

English and the Paradoxical Social Structure of Japan

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英語受容と日本の社会構造

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要 約

グローバル化の進展とともに、国際語としての英語は、世界の至る所でますますその重要性を増している。アジア諸国においても、英語教育推進を目的とした国家レベルの言語対策がなされ、日本でも2002年文部科学省により外国語を対象とする初めての言語政策「英語が話せる日本人育成のための戦略構想」、2003年「英語が話せる日本人のための行動計画」が策定された。本小論では、一見すると英語で溢れ返っているように見える日本における日常生活での英語の受容は限られているということを日本の社会構造と関連付けて論じる。

1. Introduction

Once boundaries defined social life (Douglas, 1973). Geographical and conceptual boundaries confined people in their limited sphere in the past, and accessibility to the outer world was somewhat limited. However, the surge in technical innovation has accelerated interactions among people with different cultural and/or national backgrounds. As a consequence, globalization has broadened the horizon and blurred geographical, conceptual, social, political and economic borders. Information technology further makes it possible to communicate without being bounded by national borders, space or time. Along with these changes, English has become one of the most needed and most commonly used communication tools in the world.

This dominance of English is clearly seen in the 2010 Best Global Brands chart (Interbrand, 2010), which lists the world's most valuable brands according to the latest Business Week/Interbrand survey. It shows that nine out of the ten best brand companies are owned in the U.S.A., where the main language is English. Coca Cola (its brand value is US \$70 billion) is ranked number one, followed by IBM (\$64 billion), Microsoft (\$60 billion), Google (\$43 billion) and General Electric (\$42 billion). Among the top 50, approximately 60% of the companies have their headquarters in the U.S.A. This is one of the many examples which show the power of the English language in the modern world.

Rank	Brand	Country/Region	Sector
1	Coca Cola	United States	Beverages
2	IBM	United States	Business Services
3	Microsoft	United States	Computer Software
4	Google	United States	Internet Services
5	General Electric	United States	Diversified
6	McDonald's	United States	Restaurants
7	Intel	United States	Electronics
8	Nokia	Finland	Electronics
9	Disney	United States	Media
10	Hewlett-Packard	United States	Electronics

Chart 1: "2010 Ranking of Best Top 100 Brands"

2. English and National Language Policy

As the importance of the English language grows, more countries are putting English at the center of their language policies, and Japan is no exception. In 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereinafter, MEXT) drew up its first official foreign language policy: "A Strategic Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities.'" In the

following year, 2003, “An Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’” was set in motion. Atsuko Toyama, the Minister of MEXT at that time, explains about the establishment of the Action Plan (MEXT, 2003):

Globalization extends to various activities of individuals as well as to the business world. Each individual has increasing opportunities to come in contact with the global market and services, and participate in international activities. It has become possible for anyone to become active on a world level.

Furthermore, due to progress in the information technology revolution, a wide range of activities, from daily life to economic activities, are being influenced by the movement to a knowledge-based society driven by the forces of knowledge and information. Thus, there is a strong demand for the abilities to obtain and understand knowledge and information as well as the abilities to transmit information and to engage in communication.

In such a situation, English has played a central role as the common international language in linking people who have different mother tongues. For children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language. In addition, English abilities are important in terms of linking our country with the rest of the world, obtaining the world’s understanding and trust, enhancing our international presence and further developing our nation.

There is no doubt that English is the foreign language that is needed most and promoted most in Japan. However, MEXT is fighting an uphill battle, for English has long occupied a rather marginal position in Japan. At first glance, English is very much accepted and appreciated by the Japanese people and highly valued by their society, though closer scrutiny will reveal that the acceptance of English is rather limited. This short paper demonstrates that those contradictory views of English reflect the paradoxical social structure of Japan.

Several scholars (Maruyama, 1959; Kosakai, 1996) have pointed out that Japanese society is open, but at the same time closed to the outer world. This duality can be detected in the ideology of English in Japan. Here, “ideology” refers to the meanings that are shared both consciously and unconsciously among the members of a society, which support a certain social structure. Japanese see English as an indispensable communication tool at one level (i.e., they are open to English), but simultaneously, English plays a very limited role in their daily lives (i.e., they are closed to English).

