

Presence and Absence: The Cultural Character of the Japanese Language and English Communication

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Introduction

A key issue in gauging the impact of how languages mesh with each other can be found not only in what they give to each other in terms of lexis and grammar, but in cultural character as well. While the preeminence that English now enjoys has presented formidable challenges to other languages, the cultural character of other languages have made their imprint on English as well, especially those from Africa and Asia. In particular, the cultural character of the Japanese language and the way it has meshed with English has long presented unique challenges to EFL, and forms the subject of this paper.

The Japanese language is an interesting case for EFL in that it is contained within a culture that freely embraces outside influence and holds it at arm's length at the same time. This is reflected in the L1, and dictates and colors L2 borrowing and usage. The impact of English on the Japanese language has been profound, not only in enlarging the vocabulary, but elongating it with a character that seems bewildering, adding to a language already imbued with uniqueness. Socio-culturally, Japanese appears to be digesting English for ideas and concepts that either do not have an existing name in the L1, or do but are renamed and reframed through the L2. The result is a communicative process that is seen as containing a more relaxed, more open component that liberalizes and reinvigorates Japanese communicative discourse. In turn, this is seen to serve to many Japanese as evidence of internationalization and proof of engagement with the larger world.

Nonetheless, the transformation of English within the communicative space of the Japanese language seems very much to be a way of absorbing foreign ideas in superficial terms. For Japanese culture seems to allow plenty of room for borrowing and circulating words, ideas and concepts from other languages and a larger world, but with a strong filter that sifts through what is borrowed, creating misperceptions about things foreign, and ultimately keeping out a larger world at the same time. In essence, the Japanese are using English as a vehicle to extend themselves, but to a communicative effect strictly within the framework of their culture, rather than one that could be understood by non-Japanese English L2 users outside Japan, and build bridges with their cultures. The result is a non-communicability that

shuts out both Japanese and non-Japanese alike, and segregates them communicably from each other.

Transformation of English in the Japanese language

Much of the English in the Japanese language undergoes some degree of transformation from its source. The impenetrability of pronunciation with many Japanese loanwords has long been notorious, and in turn, phonalization, pronunciation, and the lexis for items borrowed from English that have been transformed far from the origin is often a challenge for many Japanese L2 learners. Indeed, a number of studies have been undertaken on the effect of English loanwords in Japanese with regard to English pronunciation (Cross, 2002; Daulton, 1997; Jannuzi, 2001) and vocabulary acquisition (Brown & Williams, 1985; Daulton, 1998; Kimura, 1989; Nation, 1990; Yoshida, 1978), which take into account the differences of the Japanese phonetic system and the difficulties Japanese learners have with English pronunciation and vocabulary.

Daulton and the four main aspects of L1 transformation

In a 1995 study, Daulton explicated four main aspects of English transformation in Japanese, in terms of rephonalization, truncation, speech part modification and semantic modification (Daulton, 1998, pp. 8-13). His analysis was illuminating in the multivariate and radical ways that Japanese transforms imported lexis, highlighting the gulf between Japanese and English, and is necessary to look at for an understanding of what Japanese learners, EFL teachers, and non-Japanese communicators and receptors all go through in the attempt to bridge the gaps.

In terms of phonalization Japanese has a regular consonant-vowel pattern in its sound system, whereas English combines consonants and vowels in irregular patterns. This makes relatively uncomplicated words in English such as "artist" or "wheel" become more difficult in their transformations as aachisuto and hoiiru, and literally stretches longer words into bewildering and often incomprehensible ways, so that, for example, McDonald's becomes makudonarudo (Daulton, 1998, para. 9). In writing this is accentuated even more with the katakana phonetic script, which is used to write gairaigo (loanwords) and accentuates the distance between foreign- and Japanese-language phonalization.

