Japan and English as an alien language

JOHN DOUGILL

Twenty years on English still decorates Japan

Excerpt from John Dougill, *English as a decorative language* (*ET*12, 1987)

'Let's be bilingual!' suggests an advertisement in Kyoto, and there are times when the visitor to Japan might believe that the country has indeed adopted English as its second language. Shop-signs, shopping-bags, pencil-boxes, albums and clothes of all kinds bear messages that range from the bizarre to the philosophical. The names of just about everything are in English too, not only cafes, companies and industrial products but even Japanese-language magazines and records.

Just as eye-catching as the amount of English to be seen is the nature of the language. Shop signs proclaim 'Fresh men's sale', 'Last off!', 'Men's bigi' or 'Fun for every day in the year' (this last in a window display of grey suits). Shopping-bags bear intriguing messages such as 'I feel basically you should sports for yourself' or 'Those people had better know the way of tradition'. Diaries carry legends that sometimes verge on the lyrical, as for example, 'When I jumped far beyond your imagination, I found myself a gust of wind'. Clothes are a never-ending source of varied reading matter, ranging from 'Heartful communication' to the alarming 'I love everybody, and you're next' and the thoughtful 'It, going on living tranquilly, is in the mind'. Among the many types of Japanese scooter is the inappropriate 'Jog' and the worrying 'Squash'. There is a popular drink named 'Pocari Sweat', a type of milk powder called 'Creap' and a condom with the descriptive name of 'Rony Wrinkle'.

Gaijin, romaji and 'experts'

The widespread use of English in Japan is a reflection of the country's desire to internationalize and of its fascination with the world of the *gaijin* (literally, 'outsider' or 'alien'), particularly America. As well as being the economic envy of Japan until recently, America has twice proved its superiority in modern times, once by forcing an end to the years of isolationism in 1853 and then by its victory in World War II. English is the language of success, profit and international acceptability.

Compared with the Chinese characters used for everyday purposes, the *romaji* (Roman alphabet) of English seems smart, sophisticated and modern. Indeed, such is the difference between the scripts that merely the appearance of 'romaji' is enough to suggest glamorous associations. One company recognises this by printing on their writing-paper, 'The very best stationery for people who get excited when they see English all over everything'. Apparently, the English is never even read, even by students and teachers of the language: it is purely decorative.



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Fantasy and reality

Being oneself has become a leitmotif with the young. Under the influence of Western notions of developing one's own individuality and with the rise in leisure-time and wealth, younger Japanese have become obsessed with consumerism and image. This is reflected in the numerous references to fashion and design in goods marketed for 'shinjinrui' (literally, the new type of person). 'The basic concept of Boxy exists in the cross between ergonomics and engineering and suggests a new life-style', says an ordinary looking pencil-box.

On the other hand, for those concerned about opening up what has traditionally been a closed society, there are worrying implications. The total lack of concern with the communicative aspect of the language adds strength to the theory put forward by many commentators over the years, namely that though the Japanese are fascinated by foreign languages and people, they are not really interested in getting to know either too closely. In the looking-glass world of Japan, where appearance and reality so often diverge, the use of English as a decorative language by no means indicates a serious attempt to take up the Kyoto suggestion for bilingualism.

One wonders what the Mad Hatter would have made of it all. With his riddle about the raven and writing-desk that had no answer, his nonsensical but twee verse ('Twinkle, twinkle, little bat . . .'), his reflections on saying what you mean and meaning what you say, together with his general air of unreality, he would just have loved the use of English as a decorative language. As Alice herself observes, 'The Hatter's remark seemed to her to have no meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English.' □

AT THE end of the 1980s, Japan's bubble economy burst and the country has been rectifying the ills of the past ever since. The drive to improve is a marked feature of the culture, and much has changed in the past twenty years. The number of 'international Japanese' has grown, as has the number of competent English speakers. Education has been freed up, English introduced into primary schools, and listening tests established in national exams. Yet the peculiarities of Japanese English (called Janglish or Engrish by some) continue to adorn the country's buildings, goods and items of clothing.

