

# The Use of English in Japanese Media

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## 要 旨

現在の日本では、英語は様々な場所で使用されている。特にメディアや広告には英語の単語がよく使われており、これらの英語はおそらく情報を伝える為ではなく、ポジティブでインターナショナルな連想をさせる為のものであろう。しかし、ネイティブスピーカーの目で見ると、使い方が不自然であったり、間違いであると感じる事も多い。本論文は、日本で使用されている約53個の屋外広告を調べ、実際に英語のエラーがどれほど多くみられるかを調査した。調査された屋外広告の半分以上の英語にエラーはなく、使い方が少し不自然なものが約20%、和製英語を間違って使用してしまっているものが約10%、文法や綴りの間違いがあるものが約10%、という結果になった。約40%に英語の間違いや不自然な表現がみられたりしたものの、本来の言語の役割というものは、他者に言いたいことを伝えるという事である。そして、その目的が果たされ日本人客が広告のメッセージを理解しているのであれば、これらの英語も言語としての役割は果たしているといえるのではないか。そして、その一部は新しい日本の英語つまり世界英語の一つと考えてもいいのではないだろうか。

Keywords: Sociolinguistics (社会言語学), media (メディア), advertisements (広告), culture (文化), Japan (日本), World Englishes (世界の英語)

### Abstract

English is commonly used in Japanese media and advertisements. This use of English is often understood to bring forth positive, international associations in the mind of the Japanese consumer while conveying little referential information. Many English advertisements in Japan contain what a native English speaker would consider errors. This study investigated the use of English in Japanese billboard advertisements to determine how prevalent these errors actually are. English advertising samples were divided into four categories: those containing no errors, those containing contextual errors, those containing grammar or spelling errors, and those containing English loanwords with a different meaning in Japanese. The samples without errors comprised over half of the total. However, samples containing errors are likely still effective in conveying the intended message to the Japanese consumer.

### Introduction

In Japan, English is everywhere. Aside from the helpful signs in subway stations or instructions posted next to a complicated toilet in a hotel, English can be found on billboards, on t-shirts, in the lyrics of popular songs, and in many other locations, both unexpected and mundane. However, the prevalence of English does not imply correctness. Advertisements may contain grammatical or spelling errors, or simply sound strange to a native speaker's ear. Despite the fact that Japanese students spend years studying English in school, the errors in Japanese media seem to be pervasive.

The popularization of English in Japan is not a new phenomenon. According to Stanlaw (1992), shortly after the Meiji Restoration in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'English studies' was a popular subject at many universities, and it was fashionable to intersperse one's conversation with English loanwords (p. 59). During World War II, English was abandoned and Japanese terms were coined to substitute for loanwords, but during the post-war occupation English made a rapid return. Ever since then, the use of English loanwords has continued to increase.

Currently, it is estimated that about 10% of Japanese words are loanwords, or *gairaigo* (Tomoda, 1999). (This category does not include the many words of Chinese origin in the

Japanese language.) In advertising, however, this percentage is much higher. Tomoda estimated it at 20%, or 25% for product names. Daulton (2004) claimed that the proliferation of English product names is the most important linguistic effect of Japan's post-war economic success. New loanwords emerge on a regular basis. According to Daulton, these words are being created so quickly that many normal Japanese people do not have a clear idea of their meaning, a claim that Tomoda also supported.

Haarmann (1984) was one of the first researchers to examine the use of foreign languages and loanwords in Japanese advertising. He claimed that the use of English and other languages in Japanese media was generally associative rather than referential. In other words, English was used to evoke positive associations in the minds of Japanese consumers, not to convey a literal meaning. Tomoda (1999) cited a study which found that 45% of English terms used in media were "special effects givers," while only 16% were used because of a lexical gap (p. 241).

English is used in Japanese advertisements for various associative purposes. According to Haarmann (1984), English may evoke a sense of reliability, high quality, confidence, or practicality. Hogan (2003) reported that residents of a rural Japanese town associated English with youthfulness, modernity, informality, and cosmopolitanism. Survey respondents in a study by Seaton (2001) called English "cool" (p. 237). Whatever the connotations, it is clear that English in Japanese advertising is used for more than simply conveying information.

Sherry and Camargo (1987) took that notion one step further, claiming that English is often used as an element of graphic design, while the meaning is of secondary importance. In their study of the English used on beverage labels in Japan, they suggested that, from a Japanese perspective, the phrases were written in "understandable foreign" idioms (p. 184). Stanlaw (1992) held a similar view. He called the English used in Japanese ads "English-inspired vocabulary item[s]" and argued that the most important consideration was the way a phrase was created and interpreted in Japan (p. 73).

