

“JAPANESE ENGLISH”: A VIRTUAL VARIETY

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Abstract: This paper attempts to raise concerns about the increasingly emphasized need to establish a Japanese variety of English in a society where English was, is, and will remain a foreign language to be taught at schools rather than a second language to be acquired in life. Three different proposals for “Japanese English” that were propounded a few decades ago and have mostly been forgotten by now will be introduced and examined in terms of similarities to and differences from the Kachruvian framework of world Englishes, which has provided theoretical basis for existing varieties of English in formerly colonized territories. Through a critical analysis of the past attempts and failures to develop a Japanese variety of English, this paper will also suggest that the view of English as a “universal” language that underlies the idea of developing and legitimizing varieties of English only guarantees the diversity within the language, potentially undermining linguistic diversity in its broader sense.

Key Words: world Englishes, Japanese English, English as an international language

INTRODUCTION

With more and more people using the English language in their daily lives and still more people aspiring to learn it in public and private institutions, English seems to have secured its position as a global language. An inevitable outcome of a language becoming an international language is the emergence of varieties that are different in forms and functions from the original standard variety. Braj B. Kachru, an Indian-born linguist at the University of Illinois, maintains that the English language formally and functionally has acquired “multicultural identities” and that this sociolinguistic situation can no longer be captured by the term “English,” but rather requires the term “Englishes” (Kachru, 1992, p. 357).

Kachru’s idea of world Englishes, or WE in acronym, has provided theoretical ground for acknowledging the existing varieties in post-colonial territories and encouraged descriptive studies of these varieties and their use as a norm in local English education. In light of the growing awareness and increasing body of research concerning these Englishes from the WE perspective, some researchers are now trying to apply this paradigm to the linguistic communities where English is learned as a foreign language, such as Japan, prompting educators and policy makers in Japan to assert that the Japanese people should also have their own variety of English, Japanese English. Examination of the history of Japan, however, reveals that the demand for establishment of a Japanese variety of English is by no means new.

APPROACHES TO ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE IN JAPAN

English as a National Language

There have been observed two distinct approaches in Japan towards English as an international language. The first is to make English Japan's national language. In Japan, English is not an official language, either in the strict sense or general sense of the term; it is not designated as an official language by any law or regulation, nor is it a common medium of education, government, or business. It was only during the early stage of its modernization in the nineteenth century, the period generally referred to as the age of *Bunmei-Kaika*, or 'Civilization and Enlightenment,' that some politicians and intellectuals proposed to give English the status of a national language and even to replace Japanese with English. Notable examples are Mori Arinori, a politician who later became the first Minister of Education, and Takada Sanae, an educationist who contributed to the foundation of Waseda University (see, e.g., Mori, 1872 [1978]; Takada, 1885 [1978]). Their proposals, however, were not very realistic or attractive for the Japanese school system because many institutions of higher education had already started to replace English with Japanese as a medium of instruction. Ever since the opening of Japan to the outside world, more specifically since 1860, two years after the official opening, English has been the primary *foreign* language taught in Japan.

English as an Auxiliary Language: Demands for Japanese English

The second approach is to regard English as an international *auxiliary* language and to develop Japanese English, a variety of English different from British, American, or other native-speaker varieties. The earliest call for a Japanese variety of English was observed during the Second World War, when Japan was at war with the US and UK and when the English language was thus considered an "enemy language." The status and function of English in education was often debated; some argued, from a nationalistic perspective, for the total abolition of foreign language education while some others insisted, from more of a pragmatic perspective, on its continuation. For example, Shikiba Ryuzaburo, a psychopathologist, argues that English is no longer a monopoly of Britain and America, but an international language that the Japanese can and should make use of (1942 [1978]). Furthermore, Kishida Kunio, a writer and stage director, insists that the Japanese should adapt English for their use without simply imitating American or British English as is (1942 [1978]).

It was not until the 1960s, however, that some intellectuals and linguists began to address more openly the possibility and necessity of forming a Japanese variety of English: a kind of English that the Japanese can master more easily and use more casually for international communication, not just with the American and British people, but also with other speakers of English as a second and foreign language. Among the most prominent proponents of such a variety of English were Oda Makoto (1961; 1989), Suzuki Takao (1971), and Watanabe Takesato (1983), who termed their respective varieties Englanto, Englic, and Japalish.

