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日本人と英語の複雑な関係

社会言語学の観点から分析する日本人の英語に対する意識と考え方

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〈論 文〉

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## 日本人と英語の複雑な関係

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### Abstract

Ever since their first exposure to English, which was due to the arrival of foreign missionaries in Japan, the Japanese people have had a complex relationship with the English language. Despite having studied English for at least six years in junior high school and high school, a great many Japanese are lacking in confidence when required to deal with the language in daily life situations. The purpose of this paper is to help Japanese people develop a more satisfactory relationship with English by providing a sociolinguistic analysis of this relationship with suggestions on how Japanese and the English language can get along better in the future.

### 要旨

外国人宣教師の到来により日本に英語が導入されて以来、日本人と英語は複雑な関係にある。日本人は、中学校や高等学校で少なくとも六年間、英語の勉強を行っているにもかかわらず、あまりその言語を日常生活の中で、上手に使いこなせていない。本研究では、その背景を社会言語学的に分析し、日本人と英語の関係をよりよい関係になるように提言をする。

**Keywords:** English, Japanese people, relationship, analysis, sociolinguistic

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## 1 Is Japan Under The Domination of The English Language?

Admittedly, “domination” might be too strong a word, but, as one British scholar has observed, the use of English in Japan is so widespread that a visitor could easily get the impression that this country has “adopted English as its second language” ( Dougill, 1987 ). English words and phrases are ubiquitous in advertising, to the point where TV commercials with no English are almost non-existent. Clothing, shopping bags, notebooks and even pencil cases are adorned with a great variety of English phrases. Sometimes, however, English is used in ways which are quite unfathomable to a native speaker of the language. The following case should serve as an example.

A well-known Japanese linguistic scholar, who has resided overseas for many years, tells us an interesting story. Whenever he brings his foreign-born children back to Japan for a visit, they always act puzzled by Japanese TV commercials. While watching TV one day, his son asked him, “Dad, there’s a commercial with half English and half Japanese. Who are the sponsors aiming at?” When they were out shopping one day, his son said, “Dad, why are there so many shops with English names even though this is Japan?” Undoubtedly, these types of questions must have had the professor stumped ( Sugimoto, 1988 ). In fact, the author, too, has long been fascinated by the mysterious and, at times, unfathomable use of English which is in abundant supply in Japan. In the 1990s the author even did a survey for a research project which involved traveling around Hokkaido and collecting as many examples of odd English as possible. Upon finding a sample ( t-shirts, handbags, caps, etc.) I took a photograph and later

analyzed the mistakes found in the English. Among my favorites at the time were a t-shirt with the message, “Lusty summer. Riding let’s Australia!” and a sign near a crosswalk with the instruction “To cross street, push the button at night.” ( McLarty, 1991 ).

Let us return, however, to the previously mentioned Japanese linguistics professor. He provides us with another interesting example to consider. One day he was watching TV with his children when they saw something strange on the screen. A young man wearing a shirt with English on it appeared on the show. The English written on his shirt included the word “Bullshit”. If we translate that into Japanese, it comes out as *ushi no fun*. The young man probably didn’t check the meaning of the English written on his shirt. The professor noted that no ordinary Japanese person would be willing to appear on Japanese TV with *ushi no fun*, literally “shit from cows” written in Japanese on their clothing.

Professor Sugimoto, our aforementioned scholar, wrote his book back in 1988. The author’s study was done in 1991. Now that we are in the year 2014, has the situation regarding English usage in Japan changed significantly? Professor Dougill, mentioned earlier, clearly thinks not. In an updated version of his 1987 article, he states, “Twenty years on English still decorates Japan.” He goes on to say that, although there have been changes such as English classes in primary schools, listening tests in national exams and an increase in the number of competent English speakers, “the peculiarities of Japanese English ( called Jangrish or Engrish by some ) continue to adorn the country’s buildings, goods and items of clothing.” Later he wryly notes, “Twenty years later, ‘Let’s English’ remains the name of the fashion game” ( Dougill, 2008 ). In other words,

