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Are You American? A Critique of the American English Teaching Model in Japan with Regards to the Identity Function of Language

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Are you American? A Critique of the American English Teaching Model in Japan with Regards to the Identity Function of Language

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Abstract

In Japan, an American model of English is commonly used for classroom instruction. The aim of this paper is to discuss whether the model is appropriate for Japanese learners with regards to identity. There is a close link between language and identity. In fact, identity is one of the three main functions of language. This paper argues that for the majority of Japanese learners, the American model may not be the most appropriate as it could compromise identity. In order to address this problem, it is argued that a modified English teaching model comprising of neutral, standard lexis is adopted for classroom instruction. Finally, it is argued that a Japanese variety of English needs to develop in order for the Japanese to fully express their identity and culture in international communication.

Keywords: identity function of language, American model of English, culture-specific lexis, registers of language, Japanese-English

Introduction

American power and influence is highly visible in many countries around the world and Japan is no exception. The US greatly influences many aspects of Japanese life such as politics, business, defence, popular culture and so on. As a university teacher in Japan, American influence is particularly noticeable in the field of English language education. In language teaching worldwide, native-speaker Englishes such as American and British English are used as models in the classroom. In Japan's case, an American model of English tends to be used in pedagogy. Although the (Japanese) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) does not specifically state that it must be the classroom model, the de facto teaching goal seems to be 'English-as-an-American-language' (Honna 2008: 146). When Kirkpatrick discusses about English education in Japan, he states that due to the strong

influence of American teachers, pedagogy is based on an American speaker model (Kirkpatrick 2007: 192). However, this paper will ask the question: is an American model of English appropriate for Japanese learners? As Park and Wee state '...there still tends to be an unquestioning assumption that the native speaker norm should provide the model of teaching, despite concerns that such a model might be inappropriate for the communicative and identity needs of learners' (Park and Wee 2014: 13). Whether the American model is an appropriate one is a complex question as it may be argued that there are a number of advantages as well as disadvantages for using it in the classroom. The purpose of this paper is not to critically examine all of the pros and cons, but to focus on how it may affect socio-cultural identity. There is a strong connection between language and identity. When we use language we are not just communicating thoughts but we are expressing our identity too. As Trask states 'language provides a very powerful way of declaring and maintaining identity' (Trask 1995: 82). Jenkins also states that 'identity and language are often closely interrelated' (Jenkins 2003: 37). Furthermore, the relationship between language and identity applies to both first language and second language use. When discussing bilingual speakers, Jenkins states that 'the code switching of those who speak international...varieties of English does not, as is sometimes claimed, serve purely communicative functions. Rather it is frequently used as a means of promoting identity and self expression' (Ibid: 143). She then argues that 'it is the monolingual mindset which is unable to grasp the fact that a language does not have to be a mother tongue in order to be capable of expressing aspects of a speaker's social identity' (Ibid: 143). Therefore, this means that Japanese learners, have the potential to express their socio-cultural identity in English. There are many language traits that help us to express identity such as lexis (vocabulary), accent, pronunciation, spelling, grammar and so on. Due to length, this paper is unable to analyse all these traits, but will focus on how lexical choice may affect identity. For example, depending on the language situation, a speaker can choose lexis to prioritise either the communication function or to express identity and culture. With regard to identity and culture, it is argued that for most Japanese learners, American English may not be the most appropriate model as some of its culture-specific lexical items may compromise the identity function of language. This paper therefore, will discuss how Japan's use of an American model could compromise this key function. A modified model for classroom instruction will then be put forward with some examples of neutral, standard lexis that could be used instead of culture-specific American vocabulary. Finally, the need for a legitimate and recognised Japanese variety of English will be discussed. As Honna argues, 'If established as a variety well

understood across cultures, Japanese English would identify Japanese citizens as an independent people...' (Honna 2008: 160). Therefore, a recognised Japanese English could express Japanese identity (and culture) in the same way that American English expresses American identity (and culture), or Indian English expresses Indian identity (and culture) and so on.

