

## Some Remarks on the Multiculturalism of Asian Englishes

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### 1. Introduction

English now is said to be an international language or a global language. When we say this, do we really understand what it means? This is a profoundly important question we have to ask ourselves in Japan now when the nation's 24,000 public primary schools are preparing to introduce English language teaching to their fifth grade pupils in 2002. Actually, it seems extremely difficult to comprehend various sorts of logical deductions stemming from the current state of the English language.

English today is a unique language, formally and functionally quite different from other languages of the world. For one thing, a sizable number of countries designate it as their national, official, or working language. The concomitant result of this is that English is bound to reflect a diversity of disparate cultures. English is a multinational language and therefore a multicultural language.

Thus, from a Japanese point of view, English is not the language for us to use only with Americans, the British, or any other native speakers. Rather, English is the language for us to use with Koreans, Chinese, Thais, Indonesians, Singaporeans, and other Asians. It is the language for us to use with Europeans, Africans, Arabians, South Americans, and many others. That English has become an international language means that it has become a language for multinational and multicultural communication.

Another characteristic that is peculiar to English now is that, as the spread of English progresses, non-native speakers outnumber native speakers. There are more non-native speakers using English with other non-native speakers than native speakers using English with other native speakers or non-native speakers. Conspicuously, non-native speakers are taking advantage of this additional language and are exploring new dimensions of English usage, structurally and pragmatically. Since no language is used to its fullest extent by its native speakers, there is always much room left for non-native speakers to exploit it in their unique ways. As a matter of fact, they are using English in non-Anglo-American cultural contexts.

When Japanese speak English with Singaporeans, there is no room for American or British culture. It would be clumsy if the Japanese had to represent American ways of behavior and the Singaporeans the British version while speaking

English to each other. The case is true with English conversations between Turks and Brazilians, French and Finnish people, or any other interactions there may occur on the global stage. What actually happens is that Japanese behave like Japanese and speak English in Japanese ways, and so do Thais, Malaysians, Arabians, Pakistanis, and many others respectively. This demonstrates that English now is a variegated language.

## 2. Diffusion and Adaptation

In order to grasp this English language trend, it is important that we fully understand the relation of diffusion and adaptation. If things are to spread, they must most normally mutate. For example, Italian food we enjoy in Japan is locally adjusted to attract a large clientele. Should it have happened that Italians objected to Japanese ways of serving spaghetti, this Italian cuisine would never have been as popular as it is now. We simply cannot internationalize things and ideas without having them accommodated to the customs of people who are supposed to use them for their own purposes.

This principle apparently applies to language, too. The fact is that the internationalization of English has prompted the diversification of English. The diversification is the cost of the internationalization of English. Here, it is important to recognize that English has become an international common language simply because it is being created as a culturally diverse language.

People might imagine that a common language should be a uniform language. But this is not true. A common language is a diverse language. A lot of allowances have to be made, and differences accepted. If American English standards, for example, were imposed upon all users of English, English would never become an international common language.

Many non-native speakers are learning English as an additional language. In addition to their native tongue, they want to acquire a working command of English for their own purposes. They are free to use it in their own ways. It is important to note that for most non-native speakers, the use of English is limited to a certain set of roles or domains. For native speakers, English is used in a wide range of fields in their social lives. But for non-native speakers, the situation is simply different. We use English partially in acts related to our jobs, interactions, enlightenment, entertainment, research, overseas studies, and the like. It is just one means to accomplish our objectives. We are happy if we get something done in English.

Non-native speakers generally are not expected to acquire native-speaker proficiency in English. We use our native language in our intranational domains of life. If we acquire a certain amount of English proficiency, we can significantly achieve a lot of things in our job or human relation acts. This means that English not only incorporates a variety of structural differences but also contains a multitude of functions. English is a multiformal language as well as a multifunctional

language. In this sense, more attention should be paid to teaching English for specific purposes (ESP).

### 3. English in Asia

As such, the spread of English as a language for multinational and multicultural communication employed by an enormous number of non-native speakers shows that English is becoming more and more de-Anglo-Americanized all over the world. This creates a new role English can play in the contemporary world.

People of the 3rd World first worried invariably that if they chose English as their official language after independence, they might retain some destructive remnants of Anglo-American colonialism. Yet, while they continued using English in their own social, cultural, and linguistic contexts, they discovered that they could solve this anxiety. They have created their own varieties of English best fit for their intranational, interethnic communication.

As a matter of fact, English has become a very important language in Asia. It is a working language for intranational and international communication in many parts of the region. According to a Newsweek report (October 28, 1998), 350 million people speak English for various purposes in Asia, a number that is more than the combined populations of the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia where English is a native tongue for many citizens.

In much of Asia, English is no longer a colonial import. Throughout the region, English is the language of education, culture, business and, above all, regional cooperation. English-speaking Asians claim English as their own language. Filipino poet Gemino Abad once said, "The English language is now ours. We have colonized it, too." (Newsweek, October 28, 1998)

Don't take this as a political statement. This is simply a descriptive remark concerning the current state of the English language in this part of the world. Thus, students are becoming more and more aware that English is an indispensable Asian language. The likelihood of using English with other Asians motivates an increasing number of students to learn the language better.

