

## *English as an International Language in Japan: A Threat to Cultural Identity?*

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### **Abstract**

Language performs many important roles in society by allowing people to form and maintain groups as well as transmit information. Language also composes a core component of our self-identity and mental structures. English is currently the most widely spoken language in the world (Crystal, 1997) and thus the role of English as an international language (EIL) has received much academic attention, particularly in relation to its effect on local languages and the possibility of language shift and extinction. Phillipson (1992) in particular has argued that EIL is imperialistic and diminishes local languages. In this paper I will outline the roles that language plays both on a societal and individual level, particularly in regards to Japan. English is currently the dominant foreign language in Japan, being taught in schools from the fifth grade onwards. There is also large demand for native English speaking teachers, reflected by the popularity of English conversation schools as well as the use of assistant language teachers in classrooms. I will specifically examine the role of EIL in Japan in regards to educational and corporate policies, as well as the effect of EIL on Japanese language and culture. I argue that Japanese is not threatened by English due to the large homogeneous population of Japanese speakers, the strength of their cultural entities, and the high prestige of the Japanese language in Japan. Thus, while English has out-competed other foreign languages to represent internationalization in Japan, Japanese will remain dominant.

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## **Introduction**

Language performs many important roles in human society. These include the formation and maintenance of distinct societies or groups, the sharing of ideas within and between groups, as well as individual self-identity. With language playing such important roles in societies and people's lives, it is important to critically examine the effects of national language policies on the culture and identity of members of different language groups.

English is the most widely spoken language in the world. According to Crystal (1997) the total number of English speakers worldwide is estimated to be as high as 1.68 billion. Of these, Graddol (1997, p. 8, p. 10) estimates that the number of L1 (native) English speakers (372 million) is second only to Chinese (1,113 million), and that there are an additional 375 million L2 (English as a second language) and 750 million EFL (English as a foreign language) speakers in the world. As a result of this worldwide popularity, the role of English as an international language (EIL) has received a great deal of attention from academics.

Opinions regarding the role of EIL are varied. Phillipson (1992) has argued that English is imperialistic, and serves to benefit those in power while diminishing other languages. However Crystal (1997) takes a much more optimistic view of the role of English, and claims that it is democratic due to a lack of explicitly coded class differences. Finally, Wardhaugh (1987) takes the middle view that English is neutral as it is not tied to a specific group due to its widespread use.

In this paper I will look at some of the roles language plays in societies and argue that EIL cannot be separated into exclusive categories such a democratic, imperialistic, or neutral. Finally, I will specifically examine the role that EIL plays in Japan.

## **The roles of Language**

Language has many roles in our lives. In addition to simply sharing information and ideas between individuals, language is tied to the formation of societies and people's place within them. Some researchers even go so far as to claim that language can affect a person's way of thinking and even health.

### ***Language and society***

Certainly, communication of some type is necessary to maintain the bonds that keep people together, as well as to direct people's time and energy toward mutually supportive endeavours. Language is also necessary for communicating ideas and values within a society and evolves along with it. As Holmes (2013, p. 348) states, "...language provides a means of encoding a community's knowledge, beliefs and values, i.e. its culture." Thus not only is language necessary for the functioning of society, it is a fundamental aspect of the society itself.

### ***Language and identity***

Language is also fundamental to a person's identity. "We also indicate aspects of our social identity through the way we talk. Our speech provides clues to others about

who we are, where we come from, and perhaps what kind of social experiences we have had.” (Holmes, 2013, p. 2). Variations in language use can mark us in terms of age, social position, and geographic origin, to name but a few groups within a common language speaking community. Nunn (2013) notes that individuals can be members of multiple sub-communities within a larger speech community and that speech variation contributes to a sense of solidarity within these groups. Nunn gives the example of the vocabulary of cricket enthusiasts being largely incomprehensible to non-cricket fans from the same overarching speech community, while cricket fans from other cultures and nations would be able to understand the conversation clearly. This reveals the fundamental importance of language on both an individual and society level.

### ***Language and mental structures***

According to Holmes (2013, p. 358) “Most sociologists agree that language influences our perceptions of 'reality'.” However there is a range of opinion as to the degree to which this is the case. Proponents of linguistic determinism such as Benjamin Lee Whorf, make the strong claim that “...people from different cultures think differently *because* of differences in their languages.” (Holmes, 2013, p. 343) while most others believe that languages merely influence perceptions and thoughts (linguistic relativity). In a recent example of a stronger linguistic determinism claim, Chen (2013) found that people who spoke languages which have strong grammatical distinctions between the future and present (such as English) were likely to save less money and adopt more health-adverse behaviours such as smoking, than people whose language has weaker distinctions between the present and future (such as Mandarin), despite living in the same country and sharing religious, educational, and economic backgrounds. Holmes (2013, p. 343-344), provides several examples of studies that support the idea of linguistic relativity by suggesting that the ways in which children group objects in terms of colour and shape, or understand number concepts, are related to differences in their native language.

