

DECORATIVE ENGLISH IN JAPAN

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Abstract: The present paper offers an analysis of the so-called “decorative (or ornamental) English”, as it appears in Japanese advertisements and various announcements. We make a clear distinction between English loanwords, *wasei-eigo* (‘made-in-Japan’ English) and decorative English and we address the question of whether the function of decorative English is to merely accessorize the message or to become a constitutive element of the message itself, with its own particular functions. Instances of ornamental English have been generally considered as having little or no communicative function, but if we examine them closely, we discover a deeper level, where such linguistic forms are interwoven with the other explicit message components – utterances in Japanese or images – creating a network of intra-textual relations, which incorporates the expressive function of these apparently nonsensical expressions.

Keywords: English loanwords in Japanese, decorative English, expressive function, linguistic accessory, appropriateness

1. Introduction

The globalization of the contemporary society, based on various economic, social or political reasons, could not have been achieved unless people shared a common communication medium. While it is still debatable whether English has already

gained the status of the contemporary lingua franca, its widespread presence all over the world is undeniable. In his book on the models and functions of non-native Englishes, B.B. Kachru (Kachru 1990) referred to the concentric circles of the language: the inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle. The inner circle comprises countries where English is the native language for the majority of the population (UK, USA, Australia, Canada etc.); the outer circle includes countries where English is spoken as a second language and is largely used in education and administration (India, The Philippines, Malaysia etc.); the expanding circle refers to countries where English is learned as a foreign language and is used in international communication, business etc. The inner circle is 'norm-providing' in terms of correctness and appropriateness, while the outer circle is 'norm-developing', in that they develop their own standards, while still relying on and looking up to the norms provided by the inner circle. The expanding circle is considered to be 'norm-dependent', since the English used here is entirely based on the norms of the inner circle.

Research on the English used in the expanding circle is still rather limited, although the number of countries comprised in the expanding circle is far greater than those in the other two

circles. Japan is one of the countries included in the expanding circle. English in Japan does not have any official status, nor is it used as a lingua franca. However, it is extensively taught in schools and it is extremely visible in Japanese media, having a great influence on the Japanese language itself. Although the English taught in Japanese schools – regardless of whether they are part of the state system of education or the private sector - strongly relates to the English of the inner circle, there is a category of English language that one encounters in everyday life in Japan, which, at first sight, appears to be at least strange, if not nonsensical to the native English speaker. It is the English mainly used in advertising or on articles of clothing, stationery etc., which has very little to do with the norms of correctness imposed by the inner circle. Appropriateness of such English elements, however, is an issue to be analyzed and discussed, as the apparent grammatical or lexical nonsense can be regarded as appropriate for the context in which it is being used.

English in Japan

1.1. A brief look on the contact between Japanese and English

The history of Japan's contact with foreign countries and their languages starts with Japan's neighbours, China and

Korea, the relations with China being particularly important. Japan's massive linguistic imports from China - including the system of writing - greatly influenced the Japanese language, mostly in terms of vocabulary. The first European contacts were with the Spanish and the Portuguese, which date from the late 16th century. The imports were mainly lexical and had to do largely with Christianity. However, because of the restrictions imposed by the Tokugawa shogunate the exchange between Japan and the two European countries ceased on all levels in less than 100 years' time. In the 17th century, Dutch became the main language to have contact with Japan, a situation that lasted until the 19th century, when, in 1853, the American mission under Commodore Perry's command reached Japan. The Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) meant Japan's opening to the world and, consequently, brought about major changes in the Japanese society and culture. Japan witnessed a major influx of English-speaking foreigners and the Japanese vocabulary suffered a great influence under the unstoppable English takeover. The status of the English language was rather high, leading to rather extreme attitudes, such as that of Arinori Mori¹ (1872), who claimed no less than

¹ Arinori Mori (1847 – 1889) was a Meiji period Japanese statesman, diplomat, and founder of Japan's modern educational system.

the abolishment of the Japanese language and the adoption of English as the national language of Japan. The same idea reappeared during the American occupation of Japan (1945-1952) and also at the beginning of the 21st century, when Keizo Obuchi, the Prime Minister at the time, formed the *Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century*. One of the ideas in the report drafted by said commission was that, following a debate, English should be established as the second official language of Japan (Lafaye&Tsuda 2002). Ten years later, in 2010, Japanese companies such as Rakuten and Uniqlo promoted the adoption of English as their official language.

