

# Business English across nations and cultures : To be Easternized or not to be : that is the question

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## Abstract

While the number of native speakers of English (NS) is estimated at 320 to 370 million, one quarter of the world's population, or 1.8 billion, are said to be able to communicate in English. About eighty percent of the interactions in English take place among non-native speakers (NNS). Far more than a half of them are living in the East. It is problematic, therefore, to divide people into NS and NNS with the notion of simple binary opposition. After all, (1) NS can be subdivided into many different groups with different varieties of English, (2) NNS's English levels also are different, and (3) the level of English used by NNS can be shifted from EFL to ESL, and from ESL to ENL statuses. Regardless of all these complicating factors, the global trend of using English as a lingua franca makes people wonder which English should be used, Westernized or Easternized. Considering the fact that the globalization of business activities and the use of English as a lingua franca are real challenges for Japan, I will discuss BELF (Business English as a Lingua Franca) from the cross-cultural perspective and wish to propose a new way of studying Business English for the Japanese.

## Introduction

Everyone seems to believe that 'English ability equals global business communication ability' – as if greater fluency in the English language automatically leads to enhanced abilities in global communication. Another belief is that learning "native" British or American English is or should be the goal of English-language education.

These are worrisome issues, I think. Why? In the first place, the parties in international business transactions are not necessarily native speakers of English. Indeed, the number of non-native speakers of English in the world far exceeds the number of native speakers. Moreover, it is now beyond dispute that Business English as a Lingua Franca, or BELF, has come to dominate as the language of international business over the past few decades. BELF is not the same thing as British or American English.

Japanese people should realize that international business communication practices have been dramatically changing, given a newly emerging language environment illustrated by such terms as BELF, Globish (Global English), Englishes, Basic English, IBL (International Busi-

ness Language), etc., all free from the demands of so-called “native English.”

The purpose of this paper is to voice an objection to the current policies of companies such as Rakuten Inc. and Fast Retailing Co. to adopt English as their official in-house language and their too-simplistic ideas that they can compete globally and survive by making English as their official language.

I firmly believe that English ability cannot be considered equivalent to global communication ability as the key to success in international business. They are two entirely different things. What is important to make one's global business communication effective and one's company successful today are modesty and communication based on consideration of others. I would like to clarify these claims in this paper.

My discussion will focus on three matters that are relevant to these claims. First, I will develop a definition of “Easternized English ;” what it is and how it is different from “Westernized English.” Second, I will discuss the reasons why English should be Easternized – particularly when BELF or “Business English as a Lingua Franca” is used for global business negotiations. Third, I will analyze some of the different communication styles between the West and East, including the distinctive features of Japanese language style before I propose some concrete ways to Easternize Business English within a BELF context.

## **I Definition of “Easternized English”**

First, let me define what some refer to as “English to be Easternized” – in other words, Western English. It is in part English spoken and written by Western people with the following features :

- Aristotelian rhetoric, usually with deductive sentence patterns ;
- Assertiveness and individualism ; and
- The influence of Christianity and its philosophy

I will give some examples of “Easternized English” with detailed explanations on the differences between the above Westernized English and Easternized English in the sections to follow.

### **1. Christianity and its influence on the Western rhetoric**

It is said that nearly 80% of the total populations in the USA and EU are Christians.

Here are some examples to show you how much Westerners' English is influenced by Christian ideas common among Western people. Let us consider the nature of the following statement :

\* The earth is covered with snow.

When learning the passive voice in their English class, Japanese junior high students learn this English as a model of the passive voice with a warning not to put "by" before 'snow' but to use "with," without being given any reasons why "by" should not be used. The sentence does not tell us who the actor is or who covers the earth with snow. Ohtsu (1993) explains that because it is a truism that Almighty God does it for Western people, that the earth is covered with snow "by God" is so self-evident for them that this reference to a divine Actor is omitted.

\* The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky. The train pulled up at a signal stop.

This is the English translation by Seidensticker (1957) of the opening sentence of the Nobel Prize winning Japanese novel *Snow Country* (Yukiguni) by Kawabata Yasunari (1947). However, there is a discrepancy between the original Japanese and this English translation. The original Japanese goes like this : "*Kunizakai no tonnelu wo nukeruto yukiguni de atta. Yoru no soko ga shiroku natta. Shingoujo ni Kisha ga tomatta.* (Having gotten out of the long tunnel, there it was already snow country. The bottom of the night became white. At a signal stop the train stopped)." In the original Japanese it is not expressed who and which were getting out of the tunnel at all.

The English translation suggests that a God-like observer is now looking down from above at the ground on the earth as if he were looking at a diorama. It is quite easy for us to find similar sentences as this one written with the God's-eye view in English novels and writings. Such constructions are uncommon in Japanese writing.

