

Point-to-Point

“Cultural English,” “International English,” and Language “Standards”

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The recent article by Akihiko Higuchi (November, 1992), “New English in the Education System—Focusing on Singaporean English,” raised some interesting points regarding possible future developments in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Japan, particularly with respect to which norms or models of English are the most appropriate “standard” to use. The article argues against accepting either “standard American” or “standard British” as a model, and in their stead proposes that varieties of “New English,” such as Singaporean English, should be considered as alternatives. It is argued that this will help to increase the sensitivity of Japanese EFL students to other Asian cultures. Perhaps, also, such a New English will serve as a more appropriate standard to follow until such time as Japan has developed its own distinct form of “cultural” English.

I question the usefulness and relevance to Japanese English Language students of receiving instruction in a parochial form of English restricted in its use to a single country (whether Singapore or Japan). Further I argue that the circumstances and aims of Japanese and Singaporean learners are fundamentally different.

Far from being “unprecedented” (p. 159), English is a relatively late arrival as an international language: Compare the present and previous use of Arabic, French, Ancient Greek, Latin, Russian, Spanish, and (as a written international language) Chinese. English has achieved preeminence through its use in air traffic control communication, computer languages and information storage, international conferences, and international journals. These modern aspects of English as an international language are distinct from the earlier historical conditions under which English became a prominent language in, for example, India and Malaysia. We can therefore recognize these two forms of English as “international” English and “cultural” English.

The former must be intelligible amongst all its users, and overlaps with both “inner-” and “outer-circle” English. Cultural English is a tool for communication within mixed language nations: an L2 which may undergo transformation to L1 (the “New English” as used in India and Singapore, for example). I prefer to drop the term “inner-circle” English in favour of “settler”

English (where a predominantly immigrant population retains English as the L1, as in Australia, Canada, and the U.S.A.). For people speaking cultural or settler English, intra-national use takes precedence. Compatibility with other forms of English, even in the international arena, might be regarded as of secondary importance, or even irrelevant.

I take the stance that, in general, the "target language" (Higuchi, p. 160) in Japan is international English, as defined here. This reflects the reasons for learning English expressed by most of my Japanese students of English: to communicate within the international community, and to visit "settler" countries.

Singaporean cultural English is an L2 with some characteristics of an L1, such as being "stable and institutionalized" (p. 160). It is used for communication within a nation which has had to cope with more than one major L1 (compare the development of English in Britain during the last 1500 years or so). Therefore, proposing a form of cultural English for Japan (p. 169) implies that a New English will eventually rival, and ultimately supplant the native Japanese language.

In present day Japan, many English loan-words have been loosely transliterated into katakana and given their own "culture-specific meanings," especially by the sales and marketing media. As I understand it, Higuchi's proposal would (in effect) result in this "cultural English" being transliterated back into the Roman alphabet, with its own colloquial standards quite independent of any other form of English. The eventual result (already true to some extent) over relatively few years would be a form of English intelligible only in Japan, which would then have two national languages: the original Japanese and a new form of English. The latter would be largely redundant, that is, would have no useful function: There is only one major L1 in Japan, and therefore no requirement for a "cultural" L2; if it is intelligible in Japan only, it cannot function as "international" English.

The difficulty Higuchi has with the appropriate "standard" to use for Japanese EFL stems in part from the definitions on which he relies (p. 163). A dictionary definition of "standard" is: "having no special or unusual features; ordinary; regular" (McKechnie et al., 1978). In linguistic usage, the term "standard" denotes exclusion of constructions and pronunciation considered too colloquial or provincial. The important point here is the concept of neutralizing a language to the extent that the remaining vocabulary, pronunciations, and constructions can be understood by the majority of those

with knowledge of that language. The well-known BBC standard, derived from “Queen’s English,” has gradually lost its elitist connotations (in the U.K.) through increasing neutralization during its use on radio and television. Equivalent standards for other languages are readily recognizable: for example, “correct” Italian, as spoken to the RAI standard, and Japanese *hyojungo*, as spoken to the NHK standard.

Particularly in the case of English, the use of a neutral standard is wise because there is remarkable local variation in the pronunciation of vowel sounds, perhaps more so than in any other language. Higuchi recognizes the existence of various accents and dialects (in American English) and asks, “how can a specific ‘model’ among the varieties be selected as a standard...?” (p. 164). The answer is that “standard English” is none of these particular varieties; it is what remains after attempting to remove local variations. In practice, most English speakers bear some traces of local accent or dialect, so Higuchi’s definition, quoted from Platt et al. (1984), is perfectly apt: A standard is “an ideal towards which one may strive but may not necessarily reach” (p. 163). In general, the stronger the accent and dialect, the narrower the geographical range of intelligibility. Conversely, closer adherence to a standard which sufficiently neutralizes parochial accents and dialects extends intelligibility beyond national borders, that is, it justifies that standard for use at the international level.

It is undoubtedly true that users of standard English, “are in a minority in every English-speaking community” (p. 163). However, it can also be argued that the total number of users of standard English is higher than for any particular dialect group. Therefore we should not be left with the impression that looking towards such a standard is unrealistic and irrelevant for the Japanese (or Singaporean) learner. The fact that speakers of standard American and standard British English can understand one another with ease is one argument that these forms of English are sufficiently neutralized to justify their use as international standards. It is unfortunate that both these standards derive from countries with particularly imperialistic histories, but emotive reaction against these standards is difficult to support objectively. Consider, for example, Higuchi’s charge that, “within a limited British or American standard for English, we cannot express properly our own social values and the flavor of our own culture” (p. 170), in the light of the recent international successes of many Asian authors (e.g., Amitav Ghosh) writing highly-acclaimed literary works in English.

Some of the language-learning situations reflecting British or American life might be unreal (p. 166), but this is not a serious problem in Japan because the target language for Japanese students is international (rather than cultural) English, and the Western way of life is in fashion.

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