For English language training, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia send diplomats and other professionals to the Regional Language Center (RELC) of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) stationed in Singapore. These countries are preparing to play a larger role in the Association of South East Asian Nations, where English is the official language.

English schools in Singapore or the Philippines attract a huge number of students from Asia. England and America used to be the places to go to in order to learn English. But now this urge has comparatively weakened. "The best way to learn English is to go to a country where English is spoken." This is an expression Japanese students learn in the classroom. Some Asian countries are now added to a list of their destinations.

#### 4. The Multiculturalism of Asian Englishes

Asian Englishes are diverse, however, with different social roles attached to the adopted language. Each country has used the language in its traditional cultural and linguistic contexts, thereby producing a distinct variety characterized by unique structural and functional features. Proficiency levels also differ with English-as-a-second-language countries generally producing more skillful speakers than English-as-a-foreign-language counterparts.

As most Asian countries recognize English as an indispensable language for intranational or international communication, they are increasingly committed to strengthening and improving English language teaching (ELT). Most prominently, they start teaching English at the elementary school level. While primary school English is common in ESL countries, many EFL countries are following suit.

In parts of Asia where English serves as an official language and ELT expands and succeeds, people start speaking English among themselves. Wherever this happens, a set of indigenous patterns develop, a kind of patterns people find easier to handle.

The notion of one language as an independent system is only an imaginary creation. As languages come into contact, they get mingled in many interesting ways. This has become increasingly obvious in Asian English studies, where multilingual analysis is a key to significant exploration.

As such, the forms and uses of English in Asia are enormously influenced by other Asian languages. While the influence is visible in lexical borrowing, it often gets blurred in syntactic superposition. Thus, deep insight is called upon to reveal the intrusion of Chinese, Malay, and probably Tamil in the reduplication phenomenon in Singapore English and some other varieties. Here are some examples I heard on the street in Singapore. Ho (1998) describes many aspects of these syntactic patterns.

- (1) If you go to Seiyu, everything is cheap-cheap. (Taxi driver)
- (2) Saturday can-can. (Reservation clerk at a restaurant)
- (3) I like to wear big-big. (T-shirt vendor referring to her XL size)
- (4) Play-play, no money; work-work, no leisure. Combination is better. (Taxi driver)
- (5) My friend from China, she likes (to) shop-shop. (Shop clerk)
- (6) Choose-choose-choose-choose choose, but no buy. (Shop clerk referring to recent Japanese tourists)

I have another example, which was downloaded from an Internet page in Singapore:

Under the ang mo, we all live happily together, no complain.  
Malaysia & Singapore is one big family in our brains.

One moment like brothers, can give and take.  
 Next moment we kena kicked out by the leg.  
 Everybody know we water no enough.  
 They turn off tap only we all cannot last.  
 They threaten us with water supply and shout "Cut! Cut! Cut!"  
 Aiyoh! They all think the water is one big ketupat.  
 But their own economy now all go bust.  
 Got to sell water otherwise money no enough.  
 I think hor maybe they don't understand us very well.  
 That's why relationship sometimes like heaven sometimes like hell.  
 I think hor, Singapore is like chili padi in a pot.  
 [ang mo: red hair (referring to the British); kena: to get; Aiyoh!: Oh!;  
 ketupat: boiled rice cake wrapped in a banana leaf; hor: particle of  
 familiarity]

In this connection, it is important to note that teachers do not teach local varieties of English in the school. They teach Standard British English in the classroom in Singapore. Singapore English is the result of the ELT in Singapore. If people are compelled or encouraged to speak English, they do so only in the way best fit for them. The same thing can happen in countries where English is taught as an international language if we encourage our students to speak English, as we must for various good reasons. For example, Japanese speakers might begin to say:

- A. 1. He has a wide face (is well known).  
 2. He has a black belly (is roguish).  
 3. He has a tall nose (is boastful).

It would be illogical to turn down these expressions as incorrect because these are non-native. Above all things, most Japanese learners are non-native speakers, encouraged to speak English by taking full advantage of the repertory they have, however limited it might be. It would also be hard to accept that A sentences above are incorrect while B sentences below are correct simply because they are native-based.

- B 1. He has a bitter tongue.  
 2. He has a sweet tooth.  
 3. He has green fingers.

### 5. Language Awareness as a Measure of Diversity Management

With this said, I would like to address one important issue, that is diversity management. In order to enrich the multiculturalism of Asian Englishes and to ensure their mutual intelligibility and communicability, it is important we develop

internationally coordinated educational programs. Most effective is the introduction of language awareness training into school curriculums of Asian countries. Teaching language awareness in Britain and Europe has proved useful for students to become conscious of the function of language in multilingual and multicultural settings. This is witnessed in papers in *Language Awareness*, a journal devoted to the issues involved, published by *Multilingual Matters* in the UK. In Asian countries, we should cooperate to work for similar goals in an attempt to overcome, for example, the possible inconveniences to be caused by the spread of English as a multicultural language in this part of the world.