This link (whether deterministic or relativistic) between language and mental structures highlights the importance language plays in our lives. This link also raises the question of the effect on individuals and the society they live in, of changes to the status of a language or its loss.

### **Language Shift and Extinction**

According to Grenoble and Whaley (1998, p. vii) “...there are somewhere between 5000 and 6000 languages spoken in the world today.” They go on to quote Krauss (1992) as saying that “over 4000 of the world's languages will cease to be spoken by the end of the next century.” (Grenoble and Whaley, 1998, viii)

There are many reasons for language extinction. These can include a small population of speakers, government repression (Grenoble and Whaley, 1998), a loss of prestige for the language, or a loss of domains where it is utilized (Holmes, 2013). This can be a gradual process, in which the domains (such as government, business, school, or the marketplace) in which the language had been used are taken over by a more dominant or prestigious language. As the number of domains where the language is used decreases, so does the vocabulary and the incentive for newer generations to learn it.

Eventually, as the older generations pass on, the language dies with them.

Language death has been lamented for many reasons. Intellectually, the loss of linguistic diversity and the data this can provide for testing theories of language development (Hale, 1998), as well as insights into the human mind (Mithun, 1998), is tragic. As well as losing insights into human mental structures, language loss can be devastating for communities due to the inseparable link between language, culture, and self-identity (Jocks, 1998). This loss can also lead to poor self-confidence and contribute to poor educational and socio-economic performance by affected individuals (Holmes, 2013).

Due to its prominence as an emerging international lingua franca, English has often been seen as complicit in the loss of other languages, as I will discuss further below. Language death is not an inevitable consequence of contact with new languages, however. While language shift requires bilingualism (you can't have a language disappear without something to replace it with), it is possible to maintain a language as long as people maintain pride in their ethnic and linguistic identity (such as through religion or a rich literary tradition) and there is a strong community to support it (Grenoble and Whaley, 1998; Holmes, 2013).

### **The Role of English as an International Language**

English is currently the dominant language of many different domains such as academic publishing (particularly in regards to science and technology), international organizations (such as the World Bank and ASEAN), business, and the Internet (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997).

While the increasing use of English around the globe is well known, there is a wide variety of opinion over the role English plays. Three such roles (democratic, imperial, and neutral) are examined below, although I argue that ultimately, there are many problems with attempting to fit English into a single role.

#### ***English is democratic***

The spread of English has been seen in a positive light by many. The following quote appears to suggest that the very structure of English makes it a superior choice for language learning.

“There have been comments made about other structural aspects, too, such as the absence in English grammar of a system of coding social class differences, which make the language appear more ‘democratic’ to those who speak a language (e.g. Javanese) that does express an intricate system of class relationships.”  
(Crystal, 1997, p.8)

However, this quote appears overly optimistic about the democratic qualities of English. As noted previously, language is tied to our social identity. A lack of formally encoded class structure in English does not mean that class differences are not apparent in our speech. As long as class exists, it will make itself felt in language.

Even those who support the idea of linguistic determinism would be unlikely to go so far as to say that existing social class differences will disappear simply through a change in language.

However, it could also be argued that by having access to a widespread language such as English, it is easier for minority groups to be heard on the global stage. Of course, the fact that minority language communities are forced to adopt the language of a more powerful (economically, militarily, or demographically) group to find a voice points to the issue of imperialism and power imbalances in regards to language, as I will address in the next section.

On the other hand, it could be argued that in a situation where certain languages or ethnicity have been privileged in the past, that the common adoption of an outside language such as English could lead to a more equal playing field for all, as everyone would need to use a common second language. There may be some truth to this, although there is also the risk that English ability can itself become a new class marker, if the ability to obtain quality instruction is limited to those from privileged backgrounds (Nunan, 2003).

### **English is imperialistic**

The imperialistic nature of English has long been a concern of many academics.