English is still more for decoration than communication. If the mistaken English simply contained grammatical errors, it would still be within a native speaker's tolerance range ( perhaps ). Unfortunately, this writer has found numerous examples wherein the English usage had vulgar, offensive or sexual connotations, which the Japanese person or people using it were quite unaware of. At a certain sports club in Sapporo, most of the women attending jazz dance or aerobics classes usually wore clothes with English written on them. One day while doing my exercise routine, I noticed a young Japanese woman with an intriguing message emblazoned on the back of her t-shirt. It read as follows, "Starting today, I will go on blind dates. Starting today, I will give out my phone number." In other words, she is looking for a new boyfriend. The Japanese equivalent would be *ただいま、恋人募集中*. ( *Tadaima, koibito boshu chu* ). The woman appeared to be in her late twenties or, perhaps, early thirties. Whether or not she actually was looking for a new lover is unknown.

However, I suspected that she had no inkling about what the English written on her back side meant. I decided to ask her directly about it. When she finished her exercise routine, I went over and spoke to her. When I explained what her shirt's words meant in English, her face turned several shades of purple. After I gently advised her not to wear the shirt in any place where Caucasians were present, she nodded soberly and quickly left the training room. Although I did not see the same woman again in subsequent trips to that sports club, it is likely that she took my advice to heart. One thing we can safely say is that, if she were to wear the same t-shirt in an English-speaking country, there would be a very real danger of her getting approached by male strangers with less-than-savory motives ( McLarty, 2006 ).

Professor Dougill's comments about English being the language of high status in Japan are well taken. Many Japanese people seem to have a strong feeling of *akogare* ( fascination with ) concerning English, even those who hardly understand the language at all. Let me cite several more cases from my own experience.

One time I was asked by a Japanese acquaintance to write a 5-minute speech in English for him. He said that he wanted to give the speech at a party of old school alumni. Somehow his request seemed odd so I asked him if there were to be any foreign guests at the party. When he replied no, I became suspicious and asked why he wanted to give a speech in English to an all Japanese group of alumni. He said, "If I give a speech in English, it looks cool!" At this point I became irritated and told him, "Where is the need to give an English speech when you have an exclusively Japanese audience?" As you can imagine, I declined his request.

Incidentally, the plethora of English written on clothes in Japan is affecting me personally in some unexpected ways recently. For example, when my teenage daughter goes shopping for new shirts, sweaters, etc., the clothing available at department stores almost always has English messages or slogans on it. My wife insists that I check the English on all her apparel choices before she will allow our daughter make purchases. In addition, one of my university colleagues recently told me that this prevalence of written English on clothes has affected her buying habits. As a teacher of Japanese language to foreign students, she tries not to wear any clothing that might have strange English on it. Said she, "I can't afford to have students see me wearing clothes with weird English slogans. This seriously limits what I can wear when I am teaching."

From the examples on the previous pages readers can fully grasp by now the extent to which strange, mistaken or simply unfathomable English usage is widespread in Japan. However, no matter how bemused, baffled or bamboozled foreign observers are by this English, our discussion would not be complete without some further comments from our friend, Professor Sugimoto. After all, as a Japanese person who has long resided in English-speaking nations, he is in an ideal position to judge the way his countrymen are using English. Let us hear what he has to say.

“From the fact that so many Japanese think that words written in English are chic even if they can’t read them and think discussions in English are cool even if they can’t understand what is said, I am practically forced to the conclusion that Japanese people are, subconsciously, under the domination of the culture of the English language. Whenever I look at Japanese newspapers, magazines or TV, I can’t help getting this impression. Everywhere we look, examples of Japanese-style English and English in katakana abound. There are even some scholars who think that this is an impediment to Japanese people’s study of English. Why is it that Japan’s largest TV broadcasting station is officially registered under an English name? Why is it necessary that organizations like JBC ( Japan Beauty Center ) and TBS ( Tokyo Broadcasting Corporation ) refer to themselves by English designations? While it is true that English is the world’s lingua franca, why should Japan, which is not a colony of The United States or Great Britain, be this strongly influenced by the English language? This is a matter that scholars need to give serious consideration to in the future, I believe” ( Sugimoto, 1990 ). Exactly! The best we can do is help students to master “real English.”