1.2. English and English elements in contemporary Japan

After the Meiji Restoration, English became the main donor language for Japanese. According to Masayoshi Shibatani, 90% of contemporary loanwords in Japanese come from English (Shibatani, 1990: 148). English loanwords were used to such an extent that in 2013, NHK – the Japanese public television – was sued by a 71 year-old man for “mental distress” caused by an excessive use of words borrowed from English (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23079067>). However, not all English items used in everyday life in Japan are

loanwords in the traditional sense of the word. We will further refer to the main categories of English in Japan.

1.2.1. *Gairaigo*

Gairaigo (lit. “words coming from abroad”) are the typical loanwords from foreign languages, other than Chinese. In Japanese, they are usually written with a special syllabary – *katakana*, which is different from the Chinese ideograms or the *hiragana* syllabary, used to express the lexical meaning of the words or to render the grammatical information. Associated mainly with foreign elements in the Japanese language, the *katakana* syllabary has a very strong visual impact, while at the same time functions as a filter through which foreign elements are introduced in the language. The existence of *katakana* makes lexical borrowing a conscious process and preserves some kind of psychological distance between the language user and the word.

The process of lexical borrowing in the case of *gairaigo* was a programmatic one. At the beginning, foreign words were introduced in Japanese where there was no native equivalent for the new objects or concepts which started to appear after Japan opened to the world. The main function of *gairaigo* was thus to fill lexical gaps. Words such as *rajio* (radio), *terebi*

(television), *naifu* (knife), *fōku* (fork), *supūn* (spoon), *dēto* (date) started to be used together with the adoption of their extralinguistic counterparts. In other cases, *gairaigo* are used together with the native Japanese words, resulting either in the replacement of the native word, which becomes archaic, or in the semantic specialization of the two versions. *Gairaigo* are considered to be more exotic, more sophisticated and livelier than the native Japanese words. For example, the English borrowing *kichin* (kitchen) denotes a spacious, modern place, as opposed to the native *daidokoro*, which denotes the small, usually dark kitchen of a Japanese house. *Suimu suutsu* (swimsuit) creates the image of a modern swimsuit that can be worn on a beach, as opposed to the Japanese *mizugi*, which would mainly be used for swimsuits worn in an inside, ‘local’ pool.

1.2.2. *Wasei eigo*

One of the most dynamic areas of the Japanese language is that of *wasei-eigo* (lit. ‘made-in-Japan English’), where new words are coined from combinations of existing loanwords. The most common form that *wasei eigo* takes is a lexical unit composed of two English lexemes which are combined in a way that does not exist in English. A few examples include: *pēpā doraibā* (paper driver) – a person who possesses a driving

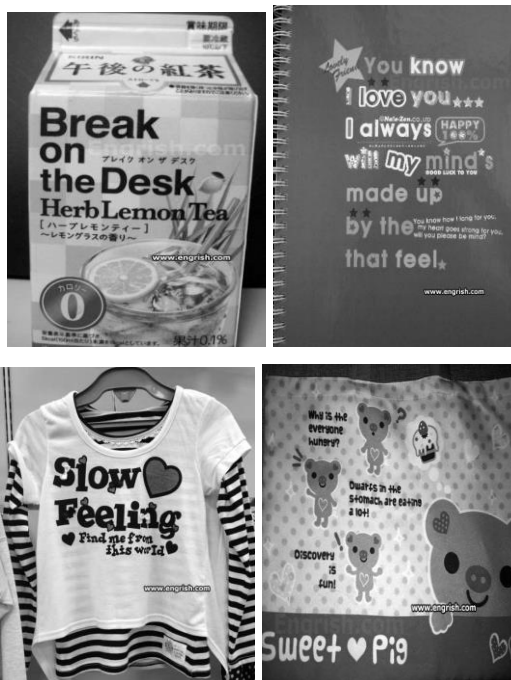
license but who does not actually drive; *romansu gurē* (romance gray) - attractive older men with attractive gray hair; *sukinshippu* (skinship) – physical contact; *rasuto hebī* (last heavy) - the final push, the last burst of effort before a task is completed or a goal is achieved; *obā dokutā* (over doctor) – over-educated people, but especially PhD holders who are currently unemployed.

