

# Creative and Innovative Uses of English in Contemporary Japan

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A localised taste of the global in manners posters and advertising texts

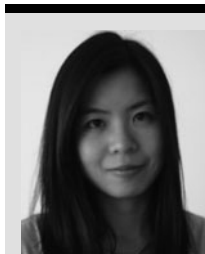
## Introduction

Over the last century or so, English has become a global lingua franca. Today, English is the first language of 400 million people and the second language of as many as 1.4 billion (Millward & Hayes, 2012: 342). In addition, it is the language that is predominantly used on the Internet; 80% of homepages on the Web are in English, followed by German (4.5%) and Japanese (3.1%) (Millward & Hayes, 2012: 343). Needless to say, English serves as a medium of communication regardless of the speaker's first language. As English spreads globally, fragments of its lexicon also permeate native languages, enriching their lexicons. This paper is concerned with the use of English and its elements, including English-derived words, in contemporary Japan, especially within the discourse of 'Manners Posters', posters which promote good manners in public spaces, and advertising texts. These types of media display creative and innovative uses of English that interact with Japanese at various linguistic levels in the form of wordplay, communicating messages, sometimes even in the form of puns, to achieve particular ends in a given context. We will look at this phenomenon from the 'glocal' point of view – i.e., the mechanisms and effects of a fusion between 'global English' and local culture that create a localised or nativised taste of the global.

## English and Its Derived Words in Japan

Japanese is not described in Japan as the official language set down by the Constitution. Instead, it is referred to as the 'national language'. English, on the other hand, is recognised and used as a

foreign language. Japan's enthusiasm for acquiring a high rate of English literacy is reflected in the growing use of English in both educational and business sectors. For instance, since 2011 English has become a compulsory subject for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>-grade pupils in all Japanese elementary schools, whereas it was previously first taught in junior high school. This has been followed by the introduction of a new course of study in junior high schools and high schools in 2012 and 2013, respectively. The changes include an increase in the number of contact hours of English in junior high schools and the use of English as the medium for teaching English in high schools. English competency has never been more sought after in the business sector. Japanese entrepreneurial companies, such as online retailer *Rakuten* and casual clothing retailer UNIQLO, for instance, have adopted English as their in-house lingua franca or official workplace



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language. There is little doubt that an increasing number of companies expect their employees to have a high level of proficiency in English. TOEIC (The Test of English for International Communication), a test produced by ETS (Educational Testing Service), is often employed as an instrument for gauging the English skills of potential employees, and is also used in the promotions process for existing employees (IBC: The Institute for International Business Communication, 2013).

Somewhat paradoxically, given this desire to acquire proficient English, it has often been said that the Japanese suffer from an English ‘allergy’, because they (generally speaking) have poor English language skills despite six years of mandatory English classes in junior high and high schools (Mitsumori, 2013). It is true, however, that there is a general feeling that English is probably the least alien language to the Japanese due to its cameo appearances in everyday life in Japan. One example comes in the form of Japanese-made English expressions known as *wasei eigo* (or English words and phrases coined in Japan) and English-origin words known as *gairaigo* (lit. ‘words that come from outside’). It is estimated that around 10% of the total Japanese lexicon consists of *gairaigo*. In daily spoken language *gairaigo* make up around 13% of the vocabulary used, and up to 25% of printed texts in general-weekly publications (Hogan, 2003). Although *gairaigo* have been derived from a range of foreign languages, English is by far the most prominent source of borrowing, and reportedly accounts for approximately 94.1% of the loanwords in the Japanese lexicon (Stanlaw, 2004). Street and shop signage, magazines, print advertisements, TV commercials, product names and packages, even song lyrics are all examples of media where English and English-derived words are commonly observable.

