerged dramatically and controversially, taking up extensive space in the national press and leading to widespread discussion. A government report issued in January 2000 contained the surprising proposal that Japan 'should give English the status of a second working language – if not a second official language – to be used together with Japanese in daily life' (Takao Suzuki, 2000).

The issue was sensationalised by being understood and widely discussed as though the proposal was in fact for a second 'official' and not just a second 'working' language; but such discussion was generally in terms of the benefits that would be gained, or lost, rather than in terms of the existing uses of English in Japan, or indeed the whole question of historical, organic roots of second languages in other countries, whose colonial history Japan does not share. Suzuki points out that 'The losses incurred from [making English the second language of Japan] would be too huge, while the resulting benefits too few (Suzuki, 2000), while a letter to *The Daily Yomiuri* (in April 2000) starts 'I think that Japan should adopt English as an official second language' and proceeds to give three arguments for this view based on electronic communication, globalization and economic development.

That is, both those who argued for, and those who argued against, the adoption of English as a second language seemed to share the belief that it could be done, ignoring the extreme artificiality of having a foreign language take on such a role simply as a consequence of government action. Perhaps this debate about English, and the polarized positions of acceptance or rejection, are further evidence of the unrealistic Japanese attitudes to English which we also see in the emblematic functions I have discussed. English on one level is a cool and trendy symbol in the world of commerce and other public areas, while on another level it is perhaps the panacea for Japan's problems – or it is dangerous and might undermine proficiency in the Japanese language. Suzuki does not say this himself, but students of mine discussing the issue have pointed to this danger.

To move on to the second question, there is evidence that many learners perceive even the English they are taught at school in this way or, at any rate, they see it not as a communicative system which can actually be put to use but as inert knowledge to be learnt and then forgotten. English is studied at school for 6 years, then at University for 1 or 2 years, whatever the main subject of study (longer of course if it is the student's major subject), but the results of all these years of tuition are to say the least disappointing. One problem is certainly motivation: the language is taught at school in a way that does not encourage active use or involvement.

Spoken English is not confidently or commonly used by the majority of teachers. There is also a heavy dependence on translation, almost as a protective barrier against direct contact with real English. The result of this approach is students who are reluctant to produce spoken or written English without recourse to a bilingual dictionary, and who cannot take in what they hear or read without translating first into Japanese. It is almost as if, for these teachers and learners, Japanese is the only real language and English is something else entirely.

In fact, it would not be unfair to say that for many the main purpose of English at school, in reality if not openly, is to prepare students for the all-important university entrance exams, and since these require grammatical knowledge and reading proficiency, not a communicative use of English, the students' motivation to work hard is the instrumental one of getting through the exam. But *why* is English an element in the exam at all, since the follow-up compulsory classes at university do not as a rule have any practical purpose? English is rarely required as the medium of study except occasionally with visiting lecturers in a subject area such as International Relations, and does not seem to be important for many jobs.

Thus, although English is compulsory at university, and in some classes may be effectively taught and engage the students' interest, in the vast majority of cases the time spent will not equip students with any useful productive ability or lead to further individual commitment to studying English. It is hard to escape the conclusion that in this context too English has something of a decorative function, being included because it looks good and has the right associations: a badge or emblem of prestige with which universities decorate themselves by employing the appropriate number of native-speaker teachers.

The numerous English-derived words in Japanese are not necessarily a help to students – some already familiar English territory, as it were – but, as suggested above, their integration into Japanese can make it hard for students to accept an authentic *English* pronunciation of these words: for them, *tepurekoda* IS 'tape recorder' and *reshito* IS 'receipt'.

Perhaps too the English visible in their everyday environment, in shops, on clothes, on wrappings, and so forth, is equally useless, not because it is sometimes faulty, but precisely because it is so functionally unlike real English – divorced from a real speaker and a real listener and any real communicative purpose. It is indeed an emblem, but one that is insidiously reinforcing the message that all English is just as peripheral to the real business of life. ■

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