Language and Identity: Are you American?

According to Kirkpatrick, language serves three main functions. The first of these is for communication; the second for expressing identity and the third for conveying culture (Kirkpatrick 2007: 10). Regarding identity, he states 'people use language to signal to other people who they are and what group(s) they belong to' (Ibid: 10). Concerning this point, this writer recently overheard the following utterance, which is transcribed below.

I'm attending school as a sophomore and majoring in Math.

Reading this transcription, many people proficient in English would almost certainly come to the conclusion that the speaker is American or has been educated within the American school system. This is because the use of *school*, to mean a tertiary level education institution, *sophomore* for a 2nd year student, *majoring* to indicate the main field of study and the spelling of the word *math* are all characteristic of American English. Of course the language is perfectly satisfactory if it were produced by an American, as it identifies him or her as such. However, in this case, the utterance was not made by an American, but rather by a Japanese university student, in discussion with a European peer. Other people may mistake the identity of the speaker due to the student's use of American culture-specific lexis. As a teacher with 18 years of experience instructing at Japanese schools and universities, I frequently hear students speaking as if they were American, rather than as Japanese. Therefore, by following an American model, the possibility exists that the identity function of language is compromised for Japanese learners of English in international communication.

The Identity-Communication Continuum and the Three Registers of Language

Kirkpatrick uses an 'identity-communication continuum' to help identify the three language functions (Ibid: 10). At one end of the scale is the communicative function, which is about

prioritising language for effective (international) communication. To achieve this goal, an educated or standard register of language is used. A register means the style of language such as whether it is formal or informal. Kirkpatrick refers to three registers of language, which he calls educated, standard and broad (Ibid: 12). An educated or standard register uses a neutral, standard type of language in order to communicate internationally. However, if one wishes to express identity or culture then the opposite end of Kirkpatrick's continuum is used, and a broad register is utilised (Ibid: 12). A broad register is characterised by informal, culture-specific and idiomatic lexical items. Below are British English examples of the three registers of language:

Educated Register (Formal/Neutral)	Television	Vacuum Cleaner
Standard Register	TV	Cleaner
Broad Register (Informal/Culture Specific)	Telly	Hoover

These examples highlight the differences in register and how the language we use may depend on the language function we prioritise. If we prioritise the communicative function, then we may choose an educated (or standard) register using formal, standard words such as *television*, *TV*, or *vacuum cleaner*. If we want to prioritise identity and/or culture then a broad register may be used, including culture-specific lexis such as *telly* and *hoover*. However, as Kirkpatrick points out, each of these functions require a different register of language and these functions, may, at times, be at odds with each other. For example, the communicative function may result in the diminishing of the identity function. Conversely, when a broad register is used to express identity (or culture) intelligibility may be compromised (Ibid: 10/11). This paper is arguing that the adherence to an American model compromises Japanese identity in international communication. Therefore, culture-specific American lexical items ought to be substituted for neutral (international) vocabulary. Ultimately, this may result in a standard, neutral model of English that can be used with confidence in the Japanese classroom, as it is less likely to compromise the identity function of language. Students need to be aware that a neutral, standard register of English is attainable, and is often preferable for not just reasons of identity but for intelligibility as well. This is because many of the substitute neutral lexical items are core words used in most world Englishes. In other words, they are not culture-specific to the US, but are international in usage. Regarding the current American model used in a lot of Japanese pedagogy, perhaps only a small number of lexical items may

need to be omitted or replaced from the educated and standard registers, as these registers already consist of mainly neutral, standard language. However, with regard to the broad register, a great number of lexical items may need to be omitted or replaced due to the simple fact that they express America's identity and culture, and not Japan's. Some examples of broad register, culture-specific American lexical items include *dude*, *buddy*, *mom-and-pop (store)*, *baby shower*, *John/Jane Doe*, *prom*, *homecoming (queen)* and so on.