Dougill (1987, 2008) describes the status of English in Japan as decorative rather than functional, arguing that the English used in Japan does not truly serve as a means of communication; rather, it works to create particular moods. This could be true to some extent, based on observations wherein English-derived words, especially those seen in advertisements and TV commercials, are used extensively to evoke special/positive images that the native terms, if any exist, cannot convey. Besides serving as attention-grabbing devices, more specifically, they often impart modern, sophisticated, cosmopolitan and fashionable values to the products and services advertised, stimulating consumer interest (e.g., Gabbrielli, 2005; Takashi, 1990).

## Wordplay

It is true that English and English-derived words often serve a decorative function in contemporary Japan, but they also have a more functional aspect in the Japanese discourse. One such role includes wordplay or puns, in combination with Japanese expressions, to convey messages in an effective way through the use of humour. A pun is defined by Nakamura (1991, cited in Nagashima, 2006: 75) as, ‘a rhetorical manipulation of a language that makes the indicative function of utterance complicated, introducing words whose pronunciations are homonyms, or very similar, but whose meanings differ’. The following sub-sections provide examples of cases where English and its derivations are used in language diffusion, and play on Japanese words at various linguistic levels in Manners Posters and advertising slogans, creating a double meaning and serving as a communicative device.

### **Puns with English-derived Words and Their Elements**

A Manners Poster that aims to promote good manners on public trains, published by *Seibu Tetsudō* (Seibu Railway Company), demonstrates the creative use of English-derived words in wordplay or puns (Figure 1). A phrase in large, bold vertical type on the far right of the poster reads ‘Tsumete suwarō san.’ (詰めてスワローさん or ‘Let’s all shift a little to make room for one (more)’). Alongside the request is an image of swallows sitting politely without taking up too much space. The word *スワロー* *suwarō* in the slogan is the English-derived word for *swallow*, and is transcribed in *katakana*, one of the Japanese scripts used for transliterating words of foreign origin. The poster’s pun is to ask commuters not to bother other commuters by sitting improperly (or taking up too much space) through the use of the English-origin loanword *スワロー* *suwarō* (swallow), which is a homonym of the Japanese phrase *座ろ* *suwarō* meaning ‘Let’s sit’. In other words, it creates the double meaning of ‘Let’s sit’ and ‘Swallow’:

Slogan: 詰めて スワロー さん。

Romanised: *tsumete suwarō san.*

Translation: to move over E: swallow/ J: let’s sit

Mr/Ms

Manners Posters displayed in public places are an intriguing subject for research in terms of the way in which they embody certain socio-cultural



Figure 1. Manners Poster Published by Seibu Railway (2009)

values and norms – in this case, how people should behave in public spaces – which can vary from one community to another. From a linguistic perspective, they demonstrate how the clever manipulation of language can engage and influence the general public to mind their manners without being overly authoritarian. The Manners Poster in question shows that English-derived words play a role in achieving such goals through the use of puns while interacting with Japanese.

The creativity employed in the use of English elements in Japanese advertising has even led to the creation of new hybrid words – for instance, ‘ツウベニア [tsu:benia]. This word introduces a partial homophony between the English word ‘souvenir’ [su:və'niə] (or スーベニア [su:benia] in Japanese) and the Japanese word ツウ [tsu:] meaning ‘connoisseur’, creating the word ツウベニア [tsu:benia] denoting ‘connoisseur souvenir’.

It is interesting to note that, unlike the example in Figure 1, Figure 2 (which is a leaflet published by Narita Airport), provides a simple description that elaborates on the slogan, including a translation for the English-derived word スーベニア [su:benia] as follows:

スーベニア  
定番のお土産もいいけれど、  
たまにはいつもと違うお土産を選んでみたら、

こだわり作られたツウなお土産＝ツウベニア  
なら、  
そこに込められた想いも一緒に伝わるはずで  
す。

It's not too bad to choose classic souvenir, but  
why don't you pick something different once in a  
while.

A connoisseur souvenir which was made with com-  
mitment = *tsuubenia* (tsu:benia)  
should also exude the thoughtfulness that has been  
put into it.