## 2. English with Asian rhetoric

Next, I would like to introduce some English passages employing what I call Easternized English, in terms of rhetoric. The first one is an example of English expressed with typical Asian modesty.

Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and a speaker of nearly perfect English because of her upbringing and her British educational background, once was interviewed by a *Time* magazine correspondent (*Time* 1989). During the interview she spoke about her father, General Aung San, the savior and founding father of Burma, and said, “. . . he was really a great man. I feel embarrassed saying this about my father, but the more you study his life, the more impressed you are.”

Asian modesty, a common communication pattern, is well expressed in this English utterance. If the interviewee were an American, he or she would never use the word “embarrassed” and might say something like “I am very proud of my father. He was really a great person, who did wonderful things for our country!” Almost all Easterners can understand the way she speaks, which clearly shows Eastern modesty as a rhetorical device to show humility and a desire not to place oneself above others.

A second example refers to cultural schemas involving Western direct speech contrasted with Eastern indirect speech that Kirkpatrick (2009) introduced in his *World Englishes*. This is an excerpt of a conversation that took place between an English expatriate police officer and a Chinese police constable in Hong Kong.

Chinese police constable : My mother is not well, sir.

Expatriate English Officer : So?

Chinese police constable : She has to go into hospital.

Expatriate English Officer : Well?

Chinese police constable : On Thursday, sir.

The reason for apparent misunderstanding, Kirkpatrick wrote, is that the Chinese speaker, while speaking excellent or at least Standard English in terms of grammar, is using Chinese cultural norms requiring indirect speech, and these influence the schema he adopts. “Actually he is probably hoping that his boss will realize what he wants and offer this before he has to ask for it,” wrote the author (Kirkpatrick, 2009, p.25) and continued, “In British English, however, it would be more usual to start with the request in this context and then give reasons if required. So, the ‘English’ request schema would give :

Chinese police constable : Could I take a day off please?

Expatriate English Officer : Why?

Chinese police constable : My mother is not well . . .”

It is interesting to note that this kind of Eastern rhetoric or dialog style is also common

among Japanese people. The following is a dialogue between a Japanese student and a professor (Kameda, 2008, p.52) :

Japanese student : Excuse me, but I have to have a talk with you.

Professor : Yes?

Student : I had a problem in my eyes last year.

Professor : So?

Student : My mother told me that I should go to see the same eye doctor again. We checked his availability at the hospital in Osaka and learned he would be available only on Wednesday.

Professor : Well?

Student : By the way, the doctor is a very famous oculist and renowned for his excellent skills ; that makes him very busy.

Student : Therefore, I am sorry, but I cannot attend your seminar class next week.

If he or she were a Westerner, the student would speak to the professor straightforwardly, “I am sorry, but I cannot attend your seminar class next week, because I will have to go and see my eye doctor on Wednesday.”

Incidentally, the organization of this student’s statement is the same as one that Li (1996, pp.73–74), a Chinese professor of writing, boastfully comments on as follows : “Basically we think a piece of writing should have four components : introduction, development, transition, and closure [*qi 3 cheng 2 zhuan 3 he 2*]. I think this basic format is still valid because they are in accord with the way we think. . . . We have three thousand years of writing history. . . . Teachers have the responsibility to teach a student the successful writing experiences of our forefathers.”

Hinds (1983, p.150) cited a description of the Japanese pattern of these four components as follows : *Ki* (First, begin an argument), *Shou* (Next, develop the argument), *Ten* (At the point where the development is finished, turn the idea to a sub-theme where there is a connection but not directly connected association to the overall theme), and *Ketsu* (Last, bring all of this together to reach a conclusion).

## II Why should English be Easternized?

It is hardly possible nowadays to divide the world into native speaker countries and non-native speaker countries with the notion of simple binary opposition. It may be also difficult to divide English speakers into the three groups widely known as the ‘inner circle’, the ‘outer cir-

cle' and the 'expanding circle' of three concentric circles.

### 1. Native speakers vs. Non-native speakers of English

The 'inner' circle represents native speakers; the 'outer circle' consists of second-language speakers in countries like India. The 'expanding circle' is the ever-increasing number of people learning English as a foreign language. The three circles were first described in this way by the sociolinguist Braj Kachru (1985). However, such a model as this one has failed to capture the increasing importance of the outer circle, and the degree to which 'foreign language' learners in some countries are becoming more like second language users.

