

[Research Notes]

Some Perspectives on the Phenomenon of “Engrish”

Jayne Hildebrand IKESHIMA *

Printed English seems to be everywhere in Japan, on products, on signs, and in advertising. At a closer glance, much of the English seen is at best odd, and at worst incomprehensible. This type of printed English has come to be called “Engrish.” In today’s world, users of English have come to outnumber native speakers, and it is increasingly difficult to draw lines between correct, creative, and incorrect English. The question is raised whether Engrish is in fact a new variety of English, and actual examples of Engrish are evaluated and analyzed. I conclude that Engrish is basically an advertising phenomenon rather than a means of communication, but even so, it is not without merit, being both creative and fresh, giving us a new way of looking at English, and deserving of further research.

Introduction

No one can be in Japan for long and fail to notice that printed English seems to be everywhere. One sees it on signs, in advertisements, on vending machines, and on numerous products for sale. English words, surrounded as they are by Chinese characters and Japanese syllabary, tend to draw a native speaker’s eyes like a magnet.

* Jayne Hildebrand IKESHIMA ジーン・ヒルデブランド・イケシマ：敬愛大学国際学部
専任講師 英語

Lecturer of English, Faculty of International Studies, Keiai University.

Most people would generally agree that the common purpose of printed language is to convey some sort of message. We might further reason that this would best be accomplished through attention to grammatical and syntactic elements of the language in order to assure a certain accuracy of meaning.

However, the English seen in Japan—primarily on products, but in other venues as well—often leaves one baffled. Much of it is at best odd, and at worst incomprehensible. It abounds with mechanical, grammatical, and lexical errors, which contribute in varying degrees to obscuring the meaning.

The type of English described above, found in advertising and on products, is a well-documented phenomenon which has been noted by many. It has even acquired a technical name—“Engrish.” An Internet search for the word Engrish produced 453,000 hits, many of them websites devoted to Engrish and containing photos and examples. Wikipedia, an Internet encyclopedia, defines Engrish as “a slang term which in its purest form, refers to poor-quality attempts by Japanese writers to create English words and phrases; whether in mistranslation of an original Japanese language text, or in an attempt to create an original text in the English language.” It goes on to note that Engrish is most often considered by English speakers to be a humorous misuse of English. Engrish also refers to “the deliberately careless or mistaken use of English words in advertising, for example, as an exotic embellishment” (Wikipedia, 2005).

Unlike some similar terms, such as “Japlish” or “Janglish,” which are considered more derogatory, the term “Engrish” is thought to be more neutral and in theory can be applied to humorous misuse of English from any country, not necessarily Japan.

However, drawing lines between standard “correct” English, creative use of English, and incorrect English has become increasingly difficult in today’s world, not to mention controversial. Consider the following: Kubota notes that the estimated number of English speakers throughout the world ranges from a figure of 700–800 million to a more encom-

passing figure of two billion (2001). Kachru further notes that the English-using population of Asia is estimated at 350 million, which is almost equivalent to the total populations of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada combined (Kachru 1997, from Kubota 2001), and that the “worldwide ratio of non-native speakers of English to native speakers is somewhere between two and four to one” (Kachru 1996, from Kubota 2001).

In other words, non-native users of English now outnumber native speakers. For better or worse, English has become a multinational language, and the lingua franca of today’s world. It is the language used in 70% of scientific publications, the working language in most international organizations, and the most taught foreign language in the world (Leffa, 2002). It is the language of air-traffic controllers and of captains at sea. It is essential to conducting international business. In fact, the majority of people who are learning English today are probably learning it not so much for the purpose of communicating with native speakers as for the purpose of communicating with other non-native speakers.

It is the linguistic nature of any widely-used language to change and evolve over time. This is influenced by many factors, including the people who use the language and the differing environments, locales, and cultural backgrounds in which the language is used. This type of language evolution has certainly happened with respect to English. In fact, there exist so many varieties of English in today’s world that the different varieties are now referred to as “Englishes” (Kachru 1986, from Leffa 2002).