Providing the translation for the word スーベニア [su:benia] or ‘souvenir’ may imply that this English word has yet to be understood and absorbed into the lexicon by the general public in Japan. As a result, the copywriter needs to give a Japanese explanation to make the word and slogan intelligible to the audience, unlike the English-derived word スワロー [suwaro:] or ‘swallow’ in Figure 1, which has taken root in the Japanese language to the extent that it does not require an accompanying translation.

These two contrasting examples, one with a translation and the other without, reflect the relationships between certain words in English and the community where they are used (in this instance Japan), and how they are understood. In other words, they are the indicator of the level of assimilation of the words or language into the recipient language. In addition, they reveal the high level of linguistic knowledge and creativity of advertising companies in Japan through the way they negotiate the nexus between native and adopted language.

### Puns with English

Although *katakana* is conventionally the principal medium for foreign names and loan words, recent years have seen the growing use of English written in its native Roman letters in various social and cultural domains in Japan (e.g., MacGregor, 2001; 2003). Figure 3 depicts a campaign advertisement for hot springs in Eastern Japan published by Japan Railway (JR) East, and is one example where English is used in such a way. Furthermore, by employing a mixture of Japanese and English, the advertising slogans demonstrate how English has a key role in wordplay, creating multiple layers of meaning.

On the top left hand side, ‘THE ONSEN’ is written vertically in Roman capital letters, while the *kanji* (or Chinese characters) ‘地温泉’ (*ji onsen*)



Figure 2. A Brochure for ツウベニア [tsu:benia] Published by Narita International Airport Corporation (2014)

are written horizontally. The Japanese phrase in *kanji*, (地温泉) coins a new word that in fact incorporates the meaning of two words. The first character 地 is pronounced *ji* (/ɕi/) and has multiple meanings, such as ‘ground’ and ‘earth’, while the last two characters 温泉 are pronounced *onsen*, meaning ‘hot spring’. Those who have a good understanding of both Japanese and English will realise that there is a clever interplay between the English and Japanese phrases. The wordplay lies in the similarity between the pronunciation [or reading] of the *kanji* 地 *ji* (/ɕi/) and the English

*the* (/ði/), in 地温泉 (/ɕi/ onsen) and *the onsen* (/ði/ onsen), respectively. The Japanese text in smaller script in the bottom right hand corner elaborate on the wordplay, conveying the connotative meaning of the English phrase ‘THE ONSEN’ and the catchy Japanese phrase 地温泉 (*ji-Onsen*) in the following way:

地・温泉は、東日本各地に根ざした伝統ある湯。  
 地・温泉は“THE ONSEN”でもある。  
 すなわち、この世にふたつとないオンリーワンの湯。



Figure 3. Advertisement for 'THE ONSEN' Published by Japan Railway East (2013)

Ji • Onsen is a hot spring with a tradition that is rooted in Eastern Japan.

Ji • Onsen also refers to 'THE ONSEN'.

In other words, it is a unique hot spring, i.e., *the* Onsen, which is not paralleled anywhere in the world.

The captions suggest at least two possible interpretations for the phrase 地温泉, along with the English phrase 'THE ONSEN': a) a hot spring with a tradition that is locally-rooted (i.e., 地 *ji* derived from the word 地元 *jimoto* ['local'] or 土地 *tochi* ['land']); and b) a hot spring that is unique, and hence cannot be found anywhere else (i.e., *The* Onsen). Closer analysis of the leaflet, furthermore, reveals that 地温泉 also depicts The Onsen as, 'the hot spring with inherent powers' (i.e., 地 *ji* derived from the word 地力 *jikiki* or 'one's inherent powers'). The wordplay exhibited in Figure 3 is subtle and clever, and requires the observer to have not only an understanding of the two languages, but also a high level of linguistic competence in order to fully appreciate the pun. Here, more specifically, one needs to have a good grasp of the use of the definite article in English; 'the' in the message needs to be read as /ði/ (stressed and/or unstressed before a vowel) instead of /ðə/, not only because it precedes the vowel *o* in *onsen* but also to produce a particularising effect.