Seaton (2001) used the term *Japanized English* to refer to "incorrect or unnatural written English produced by the Japanese and displayed in the public domain" (p. 234). He argued that as long as Japanese consumers receive the intended message from an English phrase, then it serves its purpose. The English used in Japanese advertisements is not meant to be objectively correct or error free, but rather to convey meaning through easily-understood key words and associative implications.

It may help to consider the discussion of Japanized English in the context of the Three Circles model of World Englishes, which was first outlined by Kachru (1986). Kachru's model divides the English-speaking world into three groups: the Inner Circle, consisting of countries where English has traditionally and historically been the primary language, such as Britain, Australia, and the United States; the Outer Circle, consisting of (primarily post-colonial) countries where English is used for a range of purposes, such as India, Singapore, and Nigeria; and the Expanding Circle, where English is taught as a foreign language and used for international communication. Much of the rest of the world falls into the Expanding Circle, including China, Russia, Brazil, and Japan. As Rajadurai (2005) described, in the initial model the Inner Circle was seen as norm-providing, the Outer Circle as norm-developing, and the Expanding Circle as norm-dependent. However, this model has been criticized as Euro-centric and simplistic, with the argument that the varieties of English spoken in the Outer and Expanding circles deserve more consideration and, perhaps, legitimization (see, for example, Bruthiaux, 2003). In this context, the Japanized English used in the media of Japan could be viewed as a newly developing, non-Inner-Circle-based variety of World English.

## Research

Many studies have discussed the incidences of errors found in Japanized English. However, there is a lack of research investigating the frequency with which these errors actually occur. It seems possible that the seemingly incorrect or unnatural uses of English catch the attention and overshadow English usage that would be considered normal by a native speaker. In addition, the intent of the writer should be considered; if these phrases are understood as intended, then it is difficult to consider them in error. This study was designed to investigate these possibilities. The following questions were considered:

- What percentage of English words and phrases used in Japanese advertisements would be considered correct English by a native speaker, and what percentage contains errors (in grammar, spelling, and so on)?
- What types of errors are most common? Are there recurring errors?
- Are the phrases that a native speaker might see as incorrect truly used in error, or can they be considered a uniquely Japanese form of English?

For this study, I wanted to examine actual English phrases used in Japanese advertisements. I chose to focus on billboards and similar posted advertisements because they are common in Japan, easy to find, and contain many English words and phrases. In some cases I included store signs, as the distinction between store name and billboard advertisement was not always clear.

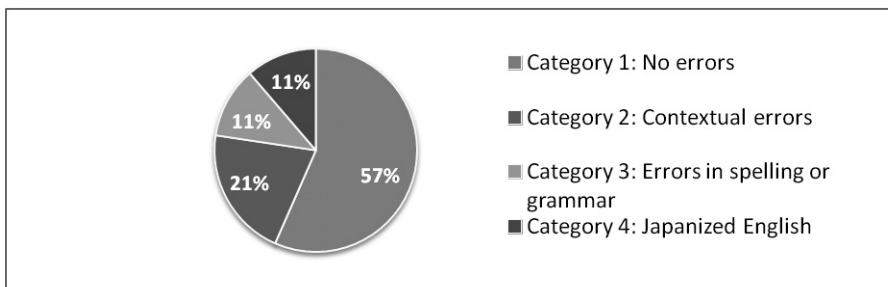
I used pictures of ads gathered from locations throughout Japan. All the pictures were taken within the last five to ten years. Many were gathered over the course of my residence in Japan, and others were contributed by friends and colleagues.

The pictures were examined to be sure the text was legible and complete. Out of a total of over 70 pictures, 53 were suitable for evaluation. Once these pictures were collected, the English text was evaluated. In cases where one sign had multiple lines of text, the largest and most prominent phrase was used. These phrases were separated into four different categories: those with neither errors nor contextual problems; those that did not contain errors, but were contextually odd or inappropriate; those with errors in spelling or grammar; and those which contained a uniquely Japanese usage of an English loanword.

## Results

The majority of the phrases were judged to be error free. Out of a total of 53 samples, 30 fell into this group; as shown in Figure 1, these phrases comprised 57% of the total. Phrases such as “Gold Point Card” and “New! Rainbow Mountain Blend” were in this category.