Further complications arise with the propensity of loanword truncations. Japanese is liberally peppered with shortened derivations like terebi (television), supaa (supermarket) and eaakon (air conditioner), and such loanwords are so much a fact of life in natural Japanese communication as to sound like natural Japanese to non-Japanese, and confused with natural

English by Japanese. In L2 oral communication, the component of rephonologizing and character of truncating with regard to loanwords in Japanese often leads to breakdown in the flow of articulation, even among intermediate-level learners, and can make the development of oral fluency difficult and frustrating for communicators and receivers alike. This is made all the more perspicuous by the tendency to shorten lexis in natural Japanese as its sound system already lends itself towards such communicative abbreviating. Therefore, it is natural for Japanese to do the same with imported lexical items. This comes out in English communication as a result. Even among higher-level learners, utterances such as “I moved to a new apaato (apartment) last month” or “I’m planning to buy a new pasokon (personal computer) very soon” occur, and written passages like a new depart (department store) opened near my train station recently and I have a small radio cassette (stereo) that I play music on before I go to bed are not uncommon.

The gap between the languages widens even more with speech part modification. Daulton cited Henderson (1948) in how part of speech is sometimes disregarded with loanwords used in Japanese, and the former noted this phenomenon in his examples of conjugations such as haamoru (to harmonize) and verbalizations like meiku suru (to put on or wear makeup) (Daulton, 1998, para. 11). In the former case, the Japanese conjugating –ru stem has been added to an English noun, truncated to haamo-, and conjugated as a regular Japanese verb, while in the latter case, Daulton cited Park (1987, p. 36) in noting how the –suru verb has been added to a truncation of “makeup” to create a Japanese verbalization (Daulton, 1998, para. 11).

Semantic modification is an even further departure. For many non-Japanese this is detectable more markedly in oral communication, and can lead to misunderstanding and confusion or at the very least, ambiguity, even among those with a modest level of Japanese and familiar with Japanese verbal conventions.

As an example, I once had a conversation class member introduce the class organizer as such: “You will like her very much. She is very smart.” While I did not doubt her intelligence before our meeting, it still caused me to reflect on how she had been characterized, for when we met she greeted me in a stylish black dress and freshly-coiffed hair – for what turned out not to be the only time. Another example occurred in a private lesson. In a discussion focusing on the characterization of famous people and places with adjectives, my student said that Einstein was not a smart person – even insisting on the point when I disagreed, to his consternation! The consideration of the choice of “smart” in both cases came about because *sumaato* in Japanese has a narrowed meaning. As an adjective it is usually

used to refer to a slender person of elegant proportions, or someone stylish or chic, as in a natural construction like *densha ni ita ano onna no hito sumaato deshita ne* (that woman on the train was smart [stylish], wasn't she?) - but it has only recently been used to refer to intelligence.

By contrast, there was another advanced conversation class of mine where, in one lesson, the students were explicating their likes and dislikes with everyday items. One of them brought up TV shows with the American sitcom *Friends*. "Oh, I love it," she said. "It's my favorite drama." The other students nodded and agreed with much laughter, discussing the intricacies of the characters, the way they interact, and so forth, all within the scope of it as a drama. It was possible for them to discuss *Friends* this way because for them, a *terebi dorama* is a generic term for any fictional television program. The widened usage of this word therefore allowed them to lump together vastly different popular shows like soap operas, sitcoms and anything else as dramas, even though the original meaning in English is specific to drama in the literal sense.

"Janglish" calques and buzzwords

Beyond Daulton's analysis, however, there are other kinds of transformation at work. While the elements he cited demonstrate in their own right the already unusual positioning of English within Japanese, there are other factors that must be pointed out. For example, there are a myriad of Japanese calques, or "Janglish" as it is often called, that has an English lexical origin in at least some part. Such coinages show both the extent of English in the language and what it has come to mean within a wider socio-cultural framework. Calques such as *gaadoman* ("guardman," i.e., security guard), *koin randorii* ("coin laundry," i.e., what would be called a Laundromat in North America and a *laundrette* in the UK) and *famiresu* (from "family restaurant," an American-style restaurant serving a variety of dishes and open to late hours) are numerous, and while in some cases indistinguishable from Japanese lexis to an outsider, function in their communicative contexts within the L1. There is code mixing as well, such as *denshi renji* for microwave, consisting of the Japanese *denshi*, "atom," and *renji*, from "range," (as in "oven range"), and *meerutomo* for e-friend, from *meeru* for "mail" (which in this case means email and not the Japanese *yuubin*, for postal mail), and *tomo*, a truncation from the word for friend, *tomodachi*. In both of these examples, meanings are carried well and show their versatility.