There is no doubt that the importance of English has been recognized for a long period of time. However, English education in Japan has been criticized as not being effective enough. The major claim is that the focus is too much on grammar and translation; thus most students, even after

completing six years of study, still have trouble communicating using the language. Responding to those long-standing criticisms, as mentioned above, the government initiated its 2002 “Strategic Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities,’” putting strong emphasis on “communicative ability” and “practicality.”

The establishment of this language policy was a result of both external and internal forces. One of the biggest changes made in the Japanese English education was to introduce English to elementary school students. This change was obviously caused by the pressure of neighboring countries. In China, for example, English is taught from the fourth grade in most public elementary schools, and some elementary schools in the cities have even been offering English as a regular subject for first graders since 2003. In the case of South Korea, English has been required from the third grade of elementary school since 1997. By the end of the sixth grade, the Korean students are supposed to have received as much English education as a Japanese ninth grader has (i.e., the third grade of junior high school, Kawai, 2005:15).

Fear of being left behind because of the “advanced” English education of the nearby countries made early introduction of English inevitable. In Japan, it used to be the case that formal English education started when a person entered junior high school. However, to survive in the era of international “mega-competition” and enhance Japan’s presence in the world, English education (or to use MEXT’s term, “English activities”¹) has been moved forward to fifth and sixth graders in elementary school as of April, 2011.

Furthermore, the need for English in the business world, as outlined by entities such as Japan’s Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren in Japanese) acted as a catalyst for the government’s new language policy. “Regarding the Personnel Development in the Age of Globalization” (Keidanren, 2000), a report published by the Federation, proposed to strengthen English education by putting its focus on “communication.” The report suggests, for instance, putting more emphasis on “English conversation” in the English education to foster Japanese English speakers.

The Federation also recommended that schools increase the number of native-speaker instructors and advised companies to use official English exams such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) when making decisions regarding hiring and promotion. As several scholars (Erikawa, 2009; Mizuno, 2008; Saito 2007) have pointed out, the 2003 MEXT policy adopted many suggestions that this report proposed. Thus, both the neighboring rival countries’ language policies and the proposals made by the Japanese business world pushed the Japanese government to set up the new language policy to strengthen English education in Japan.

3. Communicative Ability as the Ultimate Goal

The curriculum changes in junior high school (which will go into effect in 2013) and high school visibly reflect the shifted focus (i.e., more emphasis on communicative ability). In the case of junior high school, the number of hours of English classes will be increased from 3 to 4 hours per week, and the required vocabulary will jump from 900 words to 1,200 words in 2012. When they teach vocabulary, the teachers are expected to give special attention to both spelling and pronunciation to make the words useful in actual “communication.” Moreover, the teachers are expected to give all the grammar instruction in relation to actual-language use. All of these instructions from MEXT show that the expected outcome is the improvement of the students’ “communicative ability.”

Old Curriculum		New Curriculum	
Name of the Subject	Credits	Name of the Subject	Credits
English I *	3	Communicative English Basic	2
English II	4	Communicative English I **	3
Oral Communication I*	2	Communicative English II	4
Oral Communication II	4	Communicative English III	4
Reading	4	English Expression I	2
Writing	4	English Expression II	4
-	-	English Conversation	2

* Elective

** Compulsory

Chart 2: Curriculum Guidelines for High School English (MEXT , 2009)

The new emphasis on “practicality” can also be seen in the changed subject names of the high school curriculum; from “reading” and “writing” to “expression” and “conversation.” (see Chart 2) Additionally, high school English teachers are expected to conduct their lessons entirely in English from the beginning of 2013. Undoubtedly, after the introduction of the new language policy, a stronger emphasis on improving communicative ability is apparent in the changes made in the English education from elementary to high school.

Not only MEXT officials but also Japanese companies and Japanese people in general support and promote English as a means of international communication. Uniqlo, a famous fashion company, announced that English will become the official language of the company beginning in March of 2012. According to Mr. Tadashi Yanai, the president of the company, this change is needed in order to survive the stiff competition in the world market. The company also plans to increase the percentage of non-Japanese employees to 50% of the company’s workforce. Another company, Rakuten, one of the largest online merchandisers, also announced in 2010 that English

would be adopted as the company's official language by the end of 2012 for all the employees, regardless of their status or position. The president of the company, Mr. Hiroshi Mikitani, also promised that if board members could not master English within two years, they would be fired. This announcement was widely reported by the media and interpreted as a sign of the importance of English in the business world.