The three examples examined in this study show that English and its derivations not only have a decorative function, but are also a communicative device, contributing to wordplay in Japanese discourse, such as in the discourse of Manners Posters and advertising texts. These examples also suggest that the level of complexity in the manipulation of the pun varies according to the situation and the context in which it used, along

with the degree of assimilation of the English words in question in the Japanese language.

### Glocal Features of English

In addition to the above observations, the analysis of the use of English and its derivations in the present study reveals what might be called 'glocal' features of English. More specifically, while we can observe in each of the above examples a reflection of the global dissemination of English in Japanese contexts, each instance also undergoes some kind of change in the process of assimilation to the local context – a localisation or nativisation of the language. There is a general consensus that English-derived words are used less in the areas of traditional/national Japanese referents. However, the present study suggests that due to the ongoing spread of English, along with increasing globalisation, this may no longer be the case. The article observes that English and its derivations permeate the advertising of items that are usually associated with traditional Japanese customs and culture, such as お土産 *omiyage* or souvenirs (giving-gift culture) and 温泉 *onsen* or hot springs, which may reflect the expansion of English and its derivations into other, usually more insular spheres rooted in the cultural past.

While there are indications that the use of English in Japan, and specifically in Japanese advertising, is growing, this study also alludes to a greater permeation of English at a deeper level as localisation or nativisation. From the viewpoint of linguistic localisation or nativisation, for example, it can be observed that a significant amount of the English lexicon has been adopted into the Japanese language, and is usually transcribed in *katakana* (a script type dedicated to

transcribing foreign lexica), along with the phonological alterations made to accommodate the phonological systems into the recipient language, as illustrated above in Figure 1.

Another transformation that English has undergone is the creation of Japanese-specific usages, such as words that have been hybridised – i.e., words made up of a combination of elements derived from both English and Japanese as illustrated above (i.e., Figure 2).

From a stylistic point of view, furthermore, the traditional orientation of Japanese writing (i.e., vertical) is employed not only for English words transliterated in *katakana*, but also for English sentences written in the Roman alphabet. In addition, the nativisation of select English words can be observed in the way in which translations are given for certain English expressions. The use of the English word *souvenir* in Figure 2, for example, follows the general practice whereby *kanji* and a reading aid for the *kanji* are represented in the Japanese language (i.e., the *furigana* or reading for the *kanji* is placed above the line of text as follows: <sup>かんじ</sup>漢字). In other words, the native term for the English word *souvenir* (i.e., お土産 *omiyage*) is given along with the English loanword transcribed in *katakana* above it (i.e., スーベニア *suubenia*) in the form used for representing a *kanji* and its reading (i.e., <sup>スーベニア</sup>お土産 *omiyage*). These localised transformations of English are likely to encourage local audiences to perceive a Japanese-like quality to the English words, rather than feeling that English is somehow a foreign entity encroaching on traditional ground.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to reveal something of the creative and innovative use of English and its elements in Manners Posters and advertising texts in contemporary Japan. It demonstrates that English and its derivations in the Japanese discourse go well beyond being merely decorative or attention-grabbing devices. In fact, they have functional purposes or persuasive effects in the form of wordplay, engaging the audience in thought-provoking ways and conveying messages in an effective and pun-like manner. Importantly, such effects are achieved through the fusion of English (at various linguistic levels – English elements, lexicon or sentences) and a local language (in this case, Japanese), demonstrating the dynamic

nature of language. The use of English and its derivations in the Japanese discourse examined in the present study also reveals the glocal qualities of English. It displays an ability to adapt to more localised, native usages in creative and innovative ways that have function, frivolity and flirtatiousness in their interaction with the local language and its systems, writing scripts and styles.

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