There have been lexical borrowings that have also highlighted some new, but also some long-lasting, realities in the country. Though it may be easy to see that English is being used in these cases because no adequate vocabulary exists for them in Japanese, it may also be that English is serving as a code

to enable some issues to be aired that have never before been openly discussed. Key issues such as *seku-hara* (sexual harassment) and DV (domestic violence) have become major buzzwords, but have led to some attention and debate with frankness unheard of, and perhaps even impossible, a generation earlier, while the vocabulary of *risutora* (“restructuring”, i.e., the reconfiguration and downsizing of many Japanese firms after the burst of the 1980s economic bubble) has represented a new fact of life for many Japanese – for many an uncomfortable fact, but for many others a liberating one.

Formality, overelaboration, inappropriateness, and nuance

There are factors of interference beyond the transformation that has been enumerated. In relatively more natural communication, Japanese L2 learners often evince patterns of formality, overelaboration or inappropriateness, often from lexical or rhetorical transposition. Every teacher in Japan has heard a student, who, when asked how he is doing, complained that his “health condition is not good right now” - when what he meant, was that he had a cold. The same teacher, especially if new to Japan, can be forgiven for being alarmed by the student who informed the class during a round of free talk that she “had to take my son to the hospital this morning” – when all she meant was that she took her son to a doctor for a routine exam. Another student talks about the accident that “broke my car yesterday,” when in fact she scraped her fender, and as an extreme example yet another, when he was asked about what he did the previous weekend, enthused about going to Tokyo and “playing with my boyfriend on Saturday night,” when what he did was go drinking with his best friend. Such patterns are not uncommon in Japanese speakers utterances, and indeed, reflect the same L1 interference issues and patterns found in learners in other countries.

At its most extreme, however, this kind of L1 interference can cause misunderstanding and bad feeling - especially with lexis that exists in both the L1 and L2, but have differences in nuance. There was a case where a student of mine who had spent some time in the U.S. on a homestay told of a budding friendship with an American acquaintance that had become ruptured over a simple word. In complimenting her on what she saw as her uninhibited spirit, the student had told her acquaintance that what she liked most about her was that she was so naïve. The acquaintance was so irked by this remark that things between them changed, even with apologies on the part of the student. It was only later that she learned what the source of the rupture was. In Japanese, while there are a number of adjectives for naïve, most have the shading of purity and sensitivity to the meaning, and one predominant term, *junshin*, is made up of two ideograms, “pure” and “truth.” Overall, what the range of terms for this word mostly have in common is a more affirmative use than the sense it carries in English.

Indeed, even the English term has made its way into Japanese as *naiibu*, but still has the more affirmative shading within its meaning. She had therefore understood it in Japanese terms, and her unawareness of the more negative attachment it has in English unfortunately brought about miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Given this, we can see in close investigation an extensive and sometimes radical degree of transformation and L1 interference that creates obstacles for Japanese English L2 learners – often without any awareness on their part that the conventions of their language and culture are creating such obstacles. Given the often vast distance from original phonalization and meaning the more multivariied the lexis, along with the compression and expansion of meaning and usage, and compounded with the sheer amount of it with a great impact in a larger socio-cultural framework, we can already see that not only English communication, but English in general, is positioned differently in Japan compared with many other advanced countries. The pertinent question for many in EFL when looking at the state of English in Japan is why, for the undoubted time, effort and discipline that so many Japanese bring to bear to the task, their country rates lower overall compared with other advanced countries with regard to spoken and written communication in English.

Thus, the transformation and interference aspects Japanese deal with in L2 have an impact that go beyond the mechanics of language learning. They form the basis of a cross-cultural divide between Japanese and non-Japanese – one that, for many on both sides of the fence, is insurmountable. But there are other, broader factors that reinforce this divide, and they form something even bigger that is necessary to look at. When seen, it will come as no surprise why Japan produces far fewer communicatively competent English speakers for the wealth, freedom and relatively long period of stability it has enjoyed.