'Funny bunny cute life', says a piece of writing paper. 'No human, go ape', shouts a carrier bag. 'Please look at my weather cock', requests a pencil case. 'Quench your thirst with perspiration', suggests a drink can. 'I hope to play along with the heartiest gadgetry manifesting my destiny', claims a pompous piece of stereo equipment.

In my original article, I wrote that 'English is the language of success, profit and international acceptability'. Twenty years later, 'Let's English' remains the name of the fashion game. As well as the key to knowledge, English is the gateway to dreams and faraway places. In a word, it's *chic*. As a result, newly built shops boast 'Since 2007', noticeboards say 'Recycle yourself', and bullet trains have 'Ambitious Japan' written on them. The look is the thing.

English is particularly common in names and titles, conferring a cosmopolitan air on the otherwise mundane. Apartment blocks are called 'Royal Mansion'. Pop groups adopt names like 'Dreams Come True' (shortened by fans to 'Doricomu'). Bars style themselves '*The*', or '*It's*', or – my favourite – '*Rusty*' (the Japanese pronunciation reveals the true intention).

The taste for decorative English is matched by an influx of loanwords into Japanese. In the process many are so transformed as to be unrecognisable. To watch *terebi* (television) you use a *remcon* (remote control), to control the room temperature you use an *aircon* (air conditioner), and to take a picture you use a *digicam* (digital camera). Such is the flood of words that old people complain they can no longer understand their own native language.

Culture shock

When the original article appeared, I was new to Japan and the oddity of English usage leapt out at me like a slap to the face. Now, after twenty years, it has come to be so much a background to daily life that I barely notice it. Similar to the Japanese, in fact. It shows the extent to which I've changed.

It is said that culture shock consists of three stages. First is the honeymoon period, when all is new and exciting. At this point the Japanese use of English seems bizarre and bemusing.

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Second comes the difficult stage of adjustment, when one learns to live with alien ways of thinking. Irritation may result, with a tendency in Westerners to lecture locals about their faults. It can lead to a proprietorial attitude to the language, and I remember on one occasion vainly pointing out to a butcher the error in his sign for 'Flesh meat'.

The third stage of culture shock brings an accord with the host culture. It signifies that the once alien values have been internalized to some extent. Slogans like 'Love get you; I've seen my favourite impressions in your mind', now seem perfectly innocuous. Indeed, it is so much a part of daily life that I would miss it if it were not there.

A national expression

The content of decorative language, as the original article identified, is full of dreamy thoughts and the yearning for individualism. This goes together with the national cult of the cute. 'Nature's wind: I feel like relax', says a shopping-bag. 'It's warmth and gentleness to relieve one's mind', replies a toilet seat cover. 'Hello Tomorrow. I only wish to provide you with strength', adds a photo album. 'Natural high: I feel like relax', responds a bag. The dialogue is filled with pleasantries, as is Japan's daily life. Harmony is the guiding principle. The concern is with associations.

The emphasis on mood rather than meaning, I now realise, is characteristic of the culture as a whole. You see it in television dramas, and it is a keynote of Japanese literature where writers like Kawabata spend whole novels in the creation of atmosphere. It is evident too in film, where a director like Mizoguchi is concerned to evoke a sense of pathos. It is this emotional element which distinguishes Japanese advertising from its Western equivalent, where the emphasis is on informing. It makes me think decorative English should be treasured as a form of national expression.

The copywriters who make all this up are chosen for their creativity rather than their English ability. But why not consult a native speaker to make sure it's correct? Most likely they have neither the resources nor the time, but more importantly it simply doesn't matter. They know, and their audience knows, that this is not for communication. In fact it is probably not read at all. I remember being shocked when I first came to Japan that my students, who were specializing in English, had never read the slogans on their T-shirts or pencil-cases. Even when purchasing them. One had 'Dickhead' written on his back.