Oda is probably better-known now as a symbolic leader of *Be-Hei-Ren* (*Betonamu [Vietnam] ni heiwa wo rengo*), or 'Peaceful Vietnam Movement,' in the 1960s and 1970s, than as a protagonist for Japanese English. After studying in the US as a Fulbright scholar, he traveled abroad extensively throughout Asia, Africa, Europe, and

other parts of the globe, engaging in peace movements. Witnessing many people communicating in English without caring about their accents or pronunciation and without hesitating to incorporate words and expressions from their mother tongue increasingly convinced him of the need to re-conceptualize English as a global medium of communication instead of as a language of the US, UK, or any other particular nation. Oda propounded the concept of Englanto, the portmanteau word he coined by combining English and Esperanto (Oda, 1961). According to him, it was meant to be a “convenient language” that could be used widely around the world, just like English, and that could embrace any culture, including Japanese culture, just like Esperanto, which is supposedly a culture-free language (Oda, 1989, p. 42). Contrasting Englanto with the so-called Basic English of Ogden, which he considered to have resulted from the paternalistic attitudes of English speakers toward non-English speakers, Oda emphasized that if any simplification of the grammar or syntax occurred in Englanto, it should emerge naturally from its speakers and not from the paternalism on the part of native English speakers (ibid., p. 89).

Suzuki, a sociologist of language and professor emeritus at Keio University, also proposed a similar concept, Englic, to describe a variety of English that is not specifically associated with American or British cultures but is used as an “international auxiliary language” (1971, p. 5). With a thorough reform of English education in Japan in mind, he intended that this concept should be a prescription to heal what is generally referred to as an ‘English complex’ of Japanese learners. Claiming that the relationship between Japan and the Western nations had shifted from the “vertical,” unidirectional inflow of information, to the “horizontal,” multinational exchange of information on equal terms, he insisted that the Japanese must change their communication style with non-Japanese speaking people from what he called the “receiver” mode to the “sender” mode, in which they should express more about their own culture by using their own variety of English (1999 [2000], p. 75).

Watanabe’s Japalish is, as are Oda’s Englanto and Suzuki’s Englic, intended to validate “a kind of English that is heavily influenced by Japanese” and to encourage more active cross-cultural communication between the Japanese and non-Japanese peoples (1983, p. 57). While Oda and Suzuki’s proposals were more of a theoretical or ideological nature, Watanabe presented specific elements for his Japalish to be distinctive and yet intelligible in international communication. Table 1 below shows some typical examples of what Watanabe termed “Japalish”(ibid.):

Table 1: Examples of ‘Japalish’²

Pronunciation	/sink/ for both “sink” and “think”; /lais/ for both “lice” and “rice” /indikt/ for ‘indict’ (/indait/)
Accent	No distinction between “desert” (n) and “desert” (v)
<i>Gairaigo</i> (words of foreign origin)	<i>arubaito</i> (arbeit [= part-time job]); back-mirror [= rearview mirror]

Syntax and pragmatics	“The sun climbs up”; “He live in Tokyo”; “I think he is not honest.”; “Don’t you like coffee?” “No, I like coffee.”
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Watanabe maintains that in a concrete context of conversation the Japalish pronunciation, words and phrases, and expressions would not lead to communicative breakdown as long as both parties in conversation are willing to understand one another. His prediction in the 1980s was that in another few decades the use of Japalish would no longer be considered “errors” in English but an independent variety of English widely used among the Japanese. This prediction has not come to past, at least at this time. The Japanese variety of English he envisaged is still regarded not just by Japanese teachers of English, but also by their students, as typical errors to be avoided.

JAPANESE ENGLISH AND WORLD ENGLISHES

Now we can see some noticeable similarities between these proposals for Japanese English and the Kachruvian concept of world Englishes that first appeared in the late 1970s and have gained recognition only recently. First, both ideas originated from the proponents’ keen awareness of the implication and significance that the global spread of English carries, such as the rapid increase of non-native English speakers overwhelming native speakers and the increasing contacts between the language and the diverse cultures around the world. It is also notable that the advocates of Japanese English, just like Kachru and other protagonists of world Englishes, aim for “liberation” from the Anglo-centric conceptualization of global English even though, technically speaking, Japan was never under colonial rule and was in no need of winning political or linguistic independence. They seem to genuinely consider English as a culturally and politically *neutral* medium for international communication.

Nevertheless, these proposals failed to take hold in the mainstream of Japanese discourse on English education or language policy. Two possible factors can be mentioned here. First, while the concept of world Englishes generally has concrete referents or denotations, namely, Sri Lankan English or Chicano English, the concept of Japanese English, whether it is to be called Englanto, Englic, or Japalish, is more of a hypothetical concept, a virtual variety as it were. While almost all Japanese study English for at least six years starting in secondary school, it was, and still is, largely for test preparation, especially preparation for college entrance examinations, that most students learn the language. Most see little real communicative need to use English outside the classroom and rarely consider the language as part of their linguistic repertoire. The aforementioned examples by Watanabe are for the most part individual variations that appear and disappear in the course of learning and that do not constitute a systematic and rule-governed variety of language.