Wasei eigo is very popular among young people and also changes rather rapidly. The use of *wasei eigo* is preferred to the use of similar expressions or paraphrases based on native Japanese words, since it has a nuance of novelty and exoticism. *Wasei eigo* represents a fashionable way of speaking, showing emancipation and a certain distancing from the traditional linguistics conservatism. In writing, *wasei eigo* units are also written in katakana, the syllabary specialized for writing foreign elements.

1.2.3. Decorative English

Aside from *gairaigo* and *wasei eigo*, everyday life in Japan is filled with English words, written in rōmaji (the Latin alphabet), just like in the Western world. They appear especially in advertising, on clothing articles, on stationery items, on packages and labels and so on, and they are

sometimes mixed with Japanese words using the Japanese writing systems (hiragana, katakana or Chinese ideograms). Unlike *gairaigo* and *wasei eigo*, this kind of English lexical items does not fill lexical gaps nor does it create innovative and exotic terms for new realities of the Japanese society. At first sight, decorative English is used with the sole purpose of adorning either the Japanese message or the product itself, in a way which is somehow similar to the use of Chinese ideograms in the West. Here are a few examples²:



² All the examples of decorative English used in this paper are taken from www.english.com

For native or proficient speakers of English, this type of usage of the English language is rather nonsensical in what concerns the rules of a structured, syntactically coherent message. However, the choice of words in these messages may not be completely random, as it may seem at first. While in some cases it is true that it is very hard to find any kind of meaningful logic beyond the strings of words on certain products, it is very hard to believe, on the other hand, that big companies which invest extremely large sums of money into publicity and advertising would let the image of their products be constructed by a totally arbitrary juxtaposition of randomly chosen English words whose mere purpose is to decorate the package.

2. Functions of decorative English

According to the *Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language*, decorative English, also referred to as also atmosphere English or ornamental English, „is a non-technical term for English used as a visual token of modernity or a social accessory on items of clothing, writing paper, shopping bags, pencil boxes, etc., in advertising, and as notices in cafés, etc. The messages conveyed are ‘atmospheric’ rather than precise or grammatical, as in ‘Let's sport violent all day long’. Use of decorative English appears to centre on Japan but has spread

widely in East Asia and elsewhere.” (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O29-DECORATIVEENGLISH.html>). One of the first scholars to focus on decorative English, John Dougill, draws a clear line between functional English and decorative English, the former being truly meant to communicate, while the latter is employed mainly for mood rather than meaning (Dougill, 2008: 20). The idea that English conveys feelings rather than information is rather common in Japan: “We Japanese tend to love things that are indirect, that suggest something rather than clearly explaining it. The use of English words is perfect for that, because almost everybody knows basic English - it is a required subject at middle and high school - but almost everybody does not really understand it well. So, English is a helpful tool to convey a message vaguely and indirectly.” (Avella, 2004: 105). The ambiguity associated with English for the Japanese speakers may be one of the factors behind the great popularity of decorative English. This particular type of message looks international – which has been a desire of the Japanese society especially after the Second World War – while in fact it is not, preserving the Japanese cultural and emotional core.

A comparative quick look on the three types of English elements in Japan would reveal that while the import of

gairaigo has been a response to a linguistic necessity, filling gaps in the Japanese lexicon, *wasei eigo* are innovations, Japanese creations from foreign material, thus enriching the Japanese vocabulary. Decorative English, on the other hand, can be regarded as a response to a psychological need for emotion in the message. From this point of view, it works in a similar way to paralinguistic markers of emotion, while at the same time it enhances the message with various nuances.