Functional English

Functional English is a different matter from decorative English, as it is truly meant to communicate. One might expect here a better level of English, but this is not always the case. Every educated Japanese has studied English for at least six years, and most have studied it for longer than that. But, for complex cultural and linguistic reasons, the results are not commensurate with the time and effort. Sadly, mistakes are inevitable because of the differences between the two languages. Articles do not exist in Japanese, the word order is often the reverse of English, and some 60 per cent of sentences do not have a subject. Besides which, English can be devilishly tricky. Hence bar notices like 'Special cocktails for persons with nuts'. Or hotel signs like 'If you want condition of warm in your room, please control yourself'. Or even, 'You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaids'.

The problem with 'l' and 'r' is well known, but even if you think you are used to it the effect can be startling. 'Have a present fright', a stewardess told me as I embarked on a plane. When it occurs in written form, it can seem deliberately perverse, creating concerts with 'fork music' or a special appearance by 'Eric Crapton'. I recently received an email from my travel agent, fluent in English, about 'an alterlation' to my ticket, carefully hedging her bets as it were. It casts an interesting light on the way the brain works, for the two English sounds have been conflated in the memory banks into the one *katakana* sound of the Japanese syllabary. As a result, a friend wrote to me of 'a blight tomorrow' when she was clearly intending to be optimistic.

Recent developments

In recent years, developments have shed new light on the usage of English in Japan, one of which is the trend in the West to use Chinese characters as a fashion item. It is not uncommon to see them on articles of clothing or tattooed on sports stars. Some contain mistakes (it is easy, after all, to misspell a Chinese character). There have been reports, too, of characters printed

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Three examples of decorative English, taken from the website www.engrish.com (with permission).

upside down, and one British art gallery, to its embarrassment, displayed Japanese calligraphy the wrong way round. Asian tourists in New Zealand were apparently startled to see a man walking around with a T-shirt saying 'Mentally ill patient'. This mirroring of decorative English brings home the ease with which form can trump function.

Another development has been the advent of machine translation, which has led in recent years to students handing in virtual gibberish in the belief that it is comprehensible English. But while machine translation does not work (yet) for extended passages, it can be good for the short phrases of decorative English. It may explain some of the random language one comes across, like 'Refined flash: it seems volcano'. On the other hand, it is sometimes hard to tell. 'I feel Coke': is that human or machine?

With the rise of Western-style capitalism in China, there have been indications that similar usages of English are appearing there. Packaging, for instance, adds English for a touch of modernity, such as Fried Captain's Chicken or Asian Rear (a misspelling for Pear). There are also cases of functional English gone unfortunately wrong. 'No smrking', says one public notice, 'Please slip carefully', says another, while yet another stipulates, 'No entrance to stranglers'. Park authorities came up with this useful warning: 'Please do not feed the fishes with your privates.' And in one particular hotel the staff make this well-intentioned offer: 'Please don't touch yourself. Let us help you.'

A monocultural society

My original article finished with a note of concern that the use of decorative English might reflect a tendency in Japanese culture to treat foreign languages as something strange, separate, and not to be taken seriously as a means of communication. One sees the effect in university exams where the language is used as a

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massive logic test to sort out the grading of millions of entrants. Communication has little place; puzzle-solving is central. This still holds true, though it is increasingly less the case these days.

It seems to me on reflection that it is possible to link decorative English with Japan's monoculturalism, for it is basically an attempt to look international while remaining insular. A letter to the *Japan Times* by an American turned away from a bar, highlights the point. 'Sorry, no foreigners', he was told perfectly politely (there is no law against discrimination in Japan). The name of the bar? Manhattan. It even had a Stars and Stripes in the window.

Unlike France, Japan is all too happy to accept foreign words while being wary of foreign people, and, as of 2007, all non-Japanese entering the country will have to be photographed and fingerprinted. Yet the country stands at a crossroads, for the falling birthrate means it faces an unprecedented situation in the ratio of old to young. The pressure to import Filipina nurses and South-East Asian labourers may prove irresistible at some point. Once the doors open, the linguistic situation in which decorative English has flourished will inevitably change and English will become a second, rather than an alien, language. But for as long as Japan resists multiculturalism, it seems foreigners will continue to enjoy such delights as 'Steamed cock' on their menus, 'Painapple Candy' in the shops, and 'Help yourself to my cherry' on the T-shirts they pass. ■

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