The other reason that the proposals for a Japanese variety of English could not gather much support was cultural as well as historical. It should not be overlooked that the majority of Japanese learners themselves, despite their almost painful efforts to acquire native-like fluency, are not interested in and rather feel embarrassed about using such a variety as Japanese English even though some intellectuals and scholars assert that it

would be easier for Japanese learners to master and more convenient to use. In fact, not a few books and magazine articles criticize the use of *Wasei Eigo*, ‘words of foreign origin,’ as “Englishized” Japanese rather than “Japanized” English, and some even ridicule the “wrong” use and usage of English among the Japanese. These negative attitudes toward Japanese English seem to indicate that English is for most Japanese not just a pragmatic tool of communication and learning, but rather a sort of cultural and social icon, or a brand, which they think represents the cultures and speakers of the language, namely, Western-Caucasian cultures of Europe and America. The English that most Japanese learners strive to master, therefore, is the kind spoken in countries or areas that they generally respect, admire, or even idolize.

The persistently high esteem that Japanese learners of English hold for the traditional ENL, or English as a native language, countries is evident, for instance, in the popularity of study-abroad programs, especially in American and British institutions; according to statistics, of those who went abroad for the purpose of study in 2000, 45% went to the US and 14% to the UK (MOJ, 2001). The inclinations toward ENL is also apparent in the strong preference for native English speakers as instructors and teachers in private institutions; other statistics show that people of non-Japanese nationalities occupy over 80% of overall full-time instructors in private language schools, 90% of which are primarily or exclusively offering English conversation classes (METI, 2002). The fact that English classes in the formal education system are taught mainly by Japanese teachers (i.e., non-native speakers of English) seems to further drive learners to such private institutions, which are located virtually all over the country.

While obviously these Anglo-centric attitudes should not be encouraged, the creation of a new variety of English where only individual variations exist would not be a solution to the problem. In Japan, as in other EFL, or English as a foreign language, environments, there are those who have a good command of English, on the one hand, and many others who have forgotten almost everything about English that they learned in school, on the other. It is, in fact, most likely that the demands for creating a Japanese variety of English come from the former, that is, those who have mastered the language. The resultant Japanese English could thus be based on the criteria which fluent speakers establish for non-fluent speakers, just like the aforementioned Basic English.

Even more problematic is the view of language underlying these and other proposals for Japanese English: strong emphasis on so-called “communicative English” and insistence on neutrality of English. The proponents of Japanese English tend to emphasize fluency over accuracy, face-to-face conversation over textual interpretation, and “real-life” use over test preparations. Such a communicative orientation of English language teaching, however, especially in a society where English serves few ‘real-life’ functions, easily translates into the preference for *Eikaiwa*, or ‘English conversation,’ classrooms, to which Japanese learners of English come to encounter native English speakers just to enjoy “daily-life conversation” with them. In other words, contrary to the original aim of developing a Japanese variety of English that is different and independent from American or British English, emphasis on fostering communicative ability in English among Japanese learners would lead to an even greater demand for native-speaking instructors who people assume can teach “authentic” English. To cite an example, Funabashi Yoichi (2000), the chief diplomatic corre

spondent for *Asahi Shimbun* and one of the most active supporters of Japanese English, argues for inviting English instructors from countries other than the UK and US and quickly adds that they should be “native speakers” of English. Moreover, with the English language activities introduced into the elementary school curriculum, more and more schools are seeking native-English-speaking instructors to take charge of language classes in partnership with Japanese elementary school teachers who have never taught English before. The promoters of Japanese English tend also to stress that the English language is a neutral medium of communication. They argue that the numerical predominance of non-native speakers over native speakers of English and of communicative situations involving non-native speakers over those involving native and non-native speakers ensures communication on fully equal terms among all parties involved. Needless to say, however, the fact that one quarter of the world’s population speak English as a first or second language, as they often prefer to emphasize, also means that the rest of the population do not; for the latter group of people, English is obviously not a neutral medium but rather an obstacle. The further promotion of English as a supposedly neutral language in international politics and business could eventually alienate the non-English speaking general public from such domains.

CONCLUSION

Although there have been several attempts to create and establish a Japanese variety of English in the past few decades, as we have seen so far, none has succeeded in gaining popular support in Japanese society. Reconsidering these proposals in light of the global expansion of English and the ecology of language has revealed the foresight of their advocates as well as their uncritical acceptance and promotion of English as *the* global language. English is only one of many languages in the world, and treating English as if there were no other foreign language for the Japanese and treating English as a language of the world, of Asia, and of Japan, contradicts our efforts to attain and maintain a linguistically pluralistic state where, ideally, all languages of the world are in a healthy state with a sufficient number of speakers and where people have the right to complete their education in their native language. The diversity realized as a result of extending the range and frequency of English use, speakers’ appropriating the language to themselves, and developing and legitimating new Englishes, is not linguistic diversity in the proper sense of the phrase; it is simply-“diversity” within a single language, English.

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