Pedagogic Recommendations

There are an almost incalculable number of lexical items that have originated in America. Despite this fact, many of these lexical items are no longer thought of as primarily American, but rather as neutral, standard language that has become ingrained in the educated/standard registers of all English varieties. Some examples include *refrigerator*, *tobacco*, *tomato* and *radio*. If a Japanese person says 'are there any tomatoes left in the refrigerator?' it is highly unlikely that they would be identified as American from the lexis alone, as they are using neutral, standard language. Despite this, there remains a lot of culture-specific vocabulary used in American (as well as British English), which strongly affects how others perceive the speaker's identity. For example, '*sneakers*' and '*trainers*,' are the respective American and British words for sport/recreation shoes. Concerning identity, neither word is entirely satisfactory as '*sneaker*' has a distinctive American identity and '*trainer*' a British one. However, in this writer's view, there is no truly satisfactory, non-culture specific lexical alternative available. Therefore, with regards to the function of identity, what pedagogic recommendations can be made? This is a frequent problem as there are many differences between American and British English. Some examples include *line/queue*, *eggplant/aubergine*, *diaper/nappy*, *baby carriage/pram* or *pushchair* and so on. This paper recommends that, when possible, teachers should present the lexical items side-by-side (on the blackboard) so that students are made aware of language variation and how lexical choice may affect speaker identity. For example, if *line*, *eggplant*, and *diaper* are used, then lexis may become a factor in how other people identify the speaker. Nevertheless, it is argued that in principle it should be left to the student to make his/her own choice about lexis depending on personal preference. However, in some specific academic, work, travel or other language situations, teachers and other language professionals should offer appropriate guidance and advice to learners, about which lexis to use.

Neutral, Standard Lexical Alternatives to American English

There are sometimes neutral, standard lexical alternatives available that can be used instead of culture-specific American (and British) English vocabulary. By using these alternatives a small but important step may be made towards a neutral standard model for the classroom that may not compromise Japanese learner identity. By using the alternatives suggested below, Japanese learners may become less American and more neutral (international) in their English language usage. Some of the differences between the American and international alternatives may seem a little superficial, but it is argued that even a small variation can make a noticeable difference in the perceived identity of the English user. Of course, it should be noted that there may be situations when Japanese students are planning to live, work or study in the United States for an extended period. In these cases, a primary focus on culture-specific American lexis is recommended. Nevertheless, in most other cases, the alternative, neutral, lexical items featured below are recommended for classroom instruction in Japan.

Lexical Item 1

American English: *Fahrenheit* (as well as the imperial system of measurement)

International English: *Celsius* (and the metric system of measurement)

The United States is the only major country in the world to still use the *Fahrenheit* temperature scale. The rest of the world uses *Celsius*, which is part of the wider metric system of measurement. Although French in origin, the word *Celsius* is now part of the English language and is an example of a neutral, standard lexical item, which is used in all English varieties (with the exception of American English). Despite the wide international use of *Celsius*, some textbooks and teaching materials in Japan still continue to use *Fahrenheit*. Our students are already familiar with *Celsius*, as it is the system used in Japan, but the word form is *Sesshi*. Therefore, attention in the classroom should be paid to the English word form. There are numerous other words related to the metric system of measurement that are recommended such as *kilograms*, *centimetres*, *metres*, *kilometres* and *litres* instead of the American equivalents such as *pounds*, *inches*, *feet*, *miles*, *pints*, *gallons* and so on. To restate, this paper recommends that *Celsius* (and the metric system) should form part of an alternative, neutral teaching model for reasons of identity and for the fact that they are standard in

international usage.

Lexical Item 2

American English: *subway*

International English: *metro*

In many cities around the world such as Shanghai, Dubai and Sydney and so on, the word *metro* is used for the urban underground train network. However, in New York, *subway* is used and in London it is the *underground* or *tube*. These lexical items tend to be culture specific to the United States and Britain. Therefore, instead of *subway*, the word *metro* is recommended for classroom instruction in Japan.