English Communication and Japanese Socio-Cultural Factors

On the surface, the advanced state of Japan as an economic and technological power would seem to reflect to outsiders a high level of L2 proficiency across the board. This seems to be all the more so when we take into account the fact that English is a mandatory subject in its schools and is a key player in so many areas where English is crucial, most notably information technology and computers, while the continued preeminence of Toyota, Honda and other Japanese car makers ensure that Japanese vehicles fill the roads and highways of many countries worldwide. But the basis for these achievements are misleading, given the Japanese education system and the philosophy that guides it.

Ineffective L2 methodology in compulsory education

To begin with – and surprisingly to many outside Japan - English is not primarily taught for communication at all in Japanese schools. In fact, it is mainly taught for the rigorous nationwide entrance examination system students must pass in order to enter universities in the country, and the more top-flight the university, the more rigorous are the requirements. As a result, what motivation there is to study English is to pass exams, not to actually use it (Doyon, 2003, Japanese Higher Education section, para. 1). Grammar translation is in fact still the primary method of instruction (Hirayanagi, 1998), and because oral communication and written expression is not emphasized, many students graduate from high school with little to no ability to communicate with the English they have studied, even though they have taken it for six years in secondary schooling, and starting from the year 2002, will have taken it from the elementary level as well with the new English and cross-cultural curriculum of the Ministry of Education, Science, Sport and Culture (Yoneoka, 2000, Conclusion section).

The strictness of L2 methodology in schools is a reflection of the way all subjects are taught within the framework of a Confucian-based educational tradition. In such an approach, a teacher-centered style of instruction is emphasized and a vertical relationship between teachers and students is enforced. The teacher is supreme and the students' own opinions, feelings and even feedback are not solicited or encouraged - a state of affairs even many Japanese admit incurs a sense of passivity, a hesitation to make mistakes, and an aversion in general to risk-taking.

A foreign EFL teacher in Japan, positioned in such a nexus, is confronted with the products of such a system. While there are a myriad of types who come a teacher's way, a predominant type among adult learners are those who, after years of education-as-trial, have given up, convinced they do not have the ability to learn anything new (Doyon, 2003, Key Concepts section, para. 4). On this last point, Doyon makes it clear:

Thus, one can expect an educational system that offers students very little choice or control over their own learning (or lives) to, in effect, teach these very students to become helpless and powerless – or in other words, to give them an it-can't-be-helped mentality (Doyon, 2003, Key Concepts section, para. 5).

For L2 learning, then, this is not a healthy environment to bear fruit in terms of successful and active communicability.

Social constraints

In addition to the circumscription of English in schools, there are social constraints that often militate against fruitful communicative L2 learning. The group-oriented consciousness that touches deeply into every aspect of Japanese social life is profound, and is reinforced by factors such as the senpai-kohai relationship (the senior-to-junior hierarchy based on age and social or professional status), and characteristics like hazukashisa (shame), enryo (restraint) and amae (dependence) that inculcate self-effacement in individuals and the judgment of others for their approval at the same time.

As a result, there is a general tendency to avoid contradiction or confrontation even in L1 communication. Expression of one's own opinions is done at great risk, and even then, in vague or circumlocuted language. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say "Japanese social functions are reflected linguistically with ubiquitous amounts of presequencing, hedging and an almost legendary degree of indirectness" (Guest, 1998, para. 27). This naturally comes out in the L2, where, in discussion groups and conversation classes, many students will often only advance opinions with what will feel to many teachers like great pain and effort, with hesitation noises, deliberated starts and abrupt stops at straggling thoughts, and much mincing of words along the way – in short, with everything that they are compelled to draw on in the same contexts in Japanese. The larger the number and greater the mix of students, the greater the tendency will be for some students, especially if they are younger, to mute themselves in deference to older students in communicative exchange, who are often less inhibited because of their seniority – even if the younger ones have a better language level and are capable of forming better-reasoned and discussion-provoking opinions. As a result, what comes from such situations is much dissatisfaction and frustration for many teachers and younger students alike.