From the point of view of their functionality, it has been argued that while *gairaigo* and *wasei eigo* are functional, in the sense that they convey information, decorative English is not. It is true that if we regard the message solely from the perspective of information exchange, decorative English plays very little, if not no role at all in this process. However, if we take a closer look at some examples, we notice that there are certain patterns based on which words are chosen for certain types of products. Let us consider the following examples:

(1) Messages found on drink containers

“Break on the desk“(on a tea carton box), “I’m free” (on a coffee can), “Freshly-brewed espresso and delightful fresh soft drinks refresh our mind and soften our hearts. They are indispensable to us” (on a coffee vending machine), “The coffee is dripped one by one person by one” (on a coffee can),

“Post water. Rapidly moistens your body and softens your soul” (on a sports drink can), “Profit. Body profitable water” (on a sports drink can), “Pocari Sweat – refreshment water” (on a sports drink can), “Miu. Relax flavored water” (on a soft drink bottle), “Skal Water is a milk-based soft drink. Tender to your mouth. Nicer to your mind. Skal water always takes you to the cow-mooing meadow” (on a soft drink bottle), “Calpis water. Try Happy” (on a soft drink bottle).

(2) Messages found on stationery items

“American flavor. Excellent stationery (...) Have a nice your college life!” (on a spiral notebook), “Be fair about notebook. Every taste and function are created and manufactured for sensuous people” (on a notebook), “Joyful impression. We produce it for whole human beings” (on an electronic dictionary case), “Hope always sees beautiful things. And I want to record a moment in time” (on a photo album), “May the bright future will be yours. How happy I can meet you! Nice day. When I think of you, I feel both a warmth and sadness at the same time” (on a photo album), “I’m out of my mind with loneliness” (on a diary cover).

(3) Messages found on shopping bags

“A design and a substantial function”, “Why is the everyone hungry? Dwarfs in the stomach are eating a lot! Discover is

fun! (Sweet pig)”, Going out. Please do not go out with having left me in a house. If I am here, can you go out with you? I am unpleasant. I hate it being left. [accompanied by a picture of a sad puppy]”, “On Sunday I used to ride my lovely automobile. I called him Tom and go around everywhere”, “Contains a kind of spirit and emphasizing the life style that full of enthusiasm”, “I will go out on a fine day. It may be generated that something is good”.

The peculiarity of this type of English has sometimes been attributed to the mistakes of various nature – phonetic, orthographic, syntactic etc. It is true that, if we regard messages such as those above from the point of view of the English-speaking community, they do not make much sense to the Western person and sometimes the spelling mistakes or the direct translations from Japanese make them humorous for the native or the proficient English speaker. However, the target public of such messages is not the Westerner, but the Japanese person, who has his/her own culturally-loaded expectations. For the Japanese person, English words are attractive, cool, stylish and modern, hence their widespread use in messages that are directed at potential customers. However, we can also notice that the use of English words does not serve only decorative functions, but the messages are somehow consistent

either with the functional use of the product or with a certain attitude or emotion related to the product: the messages on drink containers include words denoting relaxation or refreshing the body and the mind (refresh, refreshment, relax) or use certain semantic isotopies³ – care and consideration for the person who purchases the drink (“one by one”, “tender”, “soft”), benefit (“profitable”), positive state of mind (“happy”, “free”); the messages on stationery items are based on isotopies related to optimism, beauty of life and qualities of human beings (“nice college life”, “whole human beings”, “bright future”, “beautiful things”, “nice day”) or are related to the specific use of the product – for example, the messages on photo albums refer to capturing moments in time, while the message on the diary is connected to the idea of wanting to write away one’s loneliness. Aside from making the product more appealing to the target public – usually young female customers, who tend to see things in a very optimistic way – the messages on stationery supplies may also be linked to conveying a bright image, which could have a compensatory function for the rather solitary environment in which such

³ We use the term isotopy based on Greimas’s definition: “a sequence of discourse whose elements have one or more classemes in common” (Greimas, 1966: 53) or “an inventory of sememes characterized by the presence of a certain classeme” (Greimas, 1966: 120)

products are generally used. Lastly, the messages on shopping bags are generally linked to the ideas of going out and discovery, which are consistent with the intended purpose of this type of product (“discovery is fun”, “ride my automobile”, “go around everywhere”, “go out”), or make reference to notions related to the products that will be put inside the bags, in the particular examples above, the product referred to being food (“hungry”, “eating”).

