
Reviews of Books

James Stanlaw, *Japanese English: Language and Culture Contact*

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‘English as she is Japped’, ‘Janglish’, ‘Japlish’, ‘Japanized English’, ‘Jinglish’ etc., are just a few of the monikers which have been used to describe more or less derisively the variety of English that is used in Japan. Everyday we come across a considerable amount of Japanized English, and the usages English words are assigned do not cease to puzzle or even amuse native English speakers. However, intentionally or unintentionally comical as it may seem, Japanese English is ubiquitous reminding us that Japan has assimilated this language and culture in its own way. English has, in other words, met a fate similar to Chinese language and culture - or Buddhism, or international cuisine- that is, it has been remodeled to fit Japanese linguistic and cultural patterns, to serve purposes that the Japanese language alone cannot (or should not) serve. Japanese culture has assimilated these foreign imports to such extent that it is no longer able to function without them.

The author of the present book, James Stanlaw, an associate professor in the department of sociology and anthropology at Illinois State University, has published extensively in the field of Japanese language and popular culture. Stanlaw’s *Japanese English* draws an encompassing picture of the history, evolution and functions of English words in Japanese discourse. His examples taken from popular culture illustrate that Japanese English is ‘home-grown’, rather than merely ‘borrowed’ or ‘imitated’. He suggests that any similarity with real English is (often) purely incidental. The author’s in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of English language ‘domestication’ also claims that there is much more to Japanese English than just using English words for the sake of sounding more sophisticated.

Japan has a love-hate relationship with other cultures, that goes back as early as the 5th century. Beginning with Chinese, and continuing with Dutch, Portuguese and English, Japan has enthusiastically taken – even found inspiration – in these disparate languages. The contact with English began during Tokugawa Ieyasu’s reign, over 400 years ago, when the British sailor William Adams came to Kyushu via a Dutch ship. Since then, cultural and linguistic contacts with English-speaking cultures have been continued on and off witnessing either radical proposals for abolishing the Japanese language, or conservative desires to purge all such foreign borrowings from the language. What is surprising is that the idea of abolishing Japanese and adopting English (*kokugo haishi eigo saiyouron* 国語廃止英語採用論) came not from foreign intellectuals but from prominent glitterati like Mori Arinori - Japan’s first minister of education and architect of the modern Japanese school system, and Shiga Naoya, one of Japan’s most admired novelists. Although these suggestions had not been adopted to any fundamental extent, the evolution that Japanese language has undergone demonstrates that in the natural course of history no tradition

can petrify a linguistic system into a set of established patterns: that the evolution of language is reflective of broader social change. At present, English is no mere fad; it is a reality, an integral part of the transformation of Japanese society after the war.

Although ‘loan words’ and ‘borrowings’ are currently used to describe language imports, the author of the book argues that these terms are misleading because these so-called ‘loan words’ often possess a meaning which is different from their language of origin. In his opinion, the term ‘English inspired vocabulary items’ is more precise since their meaning and usage have been negotiated and recreated within Japanese society. Also, in ‘loan’ words there is the implication that they help express meanings which are non-existent or inappropriate in Japanese language; they reflect the complex changes Japanese culture has undergone during the past decades. As Stanlaw shows, loan words contribute to a further diversification of already pre-existing concepts (as in the case of *raisu*, *meshi* and *gohan*, which all point to the concept of “rice”, but are not synonymous, since the English *raisu* denotes rice which is always served on a plate and eaten with a fork, whereas the Chinese borrowing *meshi* means ‘food’ in men’s language, and the Japanese word *gohan* denotes food in general and rice served in a rice bowl and eaten with chopsticks).

Loan words contribute to the phenomenon of di-glossia or di-graphia, which pervades the Japanese language. Their existence is not merely for the sake of complicating further an already complex and multi-layered language. They reflect shifts in register in the individual’s perception of himself, others and the world as a whole. An example is the discovery of the average Japanese of his or her sense of private self, alongside an increased pride in being different from the others. ‘Assisted’ by a consumerism that proclaims the need to be different, original or unique, the use of the English word ‘my’ in various compound nouns mirrors the Japanese discovery of this new self. Traditionally, *jibun*, which is the closest translation equivalent of the pronoun ‘I’, is a concept which points to the group-oriented side of the individual. It is a bi-componential word, made up of *ji* (自), which means ‘oneself’ and *bun* (分), which means ‘part’, ‘share’. Literally translated, it means ‘one’s share’. The economic affluence of recent decades which turned Japan into a consumerist heaven, where customers are treated like gods, has encouraged Japanese people to abandon their collectivistic habits and find their inner self - in short, become more self-centered, or *wagamama* (わがまま) and even greedy *yokubaru* (欲張る). Being self-centered or greedy is traditionally taboo, but when economic interests are at stake tradition is just a minor obstacle. During the 1980s, new concepts such as ‘my home’ *mai hoomu* (マイホーム), ‘my car’ *mai kaa* (マイカー) emerged in Japanese language. They look like English borrowings, but, whereas in English they have a purely referential meaning, in Japanese, there is an extra connotation of ‘mine and only mine’ or ‘my precious’. *Mai hoomu* or *mai kaa* are departures from both the English referential ‘my home’ or ‘my car’ and the Japanese referential *jibun no ie* (自分の家), or *jibun no kuruma* (自分の車).

‘Loan’ words help express new attitudes towards traditional institutions, such as marriage. Thus *hazu* from ‘husband’ or *waifu* from ‘wife’ are different from the traditional *otto* and *tsuma*; besides sounding more cosmopolitan, their major function is to emphasize a greater equality between marriage partners. Moreover, the frequent occurrence of loan words in women’s popular culture expresses a poignant sense of emancipation from the strict canons of traditional Japanese culture, which for centuries has restricted women’s writing to hiragana, and even then with restrained decorum seen as appropriate to women.

Although the author provides some enormously dense material, this is nonetheless a valuable book. Stanlaw offers insight into the complex evolution of Japanese language and culture, demonstrating with a richness of example that, true to its tradition, Japan has found innovative

ways to cope with the rapid changes in modern society. This book is of interest to both the uninitiated reader and the language specialist or anthropologist – all who seek to decipher the mysteries of the Japanese ‘empire of signs’.

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