*Figure 1. English in Japanese Billboard Advertisements*

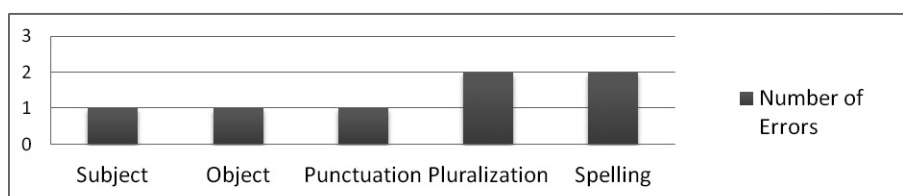


The next category consisted of phrases that did not contain overt grammar or spelling

mistakes, yet still did not seem to use English correctly. They ranged from slightly strange to completely contextually inappropriate. Examples included “Dog-Cake shop” and “Happy, indecent class development!”. 11 of the remaining samples were in this category.

The third category consisted of phrases that contained legitimate errors. These included problems with pluralization, punctuation, subject and object usage, and spelling. There were six samples in this category. Although the sample size was too small to be sure, there did not seem to be an overarching trend toward any particular type of error. Figure 2 contains a listing of their type and frequency.

Figure 2. A classification of the errors found in Category 3



The final category included words and phrases that have been adopted into the Japanese language with a slightly different meaning or usage than is found in Inner Circle English. There were six samples in this category. For example, the word “make” was used in an ad for a beauty salon. This is an abbreviation of the English word “makeup.” The phrase “hair make” is widely used to mean “hair and makeup,” and it can also refer to a salon.

Please see Appendix 1 for a complete listing of the phrases, along with a full analysis of all the phrases in Category 3 and 4. Appendix 2 contains a small sample of the pictures used in the study.

## Discussion

It seems noteworthy that the majority of samples were error-free. Even if contextual errors are grouped with spelling and grammatical errors, they only amount to about one third of the total. The perception that most Japanese advertisements contain errors in English seems to be untrue, but it could be explained by the fact that the mistakes are more visible. An ad containing the phrase “Happy, indecent class development!” is more likely to catch the attention of a native English speaker than one proclaiming “New! Rainbow

Mountain Blend.”

However, this discussion of errors may only be valid from a native English speaker’s perspective. If an advertisement is effective in communicating the intended message to the Japanese consumer, then from the creator’s perspective, there is no error. I believe that all the examples from Category 4 and many of the examples from Category 2 support this theory. For example, the phrase “Good Coffee Smile” from the second category contains strong, easily recognizable keywords that convey the intended message to a Japanese consumer, even if a native speaker finds the phrase odd.

Although some errors were probably not deliberate—“Mermaid,” for example, was written next to a picture of a mermaid, and it seems doubtful a spelling error was intended—these items are in the minority. For the most part, it seems that Japanese advertisements use English effectively for a Japanese purpose, supporting the idea that a uniquely Japanese version of English is seen here. This view could be tested in another study; for example, native Japanese speakers could be shown a selection of advertisements using “corrected” English and asked to rate their effectiveness and appeal versus the original uncorrected signs.

Although the study contained over 50 samples, some of the categories ended up with only five or six samples each. This made analysis of individual categories difficult. Specifically, for Category 3, I had hoped to analyze the errors found to determine if a particular type of error was most prevalent. However, with only six samples, the results were inconclusive. It would be interesting to expand this study to determine whether or not a trend exists.

Another possible problem was the division of examples into each of the four categories. As a native speaker, I believe my analysis was fairly accurate. However, there were some samples that were initially difficult to categorize, and my interpretation may not be fully correct. For future research, it would be helpful to collect a range of opinions on the proper categorization of each sample to determine whether or not it contains errors.

Assuming that the results are indicative of a newly emerging Japanese variety of English, from a pedagogical standpoint, it is important to educate students on the differences between Japanese English and Inner Circle versions. Students using English phrases in a Japanese context should be taught not that their version of English is wrong, but that it is a Japanese usage of the language. This will allow them to make the appropriate word choices for their audience without giving them the impression that their native use of the language is

bad or inferior.

## Conclusion

The use of English is widespread in Japan, particularly in the media and in advertisements. Although much of the English used in Japan contains errors in the eyes of native English speakers, in reality only a small percentage contains actual grammar or spelling mistakes. Some other advertisements contain English that seems strange or contextually inappropriate. However, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of these ads are effective in conveying the intended meaning to Japanese consumers. This is Japanese English, used to sell Japanese products to Japanese people in what seems likely to be an emergent Japanese version of English. The opinions of Inner Circle native English speakers may very well be incidental.