The importance of English is recognized by the parents of school-age children as well. When MEXT conducted a study in 2004,² 70.7% of the parents surveyed agreed that English should be required in elementary school. Among the parents who favored starting English education in elementary school, 83.76% responded that it is good to become accustomed to English through games and music at an early age so that the children will feel less stress when they start studying English in junior high school. Other research conducted by the Benesse Educational Research and Development Center (2006) found a similar result: 76.4% of parents in the study felt favorably toward starting English in elementary school, and 87.1% of them thought that the ability to speak English in the globalized world is important. As globalization proceeds, the recognition of the importance of English in the Japanese government, in companies and among parents has accelerated.

4. Paradoxical Reality of English Acceptance

It is clear that English is welcomed in Japan on one level. However, on another level, English is not so highly appreciated, especially in people's daily lives. One of the biggest obstacles to promoting English is the lack of opportunity to speak English. MEXT apparently recognizes this fact; that is why MEXT in its language policy called for increasing opportunities to use English at "conversation salons and speech contests as well as exchange activities with foreign students centering on schools." It also promotes the hiring of "native English speakers as regular teachers with a goal of 1,000 foreign instructors in junior and senior high schools in the future." Increasing overseas study opportunities for high school students is also part of their agenda, with a target of 10,000 students per year studying abroad.

The lack of opportunity to use English is even observed in Japan-based companies that plan to make English the company's official language. As mentioned above, Rakuten has announced that English will become its official language by the end of 2012. However, in 2009, 99% of Rakuten's trading volume was within Japan and only 1% overseas (Torikai, 2010:12). Moreover, the company plans to use English even for meetings attended only by Japanese-speaking employees. Mr. Mikitani, the president of Rakuten, says that all the company's documents will eventually be produced in English.³ Thus, an urgent need for everyone to use English cannot be seen here.

A survey conducted in Hokkaido (Naito, et al., 2005) involving 1,085 workers shows a similar tendency towards the use of English. The research revealed that approximately 95% of the

respondents did not use English on a daily basis; only 4.7% of workers responded that they utilized English every day at the work place. Here again, it is clear that the use of English even at a work place is rather limited.⁴

Furthermore, examining the countries of origin of visitors to Japan does not justify the priority given only to English either. In 2010, for example, nearly 76% of the foreign visitors to Japan were from other Asian countries: 28.3% of visitors came from South Korea followed by Chinese (16.4%) and Taiwanese (14.7%).⁵ Reflecting this distribution of nationalities, tour bus company Hato Bus, for example, runs various sightseeing bus tours in Chinese and Korean, in addition to Japanese and English. Department stores, as well, have started services targeting non-English speakers. Mainichi Newspaper (2010) reported that Takashimaya department store in Osaka has operated a Chinese translation service for shoppers since September of 2010. The department store staff says that Chinese are the most frequent visitors and the store plans to broaden the services offered to them. It is true that English can be a useful medium of communication even for visitors from other Asian countries, but those examples illustrate the need for other foreign languages, particularly Korean and Chinese, in addition to English.⁶

5. Mechanisms to Keep English Outside of the Traditional Domain

The lack of opportunity to use English is a reflection of the fact that the main language used in Japan is Japanese. It is crucial to note that MEXT's language policy calls not only for promoting the study of English but also for encouraging the study of the Japanese language. The subtitle of the language policy states that the plan is "to improve English and Japanese abilities." It further states that "the basis of social life comes into existence by the national language (i.e., Japanese)" and that "Japanese is the basis and the core of its culture." The government also assumes that the acquisition of English will be impossible without having enough knowledge of the national language. In other words, MEXT promotes English learning but recognizes Japanese as being of far greater importance than English.

This emphasis on the national language, Japanese, is undoubtedly observed in English classrooms. There is a heavy dependence on translation when one teaches English in junior high schools, senior high schools and even in universities. Often, in the English classrooms, each sentence will be put into Japanese along with a detailed grammatical explanation by the teacher. For most of the lesson the language you'll hear being spoken in class is Japanese, not English. "The heavy dependence on translation is almost like a protective barrier against direct contact with 'real' English" (Hyde: 2002:16). Thus, the most weight is placed on Japanese, not English, both in the government's language policy and in the English classrooms.