Kokusaika (internationalization) and the "inside-outside" mentality

English would thus appear to be in an unresolved position in Japan, despite the extent of it and the interest taken in it. But little research appears to have been done on what English means to the Japanese themselves. For while English would seem to play a stilted role in their classrooms and a dysfunctional one outside of them, it has become so woven into the L1 to the point of inseparability, where the transformational conventions of Japanese in their fullest sense have overwhelmed the English in the L1 and "made" it Japanese. Yet English is still marked out as something "other," treated with a mixture of awe, respect, enthusiasm and fear that assures English both an honored place, and segregation from the mainstream communicative community.

Yoneoka (2000) took up the broader but related question of what internationalism meant to the Japanese in her extensive ten-year study of

kokusaika (internationalization) taken amongst Japanese university students. In the first part of her research from 1989, she found that for many of the respondents in her initial questionnaire, the process of internationalization consisted of proficiency in English, knowledge of foreign countries and Japan, experience in traveling abroad and dealing with foreigners, while for the U.S., German and Indian students who formed the contrastive samples in her research, internationalization consisted more of tolerance, interest in foreigners and foreign countries, volunteerism, and concern for world peace and the environment (Yoneoka, 2000, Introduction section, para. 3). For the Japanese students, the abilities to express oneself and one's own opinions rated less compared with the students from the other countries, though were frequently mentioned (Introduction section, para. 3). What was just as striking was that the results of her second survey from 1999 yielded only a slight change upward from the attributes enumerated amongst the Japanese students (First "Kokusaijin" section, para. 2).

Thus, the "internationalized person" we catch in her study has still not put aside something primarily Japanese in outlook, and views the world from this basis. It is clear then that the legacy of the island mentality emphasizing an inherent difference between Japanese and non-Japanese is still exerting an influence over how the Japanese see the rest of the world (Discussion section, para. 5), and Yoneoka sums up as such:

In one sense, this "inside-outside" mentality may (play) a role in the perpetuation of Japanese group consciousness, but on the path to internationalism it can only be regarded as a roadblock. The key to mutual respect and tolerance for cultures and people throughout the world is the recognition of our differences while acknowledging the underlying universality of mankind. (Discussion section, para. 6)

Doi Takeo, the Japanese psychiatrist who authored one of the key analyses of Japanese behavior in *The Anatomy of Dependence* (1973), pointed out "a serious dearth of the type of public spirit that transcends both individual and group" (p. 42). Paralleling the "inside-outside" way of thinking that Yoneoka would cite later, Doi said that this

[...] would seem to have its origins in the fact that the Japanese divide their lives into inner and outer circles each with its own different standards of behavior, no-one feeling the slightest oddity in this discrepancy. The Japanese behave "reasonably" when enryo (restraint) is present, but the circle in which enryo must be exerted is itself experienced as an "inner" circle in relation to the outside world where no enryo is necessary, and is not "public" in the true sense of the word (pp. 42-43).

He added that “the distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ is relevant, mostly, for the individual” and that being “socially approved [...] is why the public spirit does not develop” (p. 43).

Perhaps herein may explain why a concept like internationalism, which through and through is public and outer-oriented, would have the conception that it does for many Japanese. The larger implications of Doi’s statement even now, along with Yoneoka’s recent study, are that the world for the Japanese is a place to be dealt with, not engaged with deeply, that it has no guidelines by which they can appropriately gauge and order their actions as their own culture gives to them, and that English is a coping mechanism they need in order to survive, not a channel that could circulate Japanese ideas of say, conflict resolution or environmentalism into a larger context. Indeed, the notion that they can contribute anything of substance on an equal footing with other countries seems to be largely non-existent, and the sense that lingers is that they still do not seem to recognize that they are part of a global community they have a stake in - a community that would not only make room for them, but also welcome their energy and discipline. Yet among the Japanese there is very much the sense that attempting to engage with the world runs with it the risk of losing one’s identity, and that one must reclaim oneself in order to be part of the Japanese fold.

Within these terms then, the world through Japanese eyes is a place to export things of amusement, interest, and even utility to, and import things of a similar nature from, but it is also a place they must withhold something essential of themselves from at the same time. If English seems both present and absent within Japan in terms of the way in which it has been absorbed and used, it could also be said that the Japanese are also present and absent within the world, in terms of what would seem to be the inconsistent and incoherent way in how they see and deal with it.