One thing that should be included in these programs is the study of metaphors. A cognitive and expressive device human beings are generally equipped with, the metaphor relates concept X to concept Y. Human beings have a propensity to use basic and concrete experiences to understand and express profound and abstract affairs. Yet, in many countries in Asia, metaphor is considered as a technical term for literary criticism, a tool limited to analyze fiction and poetry. It is essential that we understand that metaphor is an operation ordinary people employ in all domains of their daily lives based on their perception of similarities in an array of natural and social phenomena.

The body-part lexicon is a good example. People use it to refer to various affairs associated with body parts. For instance, Japanese extend the head, chest (or heart), and belly as containers, each intended for a different type of contents. Thus, the head is a container of knowledge ("He crammed everything into the head."), the chest of romantic thoughts ("He has his love for her hidden in the chest.") and the belly of emotions ("He decided to contain this conversation in his belly.").

If people are aware of the structure and the function of metaphors, they should not be confounded to hear Japanese say in English: "He is a kind of person who does not reveal his belly to his subordinates," or "I can't read his belly." If people see what metaphors are involved here, they would not have difficulty making sense of these expressions: the belly is a container the content of which this guy does not show easily for the first sentence and the belly is a container his message wherein is too obscure for me to read for the second sentence.

Incidentally, *Time* (March 22, 1999) quoted Monica Lewinsky as saying: "I know he (Bill Clinton) had remarked to me that we both had fire in our belly." If fire signifies passion in American English, as Monica said after this remark, Japanese speakers would have it in the chest (or heart), not in the belly. But if metaphorically aware, they could easily understand the difference and interpret the expression appropriately.

The story of metonymies should also be included in the study of metaphors. The knowledge of metonymies can save a lot of mis- or non-communication among speakers of different varieties of English. Japanese train conductors might say: "Don't put your face out of the window." Or Japanese housewives might say: "I am putting my neck into teaching Japanese as an

international language." If the face and the neck were understood as representing the head in these cases, these expressions might be unlikely to appear incorrect, nonsensical, or illogical.

For the concepts of Asian Englishes to be put into practice, it is essential that we coordinate educational efforts on a regional scale. If we establish a basis for international cooperation and develop enlightening curriculums for language awareness in various language-related subjects, we will be able to better use English as a language for international and intercultural communication while enjoying its multicultural values.

Conformism is not a plausible way of accommodating the multiculturalism of Asian Englishes. What is needed for mutual intelligibility is intercultural literacy, of which language awareness constitutes a fundamental component.

### 5. ELT in Asia as an ODA Project

I have one more ramification to add here. If English is recognized as an Asian language, Japanese people, for example, may find themselves in a position to promote it as such in their regional cooperation efforts. There is a lot to be done to improve the socio-pedagogical environment of English communication in Asia. English language teaching in Asian contexts can legitimately be listed, for example, for official development assistance (ODA) of the Japanese Government.

I recently had a talk with an executive officer of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) over English in Asia as a possible ODA project. He first said that JICA could not concern itself with ELT in Asia because English is a British or an American language. After I explained our idea of English as an Asian language, he saw the relevance right away and expressed his willingness to consider proposals if made appropriately.

In spite of the increasing demand for English language teaching in Asian countries, the lack of qualified teachers is chronic. Can Japanese ODA funds be used for supporting teacher training programs in Asia? How about for developing better teaching/learning materials? How about for distance education? How about for use of multimedia and information/communication technologies? Japanese tax payers would agree to these expenditures only if they had a clear understanding of English as an Asian language.

Right now, there are a considerable number of Japanese volunteer teachers of English in Laos, Vietnam, or Cambodia. Most of them are dispatched there by the non-government and non-profit organizations to which they belong. According to reports, they are deeply impressed by the extent to which their students, mostly children, devote themselves to learning this language of better opportunities under the difficult circumstances of scarce textbooks and other resources.

If English is an Asian language, it becomes appropriate that Japanese and other Asian nationals take responsibility for the language, which many of us are learning as well as enriching as a means of wider communication. As I described

elsewhere (Honna and Takeshita 1998), the concept of English as an Asian language is still new in Japanese educational quarters. Yet, it gets smoothly accepted into the business sectors.

Japanese business people use English as an international language in Asia more and more frequently these days. Once they recognize the legitimacy of the Asian varieties of English, they become interested in learning why Asian people speak English the way they do. To meet these demands for linguistic and cultural information, further stimulated by an ever-increasing number of inquisitive Japanese tourists visiting Asian cities, Tokyo's major publisher endorses a project on a Japanese dictionary of Asian Englishes. Another prestigious publisher supports the international journal of Asian Englishes, that is two years old now. A change in attitudes toward English among its most frequent users should very likely lend impetus to an imminent readjustment in Japan's English language teaching practice.

### References

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