It is true that if you wander around Japanese cities, you will see various forms of "English" in advertisements, in magazines, on radio and on television. This might give you the impression

that English is flourishing in the society. However, if you look closer, most usage of English has only an emblematic function. In other words, often English is not used for communication but for decoration. This is why most English appears as words but not in full sentences. For example, English (or English-like) words are used in the names of cars (March, Fit, Galant, Prius, Insight, etc.), drinks (Pocari Sweat, Wanda, Teao, Nuda, etc.), shampoos (Scalp D, Merit, Asience, Super Mild, etc.) and so on. However, it is almost never used to explain the product's use. In this sense, Hyde (2002:13) is right in saying that “. . . English conveys a fashionable, desirable image, whether it is understood or not.”

Those emblematic uses of English most often appear in “non-traditional” products. A closer look at the coffee and Japanese tea bottles sold in Japan, as an example, illustrates the point. Although coffee is part of many Japanese people's lives today, it originated in a foreign land. Accordingly, the retail packaging of coffee uses lots of English. Most companies put their corporation names and product names in English. The coffee bottles bear names such as “Rainbow Mountain Blend,” “Good Start Blend,” “Double-Shot” and “European.” By contrast, Japanese green tea has been part of Japanese culture for centuries, if not millennia. Interestingly, English characters disappear on these “traditional” drinking bottles. For example, only Japanese words are used on the Itoen, Suntory and Sapporo Japanese tea bottles. The same phenomenon is observed on other companies' Japanese tea containers.

A similar demarcation can be perceived in other occasions and places in Japan. For instance, at “western-style” weddings, English signs and songs will often be used, especially among young couples. At the reception, the names of the bride and groom will be printed in English. By contrast, if it is a “Japanese-style” wedding at a shrine, most (if not all) of those Western elements will not be present. In this sense, it can be said that English has not fully “invaded” (or been entirely accepted into) the traditional arena despite the official promotion of the language.

Katakana⁷ also prevents English from coming into the core (traditional) domain of the Japanese culture. Foreign words are often written in Roman characters or in katakana, so that it becomes obvious that they do not originate in Japan. Being written in katakana, the words become visually different from non-foreign vocabulary. This is one of the ways to keep foreign forces (in this case, English) in the “buffer zone” without allowing them to enter the traditional domains of Japanese culture.

Katakana not only isolates those foreign words from the Japanese language but also helps the word to “adapt” into a form that is acceptable to Japanese. It might not be too much to say that English transforms itself into Japanese in the process of being accepted. In the course of being accepted into Japanese, words often change their forms, pronunciation and meanings. In katakana, “taxi” turns into “タクシー (takushi),” “bargain” becomes “バーゲン (bagen)” and “computer” is converted into “コンピユータ (kompyuta)” in Japanese (or Japanese English). As for the meaning

change, “dead heat” in Japanese-English, for instance, changes its meaning to “a heated race” without retaining the original meaning. It is worth noting that those adapted words mostly describe things outside of the traditional aspects of Japan.

In conclusion, despite the strong promotion and need for English expressed by the government and by people in general, it has become apparent that English has a very limited role in the Japanese society and its use is very often emblematic (i.e., English is not used for communication). Furthermore, the foreign language policy set by MEXT promotes not only English but also Japanese language. The “excessive use of Japanese” in the English classrooms could be seen as a reflection of the significance attached to the national language. Katakana also hinders the direct acceptance of English into the society, keeping those “non-Japanese” lexes separated from Japanese. Consequently, Japanese are very open to English, seeing the language as a means of international communication and welcoming the promotion of the language; concurrently, they are closed to applying English fully to their everyday lives. In short, the paradoxical social structure of Japanese society is clearly perceived in the partial acceptance of English in Japan.

Notes

- 1 It is important to note that MEXT does not require English as a formal subject in elementary school. The main aim is not to study the language but to help the students get used to the English language through activities such as games and songs.
- 2 The survey was conducted among parents whose children are in the fourth and sixth grades and among the teachers who teach the intended students. The total number of respondents was 10,000. See *Asahi Newspaper* (2005) for details.
- 3 For the details, see *Toyo Keizai Weekly*.
- 4 This does not deny the importance of English or the fact that Japan’s language policy is aimed at grooming future generations.
- 5 For details, see the Japan National Tourism Organization home page.
- 6 The question remains why the official language policy promotes only English but not other foreign languages such as Korean or Chinese. As space is limited, I’ll leave the question for other occasions.
- 7 The Japanese writing system is composed of katakana, hiragana, kanji and the Latin alphabet (rōmaji). Katakana is a set of phonograms mainly used for imported words.

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