## 2 Do Japanese People Who Marry Foreigners Easily Become Fluent in English?

When it comes to Japanese-foreigner marriages, many Japanese people seem to share one assumption which I find puzzling. I am referring to the issue of which partner’s native tongue is the main tool of communication in that household. For example, when a Japanese woman marries a French man, do they speak mostly French at home or do they communicate mostly in Japanese? In the case of a Japanese-U.S. marriage, do they speak mainly English at home or do they generally communicate in Japanese? It would seem common sense to this writer to assume that , depending on their particular circumstances, some couples would prefer the foreign spouse’s language, while others would likely find the Japanese partner’s language to be their best mode of communication.

However, it has been my observation that a large segment of Japanese people do not share my point of view. Why do I think so? Consider the following comments made to my wife by other Japanese when they learn that I am a foreign national. They consistently say things like, “Oh, is your husband an American? Well, in that case, you’re probably fluent in English, right?” Quite apart from whether my spouse is actually “fluent in English” or not the most interesting thing about their comments is the underlying assumption that any Japanese person married to a non-Japanese must automatically be fluent in English ( or the foreign spouse’s language ) In other words, when a Japanese person marries an English-speaking foreigner, they will naturally pick up his or her language in the course of living together, even without necessarily studying English by textbooks, private lessons, etc. Unfortunately, it has been this

writer's experience that learning a foreign language simply doesn't happen that easily. It doesn't matter how many hours one spends with a foreign spouse. Simply being together with an American ( or British, Canadian, Australian, etc. ) will not make the Japanese partner fluent in English. It is possible for the Japanese partner to gain significant listening comprehension in English by regularly hearing it spoken by the foreign spouse. However, aural comprehension and communicative speaking ability are two separate and distinct skills, as all foreign language educators can readily attest. The only way to become truly fluent in English ( or any foreign language ) is to put in the necessary time studying it yourself, whether by textbooks, newspapers, CD listening or an eclectic mix of materials and methods. Obviously, the same thing applies to foreign people learning Japanese. One of my former American colleagues, who was engaged to a Japanese woman, had thought he could master spoken Japanese just by having a Japanese girlfriend. After some months with little improvement in his linguistic skills, he ruefully gave me this advice. "Charles, don't think you can master this language just by dating a Japanese woman. If you really want to get fluent, you have to approach it academically." From that day on I never failed to carry a pocket Japanese-English dictionary wherever I went in Japan.

Let us return, however, to our discussion of which spouse's language international couples use more. Do they really prefer the foreign spouse's native tongue ( meaning English ), as many Japanese people seem to assume? Or do they more often communicate in Japanese? In fact, I actually did a research study in the late 1990s about the lives of Japanese-Foreigner couples. This involved both personal interviews and written surveys with a total of forty two ( 42 ) international married

couples. One of the questions I asked was which spouse's language they used mainly at home. The results were eye-opening. Over half of the couples answered that they used mainly ( mostly ) Japanese rather than English in their households ( McLarty, 1997 ). Of course, it should be noted that all except three of the couples in that survey resided in Japan. The three couples living abroad ( all in the U.S. ) all reported that English was their main mode of communication. Also, I am familiar with the research of another American scholar who interviewed thirty ( 30 ) international couples in the Kanto and Chubu regions of Japan. Of those couples interviewed, approximately half reported using mostly Japanese at home, mainly because the foreign husband was fluent in Japanese. Clearly, this does not gibe with the assumptions made by many Japanese that international couples mainly use English with each other and that the Japanese spouse is always fluent in the foreign spouse's language.