As shown above, the choice of the words to be displayed on certain categories of products is not completely arbitrary. Grammatical correctness is not important, because the target public is not sufficiently prepared or trained to evaluate it. What is important is that the message be easily accepted by the Japanese person living in the Japanese society based on Japanese cultural and aesthetic norms. There is a certain internal coherence of the texts, built on semantic isotopies which create a specific image related to various types of products. The cultural specificity of the resulting text is also supported by the extensive use of *kawaii*⁴ elements: pictures of

⁴ Roughly translated as “cute/lovable/adorable”, the *kawaii* concept has become one of the key aspects of contemporary Japanese culture. Although its origins date back to the 12th century (Yomota, 2006: 30), the concept has become defining for the contemporary Japanese culture, where the traditional ideas of harmony and non-aggressiveness are wrapped in ‘cute’ packages. The person belonging to the Western society is often puzzled by

cute puppies or kittens, funny drawings, sweet faces, cartoon-like characters and so on. Together with other graphic and visual elements – colours, fonts, textures, text direction, position of the image on the product etc. – the language of this type of texts create a network of relations which may sometimes escape the rationalistic mind of the Western person.

3. Final remarks

Although it has been almost three decades since the concept of decorative or ornamental English was defined, linguistic research on this particular topic is still rather limited. The difficulty of conducting such a study resides extensively in, among other factors, the fundamental differences between the Japanese culture and the Western/Anglo-Saxon culture. There is a clash of perspectives if one tries to analyse instances of decorative English by applying Western logic. However, the functions of decorative English – 1) to create a certain type of mood and 2) to create a specific message associated with a certain category of products – can be explained by resorting to

the multitude of cute characters which accompany products, persons or events in Japan, but for the Japanese person *kawaii* culture is very natural. Nippon Airways, for example, uses Pikachu as their mascot; the Japan post, police offices or government offices – all have their mascots looking like cartoon characters, and none of these is considered infantile in the Japanese society, as they may be regarded in Western societies.

Jakobson's functions of language⁵ and to Coseriu's distinction between the different types of adequacy judgements corresponding to the levels of language⁶.

It has been claimed that decorative English is not functional in the sense that it does not convey information. However, if we reconsider the definition of functionality, decorative English can be interpreted in terms of Jakobson's emotive function of language, adding expressive nuances either to the verbal, informative message in Japanese or to the product as a whole. On the other hand, the apparent incomprehensible English message may not be grammatically correct, but, if we consider Coseriu's view on the levels of language, we can easily assert that decorative English is appropriate to the context in which it is used. As stated above, grammatical correctness is not necessary, because the use of decorative English has very little to do with the historical level of

⁵ Based on the factors involved in communication - addresser, addressee, context, message, content and code, Jakobson postulates the corresponding functions of language: emotive, conative, referential, poetic, phatic, metalingual.

⁶ The three levels of language, in Coseriu's view, are: the universal level (speaking in general), the historical level (particular languages) and the individual level (discourse/text). The types of meaning corresponding to each level are correlated with specific evaluations of adequacy: at the universal level the utterance must be congruent with the outside world; at the historical level the utterance must be correct, while at the individual level it must be appropriate to the context.

language, where the concept of correctness is applied, but with the individual level of language, where what is important is that the discourse be appropriate to the context.

Research on decorative English can be further expanded by analyzing a larger number of examples, as well as a larger number of product categories. We limited the examples in the current paper only to three categories of products, which we considered the easiest to decipher for the Western mind. However, the range of contexts in which decorative English is used is considerably larger. Therefore, starting from the ideas expressed in this paper, a more extensive study can be conducted, thus leaving room for further development.

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