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## Appendix 1

This section contains a full listing of the text samples that were excerpted from the advertisements. They are listed by category in alphabetical order.

### *Category 1: Error-Free*

1. Adult Goods DVD
2. Asahi Super Dry
3. Bar Nowhere
4. Baseball Heroes
5. Be as One
6. Christmas Fantasy
7. Christmas Street '06
8. Coffee
9. Do It Yourself
10. Fitness Club
11. Gold Point Card
12. iPhone for everybody.
13. Leading Light for Life
14. Liquor House HOTTA
15. Love Pika Project (Note: "Pika" refers to an animated character named Pikachu.)
16. Mega Teriyaki
17. Never Hide
18. New! Rainbow Mountain Blend
19. Next Stage Next Dream
20. NO Drugs!!
21. Penguin Square
22. Sea Dream
23. Shall we dance?
24. Star Movies Cafe
25. Thanks Mom Stay beautiful forever
26. The KICK 2<sup>nd</sup> Stage
27. Tuxedo Jazz
28. Welcome back! Mega Mac
29. You are cute if you drink a pack of Lipton outside.
30. You need HEP Five. (Note: "HEP Five" is the name of a department store.)

### *Category 2: Contextually Strange or Inappropriate*

1. America Village SATISFACTORY

2. CHILD fashion UNDER wear
3. Dog-Cake shop
4. Every (Note: This was the name of a credit card.)
5. God Mountain
6. Good Coffee Smile
7. Hard-Off Off-House
8. Kobe hot point! Happy, indecent class development!
9. magic hand club esthetic space
10. MYLORD
11. Sound Bar Man Pee

### ***Category 3: Errors***

1. All Kinda Hot Music for Boozers  
Pluralization error: Here, “kinds of” is misinterpreted as “kind of” and mistakenly shortened to “kinda”.
2. I’ve<sub>2</sub> never seen<sub>2</sub> like this!  
Punctuation error: There is an unnecessary comma.  
Object omission error: A direct object is necessary after the verb “seen”.
3. Marmaid  
Spelling error: It should be “mermaid”.
4. MATERIAL GIRL It yearns after the MADONNA  
Subject error: The pronoun should be “I/you/he/she” instead of “it”.
5. Oppen Nail Café  
Spelling error: It should be “open”.
6. We Love Pet’s ... No. 1  
Pluralization error: There is an unnecessary apostrophe (the plural form of “pet” is “pets”).

### ***Category 4: Japanese Usage of English Loanwords***

1. BEST ALBUM out now!!  
Best Album (ベスト・アルバム *besuto arubamu*) In English, this would be called a greatest hits album. It is a compilation of the artist’s most popular or “best” songs.
2. Gourmet Court Akiba  
Gourmet (グルメ *gurume*) The meaning is generally the same as in English, but it encompasses a slightly wider subject area. The use of the word “food” (as in “gourmet food court”) would be redundant, although it is necessary in English.
3. hair make S-TAGE  
Make (メイク *mēku*) This is an abbreviation of the English word “makeup.” The phrase “hair

make” is widely used to mean “hair and makeup,” and it can also refer to a salon.

4. Roadshow

Roadshow (ロードショー *rōdoshō*) This refers to the date a movie is released in theatres.

5. Super HItension

HItension (ハイテンション *haitenshon*) The phrase “high tension” has been combined into one word in Japanese, meaning “energetic” or “excited.”

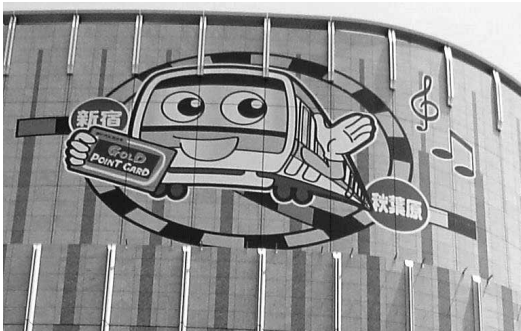
6. Takoru shock!!!

Shock (シヨック *shokku*) The meaning is generally the same as in English, but the part of speech is more flexible, so it can be used as an adjective or a self-contained exclamation as well as a noun or verb. In this example, it probably means “Takoru was shocked!”

## Appendix 2

This section contains sample pictures from each category.

(1) Error-Free: “Gold Point Card”



(2) Contextually Strange or Innapropriate: “Dog-Cake shop”



(3) Spelling Error: “Oppen”



(4) Japanese Use of English: “hair make S-TAGE”