“What is at stake when English spreads, is not merely the substitution or displacement of one language by another but the imposition of new ‘mental structures’ through English. This is in fact an intrinsic part of ‘modernization’ and ‘nation-building’, a logical consequence of ELT.” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 166)

The imbalance of power inherent in EIL is illustrated by Kachru (1985). He divides nations into three groups: An “inner circle” of nations with English as a first language (such as the UK or the USA), an “outer circle” where English is a common second language (such as Singapore or India), and an “expanding circle” where English is learned as a foreign language (such as Japan or Korea). Traditionally, English has been “owned” by the inner circle nations, with new words originating there and then spreading out to be adopted by those in the outer and expanding circles. There is also a bias in favour of inner circle English varieties over outer circle ones among expanding circle learners, as well as a view within outer circle countries that their English is somehow inferior (Sato & Suzuki, 2007). However, Nunn (2007, p. 12) claims that the idea that new English words can only be created in inner-circle nations is “no longer workable in our age of international communities and the preponderance of actual English use by and often between non-native speakers.”

There are also direct financial benefits for inner circle nations such as the UK. For example, British Council chair Lord Neil Kinnock (in Graddol, 2007, p. 4) states that “The English language teaching sector directly earns nearly £1.3 billion for the UK in invisible exports and our other education related exports earn up to £10 billion a year more.” Also, Grin (2005) concluded that if the EU were to adopt a policy of using English as the lingua franca of all its member states, there would be a 17-18 billion

Euro annual benefit to the United Kingdom. This benefit would be due to the UK not needing to invest additional resources in language learning, translation of documents, as well as having a competitive advantage due to other parties having to put more time and effort into communication with them. However, this report is specific to the EU situation, and the same advantages would be conferred on any nation whose language was chosen by the EU. Thus the issue is hegemony rather than English itself. In other situations English could function as a more neutral choice to prevent one linguistic group having hegemony over the others.

However, the US and Britain will not be powerful forever. Graddol (2007) even argues that the global spread of English could end up putting monolingual native English speakers at a disadvantage as English becomes less of a specialized skill, but rather a new baseline. Graddol argues that as English spreads, the costs of learning it decrease, while the costs for other languages remain the same, making it more costly for native English speakers to become multilingual. Also, there is a trend of fewer international students studying in the UK, with correspondingly fewer economic benefits for the UK.

In addition to economic benefits to inner circle countries, Phillipson (2008, p. 264) seeks to link EIL directly to Americanization, the neoliberal policies of George W. Bush and “...unsustainable consumerism, violence, and linguistic neoimperialism.” However, English as a language can express a multitude of views, even if the majority follow certain norms, and new or competing ideas and philosophies can be expressed in English. English speakers, and inner circle countries for that matter, do not all share the same philosophies and political agendas, nor do politics in one country remain static.

Ultimately Phillipson fails to recognize that English evolves, and there is much to be said for a future in which inner circle English is not the dominant form. As Graddol (1997, p. 3) states “the centre of authority regarding the language will shift from native speakers as they become minority stakeholders in the global resource. Their literature and television may no longer provide the focal point of a global English language culture, their teachers no longer form the unchallenged authoritative models for learners.”

### **English is neutral**

The following quote outlines many of the justifications for considering English to be a neutral language.

“...since no cultural requirements are tied to the learning of English, you can learn it and use it without having to subscribe to another set of values [...] English is the least localized of all the languages in the world today. Spoken almost everywhere in the world to some degree, and tied to no particular social, political, economic or religious system, or to a specific racial or cultural group, English belongs to everyone or to no one, or it at least is quite often regarded as having this property.” (Wardhaugh, 1987, p. 15).

It is true that the spread of English has made it more neutral in many regards. In English-speaking countries such as Canada, continual influxes of immigrants from around the world and their adoption of English has changed the nation's ethnic and religious makeup such that English in Canada is no longer associated with only ethnically British immigrants. Also, in multi-ethnic and multilingual nations such as Malaysia or India, where perceived favouritism toward one group by the government can lead to unrest, English can serve as a “neutral” language (or at least one that is equally unfair).

It will be interesting to see if, in fact, English becomes so localized that inner-circle countries will need to study a new variety of “global” English in order to communicate outside their own countries. Already some have been working to create standardized global English (Acar, 2007) as well as simplified versions of English to speed language learning such as “Globish” (Nerriere, 2004) and the “Special English” used by Voice of America.

### **Conclusions regarding the role of EIL**

In conclusion, the role of EIL is complex, with evidence to support and challenge all three positions outlined above. A language can never have only one role. It evolves over time and can have different roles in different situations simultaneously. Ultimately, it is important for those involved in teaching English to examine the role of English in their own local situations. With this in mind, this paper will specifically examine the role of English in Japan.