As this topic is of keen interest to me, I conducted another survey several years ago, though this time more informally. I asked six international couples which spouse's language they used mainly with each other. Four of the six responded that they used more Japanese than English at home. My own wife could speak only quite limited English at the time we got married. However, her English has improved greatly since that time. While this is partly due to interaction with my family and friends, the main reason for her progress is that she has studied herself via private lessons as well as reading English language materials. Yet despite my Japanese linguistic knowledge and the increase in foreigners who are fluent in Japanese, no Japanese person has ever said to me, "Oh, is your wife Japanese? In that case, you're probably fluent in Japanese, right?" Why should this be?

### 3 Why Do Japanese Insist on Native



## Speaking English Teachers and Reject Non-native Teachers?

Several years ago I recall seeing a most interesting article in The Daily Yomiuri English newspaper ( now called The Japan News ). It was a letter to the editor from an Indian resident of Japan. The Indian writer complained that, although he was seeking a job teaching English in Tokyo, no schools or educational institutions would hire him. The letter, written in superbly fluent English, detailed his frustration at being unable to find a teaching job despite his best efforts. At the letter's end he asked why Japanese people reject non-native English speakers as teachers of English, even if they are fluent in the language.

There is a reason why that particular letter caught my eye. It reminded me of two foreign acquaintances ( both non-native speakers of English ) who had sought my help in finding work in Sapporo as teachers of English. One was a man from Bangladesh and the other was a woman from The Netherlands. Unfortunately, both of them wound up having the same negative experience as that Indian man whose letter appeared in the newspaper. The Bangladeshi gentleman was university-educated and more than sufficiently fluent in English. Yet he was rejected numerous times for teaching jobs. He finally gave up trying to find such work and returned to his home country. The lady from Holland, a beautiful blond-haired woman, visited the language school where I once had taught. The school, as you can guess, refused to hire her as their teacher despite her impeccable English speaking ability. Though unable to get a school-based teaching job, she searched for opportunities to teach private lessons to Japanese students. Even at this, however, she was mostly unsuccessful. Although I

recommended her to some friends, they all declined to sign up for her lessons when they learned that she was not a native speaker of English. She reported that one Japanese female student of hers even cancelled the next lesson in mid-class by saying, "You are from Holland, right? They don't really speak English there, do they?" I could easily understand her frustration and sympathize with her exasperation. She left Sapporo shortly thereafter.

According to my American friends, the Bangladeshi man was completely fluent in written as well as spoken English. The Dutch lady had native speaker-like pronunciation. With her blond good looks and impeccable European courtesy, I had thought she would be in demand among Japanese students. Yet, despite both of them being fully qualified to teach English linguistically, they were rejected as teachers by prospective students time and time again. Both were forced to give up trying to teach English in Japan and they both left Japan, no doubt disappointed by their experience. Why do many Japanese people insist so strongly that their English teachers be native speakers of that language? Why is it that Japanese feel reluctant to learn English from non-native speaking teachers? In fact, some researchers have noted that Japanese even feel resistance to studying English under native speakers if those teachers are Asian American ( Wharton, 1986 ). It certainly is true that native speakers have some knowledge about their own language that virtually no non-native speaker would likely possess. This is naturally true for Japanese people, too, when it comes to certain aspects of Nihongo. In that sense, I can easily understand Japanese people's keen desire to learn foreign languages from a native speaking teacher. On the other hand, I would like to tell my Japanese students, friends and colleagues that there are times when learning

English from a non-native speaker can have important benefits.