As a corollary to this worldview, English seems to be circumscribed not only by cultural, social and pedagogical constraints within Japan, but also by a filtered representation of what the world means beyond Japan. The character and extent of English within the communicative space of the Japanese is therefore largely suspended in an interlanguage state much as a classroom pidgin, writ large. While being held back by the factors already mentioned, it is also held up as proof of a worldlier communicative life – thus ensuring a largely schizophrenic life for English in Japan.

Japanese cultural values and limits of cross-cultural communicability

As we can see then, Japan cannot be counted as a success story of fruitful English L2 integration within the communicative life of its people, and this prevents it from joining the outer circle of Kachru’s model of world Englishes (Kachru, 1996, para. 2). But given the economic and

technological power Japan possesses, the question still begs over why this is so – why its culture, even with all that has been enumerated above, still has such difficulty in successfully digesting English. More to the point – we are still left wondering why it has failed to develop a communicable English, one that could not only reflect the values of their culture but transmit them to the same level of the confidence and utility that has come about particularly in India and Singapore - two very different nations in Asia that share much in common with Japan in terms of cultural values, population density, technological achievement, and a range of L1s vastly different from English.

One of the major issues within the outer circle Englishes is claim of proprietorship of English. What is meant here is a claim to English based on factors such as a high level of communicative competency, intra-national communicability, and on a higher level, successful methodologies of instruction that do not depend on so-called native-speaker models and a body of L2 literature in creative, technical, and technological terms - that is, literature in the widest sense of the term - side-by-side with their L1 literature. Such criteria would bind not only India and Singapore but quite a number of other countries as well. Sweden, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, the Philippines - these are but a handful of countries whose people can claim English as their own because they have successfully developed communicative speakers and users of the language, able to more often than not eloquently articulate their thoughts, feelings and actions in it without harming their cultural legacies or marginalizing their L1s at the same time.

More than anything else, what binds these countries together is the lack of fear with which they are able to communicate the values of their cultures in the L2. If we can accept what Heidegger once said that "language speaks man," and if "man" is understood as meaning everything that men (and women) are in terms of the fullness and richness of their lives, then such Englishes as Indian English, West African English, Pilipino English, and such do in fact “speak” their people, and speak them successfully, if we also understand language as a carrier of the terms, range and value of what people are.

How well these terms “speak”, however, depend on how much room there is in culture for them to do so. On this basis then, we can see that there is little room within Japanese culture for its values to successfully communicate themselves in the L2, because the transformational aspects of the Japanese language, and the socio-cultural factors and issues amongst the Japanese inhibit such cross-cultural communication. Given the guardedness of Japanese culture, such elements may even act as checks against outside influence in the wider sense, sifting through and filtering out components that may be seen to threaten the culture. The katakana script, which upholds

linguistic transformation but also inhibits effective English language development from its distortion of pronunciation (Jannuzi, 2001, Conclusion section), may be an example of a filtering mechanism. But the greater part of the downside reveals a cultural withholding or demurring that denies others access to Japanese culture. For there is much about the culture in terms of how it is expressed through social stability, group cohesion, and discipline that has much to offer. Many Japanese do in fact care about the environment and global peace. Many do possess a spirit of work, beyond obligation or accumulation, towards an outer-oriented good. But relatively few outside Japan see this, because it is hardly ever communicated meaningfully.

Conclusion

In the end, the persistence of linguistic barriers such as the transformational aspects that have been enumerated, and the socio-cultural barriers that have been elucidated, will keep preventing the development of a conception of English that Japanese can rightly claim is a communicable L2. While Japanese culture makes a deep imprint on the English it borrows, it is not one that communicates smoothly or coherently to other L2 users. With such imprinting, and the barriers that work against a greater communicability that could speak to non-Japanese, no basis to an L2 claim can ever be made by the Japanese. Until these barriers are broken down – and it has to be said that only Japanese can do this – Japanese L2 learners will be linguistically hindered as much because of them as they are culturally defined by them.

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