### **English in Japan: A Case Study**

While examples that support and contradict the three positions outlined above can be found around the world, what is the case in an expanding circle nation such as Japan, the country where the author resides?

### **Language policy in Japan**

Education policy in Japan is determined by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Currently, English is mandatory between Grades 5 and 12 (MEXT, 2011). The government also hires many Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) from predominantly inner-circle countries (particularly the United States) to work with the Japanese English Teachers (JTEs). ALTs are often employed through the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) programme. This program has two equally important functions; improving international relations and teaching English.

The teaching of English in Japan has expanded over recent years despite a questionable success rate in terms of improving the average Japanese person's English communication ability (Nunan, 2003). According to the Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency (2011, p. 3), “Foreign languages activities were newly introduced in elementary schools, while the number of English classes in junior high schools was increased by about 30 percent; as for senior high schools, classes conducted in English and other innovations were introduced.” Furthermore, the Global 30 Project seeks to increase the number of foreign students studying in Japanese universities by offering degrees with classes taught in English

(Hashimoto, 2013).

With this expansion of English occurring in Japan, does Japan face the same issues of language demise as have been explored in previous sections?

### **Is the Japanese language threatened by English?**

The short answer to this question is no. As previously explained, factors that contribute to language extinction include a small population of speakers, government repression, a loss of prestige for the language, or a loss of domains where it is utilized. None of these factors are currently issues in Japan.

According to the CIA factbook (Accessed 2015), Japan is an ethnically homogeneous nation, with 98.5% of Japan's large population of 127 million people being ethnically Japanese, followed by Koreans (0.5%) and Chinese (0.4%). There is little need, or even opportunity, for Japanese to use English while in Japan (thus a perceived need for ALTs in classrooms is to provide such opportunities for students). As an island nation with such a large linguistically and ethnically homogeneous population, Japanese is unlikely to be displaced by English. There is certainly no government repression of standard Japanese (the national language), although there has been past repression against minority languages spoken in Hokkaido and Okinawa in favour of standard Japanese (Bugaeva, 2010). The Japanese language is also highly regarded by its speakers in Japan, and there is a well-established Japanese literary tradition and varied popular culture to maintain its prestige.

That is not to say that English (and other foreign languages) have not influenced Japanese. There has been an increase in English words in Japan, particularly as new technologies are introduced. However, many of the words have been transformed into uniquely Japanese ones that can be nearly incomprehensible to native English speakers. Some examples of this *wasei-eigo* include *salaryman* to refer to businessmen, or *pasokon* to refer to a personal computer. Likewise, English has been influenced by Japan, with Japanese words such as *karaoke* incorporated into English.

However, while Japanese is likely safe as a language, what effect does the teaching of English have on Japanese identity and culture?

### **Is Japanese culture and identity affected by English?**

Japanese culture, much like the language, is in a strong position. Japan has done a remarkable job of maintaining its distinct culture in the face of modernization and globalization, and is in fact a strong cultural exporter to inner-circle nations such as America, particularly in regards to video games and animation. While American cultural exports such as Disney are very popular in Japan, they are typically released in Japanese. And although English phrases have a tendency to appear on clothing and other products in Japan, they are mostly for cosmetic reasons, and are often understood neither by the Japanese nor by English speakers.

Furthermore, Japanese English textbooks (at least at the elementary and lower secondary school level) are designed in Japan according to targets set by MEXT rather than by inner-circle nations. The emphasis is on sharing Japanese culture' rather



than simply learning foreign culture, with many of the stories featuring Japanese people or subjects popular with the domestic audience. For example, MEXT (2014, p.1) has stated that English education should “enrich educational content in relation to nurturing individual’s [sic] sense of Japanese identity (focus on traditional culture and history among other things).” This can be an encouraging sign of the ability of the Japanese to design English for their own local needs.

Also, new mental structures are not so much imposed on Japanese students, as sought out. The goals of foreign language education (as outlined by MEXT, 2011) are not only to be able to communicate, but also the “heightening [of] students’ awareness of being Japanese citizens living in a global community and cultivating a spirit of international cooperation.”

Essentially, Japanese policy makers feel that as a result of Japan's traditional insularity, Japanese students are not exposed to alternative ways of thinking. Thus English is not only a tool for communication, but a way of fostering innovative thinking and creativity in future generations. However, simply learning English for 3 hours a week is unlikely to change a lifetime of Japanese social indoctrination.