Let me give several examples. An American instructor who was formerly my colleague used to frequently bring his wife to his classes as a guest. His wife was not American or Japanese but, rather, a Vietnamese woman. She had lived with him in the U.S. for a number of years and had attended an American university. Thus, she was very fluent in English. His Japanese students were so impressed by her English that many of them began taking private lessons with her in addition to their regular classes with him. Another example is that of a Polish lady who currently lives in the same neighborhood of Sapporo as this author. An attractive strawberry blond-haired woman with a university education, she is multilingual. Because of her educational background and fluency in Japanese, she is respected by all who know her. Though she is not able to be a college or university teacher in Japan, she has gained some teaching jobs at private schools and also holds private lessons in English. Both the Vietnamese woman and the Polish lady are in an ideal position to teach Japanese students how to study English. They both had to master it as a foreign language and, thus, can serve as role models for Japanese who aspire to master the language. It should be noted that people such as these two women might be better teachers for Japanese students than native English speakers who have never had to “study” their language and who may, in some cases, not even know the grammar of their native tongue sufficiently to teach it to others.

When we look at the worldwide situation of English, it is clear the non-native speakers actually outnumber native speakers of the language. According to one linguistic scholar, English has already ceased to be the exclusive property of native speakers of the language

(Baumgardner, 2006 ). In previous years I have had several opportunities to attend meetings of an academic society called the Conference on World Englishes. The thing that surprised me the most was the great number of superb presentations made in English by scholars and researchers who were not native speakers of the language. In fact, when I examined the conference program carefully, there were actually more English presentations by non-native presenters than there were by native English speaking presenters. I couldn't help being deeply impressed. In addition, I came away from the conference thinking that Japanese students ( including our HIU students ) certainly would get many pluses and no minuses if they were to study English under teachers like those people. While I certainly understand the strong preference of Japanese students for native speaking teachers of English, I believe it is important that they realize there are also non-native speaking teachers of English who are outstanding educators.

#### **4 Why Do Japanese People Suddenly Turn Their Conversations to English Whenever a Foreigner Is Present?**

As I have previously mentioned, I commute to my university daily by train. As such, I have been lucky enough to have many experiences which simply would not have been possible had I always commuted by car. I have noticed, for example, that when I get on the train Japanese people around me frequently turn their conversations to English-related topics. Just in case some readers are tempted to suggest that my imagination is working overtime, let me give examples of three recent cases.

One evening I got on an Otaru-bound train at Nopporo Station, heading home after another long



day of school classes. Trains in the that time period are often crowded so I felt relieved when I was able to find an open seat. Shortly after I sat down, three young women boarded the train and came looking for open seats. As there was only one available seat near me, all three ladies chose to stand together and began chatting. When they saw me their conversation immediately turned to the topic of one friend who had recently began attending English conversation classes at a local foreign language school. In case number two, I was riding an Iwamizawa-bound train from Sapporo in mid-afternoon on my day off. When I sat down there were two thirty something-looking ladies sitting in adjacent seats. Moments after I sat there, their conversation took an interesting turn. Said one, “One of my friends just got married with a foreign man. I wonder what kind of life they are living.” The other lady responded with, “Yeah, and what language do you suppose they use at home?” Then the first woman continued with, “What kind of menu do you think they favor for meals?” Listening to their conversation was so much fun that I just went on eavesdropping to my heart’s content. Unfortunately, I was unable to keep a proper poker face so they caught on to my mischief and, with sheepish grins, changed the topic.

The third case was similar, except that it actually took place at a coffee shop rather than on a train. When I sat down, two twenty something-looking women were at the next table chatting over coffee. Right after I sat down, their conversation also turned to the subject of international marriage. One lady said, “One of my old classmates just got married with a foreign fellow.” The other woman responded, “Does she speak English well?” The first woman said, “I don’t know. Maybe. I don’t suppose he speaks Japanese.” With my impudent American sense of humor, I was sorely tempted to

break in with “Well, maybe both of them are fluent in Arabic!” but I somehow managed to control myself. A few minutes later, however, I could no longer conceal the fact that I was listening in. With embarrassed smiles, they asked where I was from and what had brought me to Japan. When they realized that I could respond in fluent Japanese ( more or less ) they positively pelted me with questions about English, America and Americans. We wound up talking for over an hour. In the end, the thing about that encounter that stands out in my mind is their genuine curiosity and their intense desire to know more about anything related to English or foreign people. There was not even a hint of any derogative attitudes toward foreigners. Going over old notes in my memo book, I could cite a number of other similar cases. By this time, however, I believe readers can get my drift.

