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# Response to Gil: The double danger of English as a global language

MEREDITH STEPHENS

In ET 101, Jeffrey Gil suggested Australians needed to learn Asian languages – because not everyone speaks English. Meredith Stephens responds from Japan.

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Gil (2010) argues that Australia needs to develop proficiency in Asian languages and cultures in order to ‘pursue its interests’ (p. 54) in the region. One of the reasons is that although English is widely studied in Asia few speakers achieve proficiency. However this view is contrary to the way the status of English is perceived in at least one Asian society that will be discussed here, Japan.

Gil claims the spread of English in Asia has been exaggerated, and that there are many *learners* rather than *speakers* of English in Asian countries. However, at least in the case of Japan, this perception may not necessarily be shared by the Japanese themselves. Here English is viewed as a form of social capital; Japanese and English-speaking business persons assume they will conduct business in English, and promotion is often dependent on performance in TOEFL or TOEIC (Kouritzin et al., 2009). Recently major Japanese companies such as Uniqlo and Rakuten have chosen English as their in-house language (Asahi Shimbun, 2010). In the Japanese context, improved communication between Japanese and English speakers is not usually considered to be a question of English-speakers acquiring Japanese-language skills. For historical reasons there is a widespread expectation that English-speakers in Japan will conduct business in English. Although Gil argues that the number of proficient speakers of English in Asia is small, it is precisely these proficient speakers that Australian business people are likely to come into contact with.

## Perceptions of Anglophones in Japan as monolinguals

Another reason that English-speakers may not be readily perceived as speakers of Japanese is that Japanese is not a mainstream foreign language in Anglophone countries other than Australia and New Zealand. In Japan, those perceived to be Anglophones tend to be addressed in English. For Australians having studied Japanese before arrival in Japan, this may come as a surprise, but it must be acknowledged that the status of Japanese as a foreign language in the various Anglophone



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countries is unequal. In Australia, Japanese is one of the major foreign languages targeted by the government to be taught in schools, whereas in the USA Japanese belongs to the category of 'less frequently taught languages' (NCOLCTL, 2003). Australians constitute a small proportion of the total number of Anglophones in the world, and the majority of Anglophones do not come from a country in which Japanese is widely studied.

This is in contrast to the status of the English language in Japan. English is practically compulsory in Japanese schools; "whilst not an official language of Japan, [it] is a language that Japanese identify and associate with themselves, and that functions in the context of a linguistically plural Japan" (Maher et al., 2010: 44). Maher et al. illustrate this with the case of the choice of languages used in announcements on trains and domestic flights. English is normally supplied even though English speakers are outnumbered by Korean and Chinese speakers; the latter are normally expected to understand Japanese.

### **Japanese-English for international communication**

Currently alternative solutions are being proposed to address the problem of Japanese-Anglophone communication. Hino (2008, cited in Hino, 2009) proposes a new model of Japanese English for international communication to be used in business, as an alternative to Inner Circle English: 'an educational model of Japanese English which is intended to be capable of expressing Japanese values and also be internationally comprehensible' (p. 109). Hence rather than expecting Anglophones to learn Japanese, educators such as Hino propose a regional variety of English to be used in cross-cultural exchanges.

### **The perceived relationship between language and ethnicity**

Maher et al.'s (2010: 43) survey of 973 first year Japanese university students reveals a common perception that the most important feature of a language is that it defines ethnicity (72.8%). Maher et al. attribute this to the respondents' reflection on their local context. This may explain Siegal's (1996) observation of the low expectations typically held of western speakers of Japanese; non-Asians in Japan are typically addressed in English even when they initiate the interaction in Japanese.

### **The new breed of expatriates proficient in Japanese**

Nevertheless, there is a 'new breed' of Australian expatriates who are exploiting their proficiency in Japanese to take up positions in the Japanese workplace. This is in contrast to the 'old guard' of expatriates who tended to be dependent on in-house interpreters (O'Connell, 2006). The new breed is using both Japanese proficiency and intercultural competence to facilitate workplace communication (ibid). O'Connell's study demonstrates how the Australian government's policy of promoting the study of Japanese has enjoyed some success, in the manner that Gil suggests. Furthermore McCrostie's (2010) analysis of 133 tenured postings for English-teaching positions in Japanese universities between 2008 and 2010 reveals requirements for applicants to be able to participate in committee meetings in Japanese (60 ads), and teach in Japanese (25 ads). Hence it must be acknowledged that advanced Japanese skills are requisite for some senior positions for which Anglophones are eligible to apply.

### **Non-instrumental advantages of the study of Japanese by Australians**

However, these positions tend to be won by the elite few. The pedagogical rationale for Asian languages should not necessarily be to make up for a lack of proficiency in English by learners in Asia. A native speaker teacher of Japanese to high school students in Australia argues that one of the reasons she considers that Australians should learn Japanese is to combat racism (Nielsen, 2010). Secondly, the personal enrichment to be gained from proficiency in another language is immeasurable. Charles V expressed it lucidly in the sixteenth century in the saying which is attributed to him: 'to possess another language is to possess a second soul' (Wilson, 2008: 111). In contrast, monolingualism confines one to a limited perspective; Clyne warned against the 'Global English is Enough Fallacy': 'monolingual English speakers will be disadvantaged, being able to see everything from only a monolithic viewpoint in a global situation where multilingualism is part of globalisation' (2007, p. 9). Thus I am in agreement with Gil regarding the danger of linguistic complacency in Australia, not necessarily to compensate for the lack of English proficiency in Asia, but rather for the insights gained by being able to appreciate the very different perspectives held by our northern neighbours. Gil questions Slattery's view that

'[w]hile there may be compelling reasons for an Australian to learn an Asian language, there are no compelling economic reasons' (2009c, cited in Gil, 2010, p. 53), but the unequal statuses of English as a Foreign Language in Japan, and Japanese as a Foreign Language in the Anglophone world lend weight to Slattery's view.

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Spoken Interaction as Writing

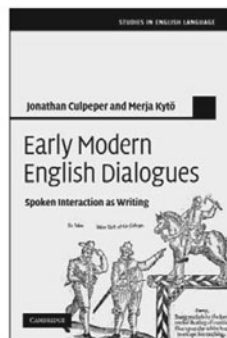
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