### **Is English dominant in Japan?**

Following the end of the Second World War, Japan has been dominated militarily by the USA, but has this dominance also extended to the linguistic level? Perhaps it is best to say that English is dominant in regards to non-Japanese languages in Japan rather than to Japanese itself. In expanding circle countries, such as Japan, Kachru (1985, p. 12) states that “understanding the function of English in this circle requires a recognition of the fact that English is an international language and that it has already won the race in this respect with linguistic rivals such as French, Russian and Esperanto.” In Japan, English is the most likely other language to see on official signs or heard on announcements. Also, as mentioned in the previous section, English appears on many products and private signs (despite often being incomprehensible to native-English speakers) because it is highly regarded. This emphasis on English exists despite the large numbers of Chinese and Korean tourists and residents in Japan. Although, due to ongoing tensions between these two countries and Japan over conflicting land claims and Japanese military action in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, English (representing current western allies) may seem a more neutral language politically to promote, in addition to being a more universal language and thus more pragmatic.

As a gross generalization, the Japanese tend to see the world in terms of “Japan” and “everything else”. Foreigners are not thought of as Americans, Europeans, or Africans, but rather as *gaikokujin* (other country people). In this context English is the representative of non-Japanese languages, so English represents internationalization in all its aspects, rather than just a language. For example, currently in elementary schools, English is not taught in “English class” but in “Foreign language activities class” In fact Hashimoto (2013, p. 28) goes so far as to argue that English instruction in Japan (such as the Global 30 Project) preserves Japanese as a national language as “...the degree programmes offered in English do not constitute part of the normal university curricula, but are aimed at bringing Others from overseas to educate them as Others in a carefully tailored but isolated environment.”

Despite massive public investment in English education, English is not present in most domains in Japan, except as an occasional convenience for the small non-Japanese English-speaking community. However, English has become increasingly dominant in academia and the Japanese multinational business community. Maeda (2010) notes that Japanese companies such as Rakuten and Uniqlo have switched to English for internal communications on a company-wide level. This is done because the companies are expanding world-wide and it is important for executives in multiple countries to communicate together. However, Maeda also notes that this development may favour those with language abilities over those with other equally important business skills and hurt the companies in the long run. Regardless, Japanese is not widely spoken outside of Japan and the Japanese economy is heavily based on international exports. Thus there are many practical reasons to learn a foreign language, and English is often considered the best choice.

Unfortunately, the English language profession is currently dominated by inner circle nations. This dominance is reflected in the preference for native-English teachers over non-native ones, despite having little or no training in teaching English. However, in the case of public schools, many JTEs often have very low levels of English ability (Nunan, 2003) and so the importation of native speaking ALTs by the JET programme is understandable. However, the lack of outer circle English teachers in Japan reflects the prestige attached to inner circle teachers. There is also a preference for inner circle ALTs from a diplomatic and economic point of view, as the purpose of the JET programme both to teach Japanese students about foreign cultures and English, but also for the ALTs to return to their home countries with knowledge of and hopefully warm feelings toward Japan (Metzgar, 2012). Thus the JET programme is a form of soft-power wherein the Japanese government seeks to promote goodwill within foreign countries and so the selection process for ALTs represents more of a political calculation regarding which countries it most wishes to influence rather than solely a question of which variety of English is best to learn. This may change in the future due to economic reasons. For instance, Japanese are increasingly studying English in places such as the Philippines at a fraction of the cost of studying in America (McGeown, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

Language plays many important roles in terms of the formation of individual identity and mental structures, as well as the maintenance of society. However languages can also be threatened by the spread and adoption of other languages such as English.

English is currently the most widespread language in the world, and there is much conflicting evidence with regard to the exact role EIL plays. Thus it is possible for English to have democratic, neutral, and imperialistic roles simultaneously.

In Japan however, English is seen as a practical means to enhance international economic competitiveness, as well as expanding students' mental structures. While dominant in some business contexts, English cannot realistically be considered a threat to Japanese, as it has been to other languages. This is due to the large homogeneous population of Japanese speakers, their strong cultural identity, and the high prestige of the Japanese language in Japan.

Ultimately, in Japan, national language policy favours English over other foreign languages because English has out-competed them. It is simply pragmatic to learn English due to its widespread use and the economic and military power of primarily English-speaking allied nations such as the USA. Hopefully, as English use expands, the linguistic dominance of inner-circle nations such as the USA will likely diminish. Japan has invested significant resources into English education and ideally in the future speakers will accept the validity of Japanese English, and concentrate on communicative competence between speakers rather than successfully mimicking an inner-circle accent. If Japanese people have the self-confidence necessary to make use of the resources they've invested in English learning, they will have a useful tool for international exchange on their own terms.

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