In a world in which there are “Englishes,” what constitutes “standard” English? Whose English is “standard” English? And should there even be a “standard” English? These are complex questions. According to Pennycook, “the main issue of debate is whether efforts should be made to maintain a central standard of English or whether the different varieties of English should be acknowledged as legitimate forms in their own right” (Pennycook, 1995). Kachru, on one side of the

debate, argues that “native speakers of this language seem to have lost the exclusive prerogative to control its standardization” (Kachru 1985, in Pennycook 1995). This would seem to support the concept of each “English” being a “legitimate form in its own right.” Quirk (Quirk 1985, from Pennycook 1995), on the other hand, holds that the existence of standards “is an endemic feature of our mortal condition and that people feel alienated and disoriented if a standard seems to be missing in any of these areas,” which would appear to support the idea of maintaining a “standard” English.

Crystal (from *The Futurist*, 2000) points out that there is a standard for written English and states that this standard “guarantees mutual written intelligibility, first within individual countries, then internationally.” However, he then goes on to point out that “a standard spoken English does not yet exist to accommodate speakers who learned English in different cultural environments.”

Whether having a standard spoken English would be beneficial or feasible to the world at large seems to be a moot point, considering that the current trend is toward the recognition of many “Englishes.” Borrowing from the popular slogan, “Think globally, act locally,” Pakir (from Goswami 2003) has suggested that we think in terms of “glocal” English—English that is “going global while maintaining local roots.” “Glocal English” is seen by some as a sort of backlash against the global takeover of the English language and is a term which represents an English with international status but which also exhibits local characteristics.

Which brings us back to the issue of “Engrish.” Given recent world developments in the nature and spread of English, is the “English” found in Japan actually a type of “glocal” English? Might it be considered a variety of English, and if so, is the term Engrish in fact a somewhat derogatory one?

Text Analysis

Before attempting to answer these questions, it is necessary to examine some actual examples of English found in Japan. By English, I mean printed English which may seem odd or strange to a native speaker, and which has been found on products and signs, primarily for the purposes of decoration, explanation of the product, or advertising. The examples will be analyzed in terms of accuracy and correctness. By accuracy, I mean the ability of a writer to approach a meaningful expression in English (as opposed to pure nonsense). By correctness, I mean a broadly defined grammatical correctness. Combining these two concepts should allow for evaluation of both meaning and form in the examples chosen.

Much of the English found suffers from errors of a purely mechanical nature. Consider the following examples.

-(On a T-shirt, just beneath a drawing of many pairs of eye-glasses) “GRASSES”
(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=grasses.jpg&category=Clothing&date=2005-02-14>)

Here, a spelling error is responsible for an amusing change in meaning. The error can be attributed to a phonological difference between English and Japanese. Whereas English has both an “l” sound and an “r” sound, Japanese has one sound which serves for both “l” and “r” in Japanese transcriptions of English words.

-(On a mouse pad) “ORANGE MOUTH PAD”
(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=pad.jpg&category=Computer&date=2004-01-14>)

Here again, a spelling error is due to a phonological difference. The katakana syllable used for both English “th” and “s” is

pronounced “su,” which reproduces neither English sound accurately.

-(Sign on a store building) “We are happy to sarve you!”
(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=wake-up-your-energy.jpg&category=Buildings&date=2004-12-27>)

The word “sarve” should be, of course, “serve.” In this case, the error is due to the fact that Japanese has five vowel sounds, whereas English has eleven, meaning that the English vowel sounds cannot all be transcribed accurately. The English “er” sound in “serve” is transcribed in Japanese as “ah.”

In fact, many errors seen in printed English are due to phonological differences of a similar type. It is often impossible to guess, from a katakana transcription of an English word, just what the original English spelling of the word might be. In addition, English spelling is irregular, and it can be difficult (especially for a non-native speaker) to guess what the correct spelling of a word is from simply hearing the word pronounced.

A different type of mechanical error is illustrated by the example below:

-(On a memo pad) “What flavor do you want?” (observed by author)

This error is due to transcriptional differences between English and Japanese. Written Japanese words can be divided at any point within the words since the kanji, hiragana, and katakana symbols which make up the words represent entire syllables. The syllables in English words, on the other hand, are made up of individual letters, and word division follows prescribed rules which can vary from word to word. A word of one syllable, such as “want,” cannot be divided.

Many errors found were grammatical in nature.

(On a car window sticker) “Baby is on a car.”

(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=baby-on-a-car.jpg&category=Signs/Posters&date=2003-04-30>)

Obviously, the preposition “on” should be “in.” Additionally, on signs of this nature, articles (in this case “a”) are usually omitted.

(On a container) “Let’s get along with me!”