Lexical Item 3

American English: *airplane*

International English: *plane*

In this case, the redundancy of a prefix makes a subtle but important difference to the perceived identity of the English user. In American English, *airplane* is standard, while in British English *aeroplane* is part of the educated register. However, with identity being the prime focus of this paper, *plane* is a satisfactory alternative as it is neither specifically American (or British).

Lexical Item 4

American English: *football*

International English: *American football*

Please consider the following short dialogue between a Japanese, Malaysian and Spanish student.

Spanish student: *'Do you play any sports?'*

- Japanese student: 'Yes, I play football'
Spanish student: 'Really? What position do you play?'
Japanese student: 'Wide receiver'
Malaysian student: 'Sorry what's that? I've never heard of it?'
Spanish student: 'Yes, me neither? What do you mean?'

In this dialogue, there is international misunderstanding over the word *football*. The word *football* has different meanings in different Englishes, but the Japanese student is unaware of this and uses *football* to mean *American football*. Unfortunately, some teachers in Japan seem to lose track of the fact that English is an international language (not just an American one), and use *football* to mean *American football* only. Therefore, the Japanese student talks about the *wide receiver* position in the American game. However, for the Malaysian and Spaniard, *football* invariably means *Association football*, so 'wide receiver' is not understood. For the majority of people around the world (especially in Europe, South America, Africa and many parts of Asia) *football* means the global sport of Association football, and not the North American (gridiron) variety. Although American football is highly popular in North America, it is, at best, a minority sport for the rest of the world. When there is reference to it outside of North America, it is called *American football* (or *gridiron*). In some of the world's major languages *football* (French) *futbol* (Spanish) and *futebol* (Portuguese) all mean Association football and not the American game. When Japanese students are taught that *football* equates to American football, not only can international misunderstanding occur, they may also be identified as American due to their use of culture-specific language. In the interests of our students, it is argued that the use of *football* to mean American football should end, not just for wider international understanding, but for identity too.

Lexical Item 5

American English: *drug store*

International English: *pharmacy*

In American English, *drug store* is standard, while in British English *chemist* is the word of choice. However, an international alternative exists, which is *pharmacy*. Already in some parts of the world, *pharmacy* is in standard usage. It is less culture-specific than *drug store* or

chemist so it is recommended for English language teaching in Japan, and for international usage.

Lexical Item 6

American English: *freshman* (*sophomore/junior/senior*)

International English: *first year* (*second year/third year/fourth year*)

There are a fair number of lexical items that are culture-specific to the American education system, such as *freshman*, *sophomore*, *junior* and *senior*. (Some other education-related examples are presented below). However, there are more suitable, neutral lexical items available that avoid identity issues for Japanese learners. These lexical items include *first year* (*student*), *second year* (*student*) and so on. These lexical alternatives are much more likely to be understood worldwide, as they are not culture-specific to the US and its education system.

Lexical Item 7

American English: *major/majoring* in (History)

International English: *studying* (History)

Majoring in a subject is American culture-specific, while *reading* a subject is formal British English usage. Rather than the American and British English terms, *study(ing)* a subject is recommended for Japanese learners as it is neutral, standard language, more suitable for international communication.

Lexical Item 8

American English: *school* (for a higher education institution)

International English: *university* or *college*

As mentioned earlier, the word *school* is regularly used to refer to higher-level education institutions in American English. As well as being American culture-specific, there is an increased danger of international misunderstanding. For example, take an 18-year-old Japanese

undergraduate who states that she is attending 'school.' From a (non-American) interlocutors point of view the use of *school* is ambiguous: does she mean (high) school or university? From physical appearances alone it may not be possible to determine whether she is still at school or whether she is in higher education. Therefore, rather than *school* to mean a higher education institution, it is recommended that *university* or *college* are used instead. These neutral lexical items are used (to a greater or lesser degree) in all English varieties. To recap, this paper recommends that *university* or *college* are used for a tertiary level education institution and *school* for a primary and secondary level one.

Lexical Item 9

American English: *elementary school*

International English: *primary school*

In American English, *elementary school* is standard, while in British English *infant school* and *junior school* are often used. However, the lexical alternative *primary school*, which is used in many varieties of English, is recommended as part of a core, neutral, international English teaching model.