Let us return to our main question. Why do many Japanese suddenly turn their conversations to English-related topics simply because a foreign person is present? In my hometown, Portland, Oregon, I cannot imagine American passengers on the bus or streetcar turning their conversations to topics like U.S.-Japan trade friction simply because a Japanese-looking ( or Asian ) person happened to be on board. Furthermore, we cannot explain this tendency to change the topic to English, etc. as simply a desire to talk with foreign people. Even if we suppose that some Japanese are interested in Charles McLarty personally, hardly any have actually attempt to strike up a conversation with me. If we are seriously going to attempt an explanation of this phenomenon, it may well be that the words of one well-known Japanese scholar are closest to hitting the mark. He stated that since most Japanese are not used to dealing directly with non-Japanese in daily life, they are unsure what to do when a

foreign person suddenly appears ( Suzuki, 1975 ). Another Japanese linguistics researcher says that, when it comes to awareness of foreign people, the Japanese have a much stronger us versus them mentality than European people, due to Japan's geographical isolation as well as the 200-year long period when foreigners were prohibited from entering Japan ( Akasaka, 1993 ). Although we are over a decade into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the globalization of Japanese people at a personal level still has quite a ways to go. It is this writer's hope that, with increasing exposure to foreign people and the English language, Japanese people's awareness will gradually move in a positive direction.

## Conclusions

The title of this article refers to the deeply ambivalent feelings many Japanese people have about the English language. Indeed, the relationship between the Japanese and English has always been a complicated one. Professor Dougill has pointed out how many Japanese have such a fascination for English that they use it as a "decorative language" The ubiquitous presence of English slogans on clothing, handbags, pencil cases, bumper stickers and wall banners is testimony to this. The fact that much of this English is filled with errors in spelling and grammar (as well as the cases of vulgar or inappropriate usage ) suggests that many of these examples are printed/published without having been checked by a native speaker. The writers were thinking about fashion, not meaning. Fashion or no fashion, having this English checked by a native speaker would have prevented many cases of embarrassment for the Japanese people involved.

Along with this noted fascination for English,

however, is the equally well-documented evidence of an aversion to dealing with English or, at least, live human beings who speak that language. For many Japanese who have studied English for at least six years ( and probably more ) the prospect of suddenly being spoken to in English by a foreign person is, nonetheless, unsettling. Hampered for many decades by an English educational system which has focused on teaching English for exams, not communication, many Japanese lack confidence in speaking English, despite possessing a considerable English vocabulary.

Recently one HIU colleague, himself a foreign language teacher, asked why I don't more often correct the students' English pronunciation. I replied that the most important thing for them in improving their English was communicative ability, not pronunciation. Of course, when a student makes an unintelligible utterance in our class, I do make him or her repeat. In certain cases, katakana pronunciation needs to be corrected. However, slight mispronunciations can be tolerated if the meaning gets across clearly. I have heard some very fluent non-native speakers such as Henry Kissinger, Indira Gandhi and the Dalai Llama and they all made some minor errors in grammar or pronunciation, but their forceful speaking ability and excellent linguistic talent more than made up for these deficiencies. Several years ago I watched an international panel discussion TV show in which Kenichi Omae, a writer of Japanese business advice books took part. Though he made some mistakes in pronunciation, his oral English was fluent and effective. I hope to help some of our HIU students to become effective and fluent English speakers who can get across their ideas cogently, without worrying about minor mistakes in pronunciation. Japan needs more young people who know how to

communicate effectively in English.

## Postscript

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