(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=bits3copy.jpg&category=Containers&date=2001-02-20>)

(On a letter-set) “Let’s play with us!” (observed by author)

(On a letter-set) “Let’s join us!” (observed by author)

(On a bag) “Let’s enjoy your life.”

(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=selection.jpg&category=Bags/Packaging&date=2004-11-02>)

Errors concerning the word “let’s” (a contraction of “let us”) are quite common among Japanese speakers of English and often consist of sentences which employ a verb but with what would normally seem a redundant or incorrect object.

(On a clothing price tag) “Our clothes makes healthy and sexy impression to us. It transforms yourself completely, and giving you happy times.”

(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=happytimes.jpg&category=Clothing&date=2002-01-14>)

(On a folder) “TWO DOGS. They are fortunate. They are very good friends. However, it sometimes quarrels. But it becomes reconciled immediately.” (observed by author)

Although there is more than one type of error in the examples above, the errors in pronoun referencing are the ones which are the most prominent—and confusing.

One of the most difficult aspects of English is its system of count nouns, non-count nouns, and articles. Not surprisingly,

many errors found concerned these points.

(On a package of cookies) “Butter waffles is the traditional European cookie.” (observed by author)

Unless there is only one type of traditional European cookie, the word “the” should be replaced with “a.” In addition, there is subject-verb disagreement.

(Inside label of a shirt) “THIS GARMENT IS BEST FOR A PERSON EVER SEEKING GOOD TIME IN LIFE.”
(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=goodtimegarment.jpg&category=Clothing&date=2003-02-25>)

The article “a” should normally precede “good time.”

(On a shirt) “Pract always give you many dynamism. But you aren’t making use of it.”
(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=pract.jpg&category=Clothing&date=2003-01-08>)

Apart from the fact that the word “dynamism” seems a bit odd here, grammatically it is a non-count noun and cannot be preceded by “many.”

(Sign on a gate) “BE CAREFUL OF THE BEE!”
(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=beecareful.jpg&category=Signs/Posters&date=2002-08-18>)

Unless there is only one bee, the word should be “bees.”

(On a child’s plate) “CHERRY BEAR. Hey! Friends!!! You want to have a red cheek like me? Oh, You do? Come on...Let’s enjoy cherry together.”
(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=cherrybear.jpg&category=Household%20Items&date=2002-10-16>)

By grammatical convention, body features and objects which normally occur in pairs (eyes, arms, shoes, etc.) are referred to in the plural, unless only one of them is meant. In the above the phrase should be “have red cheeks.” In addition, the word “cherry” in the last sentence should be “cherries.”

-(On a bag) “Weed is strong!! WEED. The flowerbed is overgrown with weeds.”

(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=weedisstrong.jpg&category=Bags/Packaging&date=2004-02-09>)

While there is nothing wrong with the last sentence, the first one flouts a grammatical convention. In English, statements of generally accepted facts are made using the plural or non-count forms of nouns, i.e., “Books are interesting” or “Work is good.” By this convention, the first statement should read, “Weeds are strong.”

Another aspect of English usage which seems to cause confusion is the use of adverbs and adjectives to modify nouns and verbs.

-(On a shopping bag) “Cuteness puppy.” (observed by author)

Although nouns often act as adjectives to modify other nouns (toothbrush, apple tree), a noun which ends in “ness” cannot normally act as an adjective.

-(On a notebook) “We’re a purely couple.” (observed by author)

Grammatically, “purely” should normally be “pure.”

-(On a folder) “Let’s go to the island. It’s so beautiful world.” (observed by author)

Instead of “so,” the phrase “such a” should normally be used.

-(On a container) “I am a good cook, and I like very music.”

(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=duckky.jpg&category=Containers&date=2003-01-21>)

“Very,” an adverb, cannot modify the noun “music.” The idea that the writer probably intended to communicate was, “I like music very much.”

Another type of noun modification which causes problems is the use of prepositions and apostrophes.

-(On a memo pad, beneath an illustration of a frog)
“Illustration by Hory’s” (observed by author)

The apostrophe and the “s” are not necessary here.

-(On a box of facial tissues bearing a photograph of a kitten) “Tissues of kitten.” (observed by author)

Sometimes the particular phrasing used to adorn products conveys an entirely different meaning to the native speaker of English than that which was intended. The words “tissues of kitten” cause one to think first of the biological meaning of the word “tissue,” which in turn conjures up an image of cuttings of raw kitten flesh inside the box—not a pleasant image.