Lexical Item 10

American English: *cell phone*

International English: *smart phone*

In the United States, the lexical item *cell phone* is used, and in Britain, it is *mobile phone*. Both lexical items are culture specific, so therefore, *smart phone*, which is used in all Englishes, is recommended for classroom instruction and international communication. In Japanese, a form of the word already exists (*sumaho*), so only attention to spelling is necessary.

Lexical Item 11

American English: *candy/candy bar*

International English: *confectionary*

In American English, *candy* and *candy bar* are used for foods that contain mainly sugar and often chocolate. In British English, the corresponding lexical items are *sweets* and *chocolate bar*. As an alternative, *confectionary* is put forward as a suitable neutral lexical item.

Lexical Item 12

American English: *trash/garbage*

International English: *refuse/waste*

American English uses the lexical items *trash* and *garbage*, while in British English *rubbish* is used. As non-culture specific alternatives, *refuse* or *waste* can be considered suitable lexical items to form part of a revised neutral English teaching model.

A Japanese Variety of English

Next, since Japanese English will be the subject of a future research project, this paper will only briefly make the point that the development of a neutral, standard model of English for the Japanese classroom is just the first step in dealing with the problem of socio-cultural identity in international communication. It is argued that the goal for the Japanese is to create an indigenized variety of English. This variety would have educated and standard registers very similar to the neutral, standard model discussed above as well as a broad register to express identity (and culture). As people from all over the world are expressing their identities (and cultures) through a plethora of new Englishes, then why not the Japanese? This writer believes that a distinct Japanese variety is slowly developing. However, it may be too early to call it a fully recognised variety, as it has not been codified in dictionaries and grammars unlike, for example, British and American English. However, as in the case with all new Englishes, native linguistic features and words and phrases are transferring in order to give the English language a unique Japanese flavour and identity. For example, Honna discusses sentence-final particles such as '*ne*' and '*yo*', which are used in English communication by Japanese English speakers, such as "I like sushi-*ne*" or "Oh, I like tempura-*yo*" (Honna 2008: 58). This is an example of how the Japanese identity can be expressed in English. Already there are many Japanese words that form part of the English language. Some of the most high

frequency lexical items include *karaoke*, *manga*, *anime*, *sushi*, *sashimi*, *walkman*, *geisha* and so on. As Kirkpatrick argues 'Many Japanese words that are currently common in many varieties of English will obviously become part of a Japanese variety of English, as it develops. These will be supplemented by many others' (Kirkpatrick 2007: 21). Perhaps it can be claimed that Japanese words such as *kawaii*, *shinkansen*, *bento* and *pachinko* are currently becoming part of a Japanese-English lexicon or are on the cusp of becoming so. It is argued that as English teachers in Japan, we need to promote the development of Japanese English to help our students forge their identities as English speakers and to express their culture internationally. In addition, we need to recognise Japanese-English as a legitimate variety even though it may be very different from American (or British) English.

Conclusion

This paper has been a call to English instructors to question whether the current American model of English, which is frequently used in Japan, is the most suitable for the majority of Japanese learners. This paper has argued that the American model may not be the most suitable due to the fact that it compromises the identity function of language. By adhering to an American model, many culture-specific lexical items are uncritically presented in classroom instruction, which may result in the Japanese becoming American-like speakers of English, rather than international-like speakers. To remedy this problem, it was argued that the current American English model needs to be modified so that a neutral, non-culture specific one can be presented for classroom use. This paper then offered examples of neutral lexical items that could replace culture-specific American ones. It was argued that by using just a few of these alternatives, a positive step might be taken to address this paper's main concern about identity. Finally, it was argued that in addition to a neutral, standard model for classroom use, a legitimate Japanese variety of English needs to develop so that the Japanese can truly express their identity and culture on the world stage. It is believed that Japanese English, which would include educated and standard registers for international communication and a broad register to express identity and culture, would serve the needs of the Japanese more effectively than American English.

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