Unfamiliarity with English word nuances, as well as with colloquial and contemporary usage of English, leads to some rather odd messages on signs and products.

-(On a sign beside a tray of rolls in a bakery) “Opium Danish” (observed by author)

The above error might be said to be the result of good intentions but insufficient follow-up. The word “opium” was probably a mistranslation of the Japanese word *keshinomi*. It appears

that someone may have taken the trouble to look this item up in a dictionary but then decided on the wrong translation, the correct one being, of course, “poppy seed.”

-(On stationery, accompanied by a drawing of an innocent-looking kindergarten-age girl who is holding a small dog) “I’LL MAKE LOVE TO YOU. Life is full of pleasant gifts and surprises, you know!”

(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=make-love.jpg&category=Stationery&date=2005-03-07>)

Given that the most commonly accepted meaning of the phrase “make love” is probably “to have sexual intercourse,” we can only hope that the designer of this stationery had no idea of what he was actually implying.

Current slang, everyday expressions, and isolated idioms are also quite popular as product adornments—with or without a few errors.

-(On a plastic storage case) “RELAX WITH BITS! GO WITH BITS! ENJOY WITH BITS! I’ve been looking forward to visiting you. I’ll be accompanying you on you life. You’ve bought some really nice things. I’ll show you the way. It’s like a dream being with you like this.”

(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=bits2%20copy.jpg&category=Containers&date=2001-03-28>)

-(On a T-shirt, in a column and the individual phrases separated by horizontal lines)

“POSTURE

BE THAT AS IT MAY

TAKE THE LONG VIEW

STAYING POWER”

(<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=staying-power.jpg&category=Clothing&date=2003-12-12>)

-(On a memo pad) “Freely as you please!” (observed by

author)

-(On a memo pad) “Hello hello...see you agein!!” (observed by author)

There are some written texts which require considerable skill to interpret, that is, if they were meant to be interpreted at all.

(On a sign for a beauty salon) “The Beauty Brain’s FANNY” (observed by author)

(On a shop window) “Your natural beauty express anteri-ors” (http://www.english.com/recent_detail.php?image name=have-a-happy.jpg&category=Signs/Posters&date=2005-02-17)

(On a T-shirt) “So much as happy lives lovely as for us” (<http://www.english.com/detail.php?imagename=so-much-as-happy.jpg&category=Clothing&date=2005-02-03>)

(On a notebook) “Is it good in the ability of happy every day to be passed?” (observed by author)

Although the last two examples (in particular) would appear at first to be little more than groups of words strung together at random, constituting absolute nonsense, they may, in fact, be the attempts of the writer to translate Japanese phrases into English. Or they may be the result of machine translation.

Conclusion

Approaching the preceding examples from a standpoint of accuracy and correctness (as defined earlier), the overwhelming impression is that much of the English has some very basic mechanical, grammatical, and lexical errors. Many of these errors are due to phonological differences and to widely dif-

fering grammatical structures and syntax between Japanese and English. In addition, lack of knowledge of English word nuances on the part of Japanese writers contributes to some misleading messages.

These are problems which might be helped by the consulting of a dictionary or grammar source, but most of all, by consultation with a competent Japanese or native speaker of English. There are many such people in Japan, which may cause one to wonder why this has not happened.

One possible explanation is that English is used on products in Japan as more of a design element than as an attempt to communicate. "A couple of rambling English sentences on the label, typically arranged neatly in three lines, give the product a catchy, Western look," says Yumiko Ono, writing for the *Wall Street Journal* (Ono 1992). English may be used primarily to give products and advertising a modern look or feel. And since it is probable that the majority of the Japanese population do not attempt to read the design element in question, and since the products in question are not intended for export to an English-speaking country, there may be less emphasis on accuracy and correctness.

Is English a new variety of English? Should it be considered a "glocal" English? Given the fact that English is primarily found in written form, printed on products and in advertising, and is not a spoken language used by people to communicate with each other, I would say not. This is not to say that English, in spite of its many oddities, is not without merit. That there are websites devoted to it (English.com) which contain numerous examples of it, is a tribute to its fascination, freshness, and creativity. I would go so far as to say that it gives us a new way of looking at the English language. It is clear that English tracking is a popular pastime and that English is a phenomenon deserving of further research.

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