As Graddol wrote in his *English Next* (2006, p.110), "In a globalised world, the traditional definition of 'second-language user' (as one who uses the language for communication within their own country) no longer makes sense. Also, there is an increasing need to distinguish between proficiencies in English, rather than a speaker's bilingual status". So, Kachru has recently proposed that the 'inner circle' is now better conceived of as the group of highly proficient speakers of English – those who have 'functional nativeness' regardless of how they learned or use the language." However, there is an opinion that, while admitting that it is better (less privileging of colonial countries), this revised model of Kachru's nevertheless still implies a hierarchy of fluency – that being highly proficient is superior to being less proficient (personal communication with Linda Beamer, former President of the Association for Business Communication, 11 December 2012).

Here are some possible reasons for my above claim that it is hardly possible or at least quite difficult to divide the world into either NS or NNS countries, or into inner, outer, and expanding circles :

- (1) The group of the NNS countries can be subdivided into many different countries with a wide variety of Englishes, even within the concepts of the outer circle and the expanding circle. According to Crystal (2003, pp.59–67), about 1.25–1.85 billion people currently use English as a communication tool. This far exceeds the number of native English speakers – approximately 329 million, which represents, Crystal claims, a conservative estimate of those who have learned English as a first language (L 1). It makes little sense to categorize close to one billion English users as simply NNS.
- (2) The populations of the NS countries include a wide variety of ethnic groups and peoples. There is no guarantee that the English spoken by nationals or residents of these nominally English-speaking countries is actually 'native-level' English.

(3) China, India, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan, etc. all have become economically powerful. Because of the tremendous expansion of the Eastern regions as business and financial centers, involving world-class factories selling into global markets, a large number of local business people have started using their own Englishes.

The *World Factbook*<sup>1</sup> compiled and issued by the CIA has noted that native English speakers represent only 4.68% of the world population, equal to about 329 million if the total world population is 7 billion, a number which actually was reached on October 31, 2011. Crystal (2003, p.67) wrote, however, in his *English as a Global Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed (2003), that a grand total of 2,236 million in 75 territories and other dependencies, well over a third of the world's population, are in theory routinely exposed to English.

Almost all these territories and other dependencies were actually once the colonies of Great Britain. There still exists an old world map published in 1897<sup>2</sup> whose caption arrogantly states that "British possessions are colored red," signifying that they are all exposed to the sunshine, which extended widely from the East to the West, covering the whole globe. This meant that "British possessions" were exposed to the sun all day long, and thus Great Britain could be called "The Empire on which the sun never sets."

Graddol (2006, p.29) reports that there were around 763 million international travelers in 2004, with nearly three-quarters of visits involving visitors from a non-English-speaking country travelling to a non-English-speaking destination. This demonstrates the scale of the need for face-to-face international communication and a growing role for global English as a lingua franca.

Thus, English is no longer the sole product of native English speaking countries. According to Crystal (2003, pp.46–47), in real terms these estimates (perhaps a third of the people in India are now capable of holding a conversation in English) represent a range of 30 million to over 330 million (for comprehension, with a somewhat lower figure, 200 million, for speech production). He further estimates that if current English-language learning trends continue and with satellite television and other sources of English increasingly available, these numbers will continue to increase. Another point is that the English language itself is rapidly changing given the input from so many NNS using global networks of communication.

I believe that even when doing business with their foreign counterparts, using this kind of

1 <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> Retrieved January 14, 2012.

2 Maproom, The British Empire, Retrieved January 9, 2012, from <http://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/pink-bits.htm>

English as a lingua franca, business people think and respond according to the way they were brought up, that is, according to their respective cultural backgrounds. Foreign businesspersons judge the merit of a business proposal or transaction largely from the standpoint of their own cultural, moral, and social values. They measure the advantages or disadvantages of a business association on the basis of reasoning that has been shaped by their cultural heritages, as represented by the rhetoric they employ and their different ways of thinking. Though different from each other, each rhetoric should be respected.

An American businessperson once boasted about the supremacy of Aristotelian rhetoric saying, "This 56 year old mind has been trained so extensively in the linear logic stemming from the Greek tradition of logic that I have difficulty following other patterns of thinking." It is all right for him to say this as long as he continues his business in either New York or Chicago, only on the American soil. However, if he wishes to expand his business to the world market, he may have to change such a small-minded attitude.

If he understood the importance of the Eastern world as a vibrant market and supplier, the American would know that while Aristotelian rhetoric has a history of 2,350 years and business English only four hundred years, Chinese people have three thousand years of writing history and an equally long tradition of rhetoric.

## **2. Wide use of English as a Lingua Franca**

In the modern global economy it is common for parties to share draft designs of products created by computer-aided design before they are sent to an outsourcing manufacturing company in another country. Then, the manufacturing outsourcing company uses computer-aided manufacturing to produce the product and export it to a finished-goods manufacturing company in yet another country. In both of these examples, the advances in modern IT have made it possible to create complex networks of international cooperation in which goods and services are supplied in 'modules'.

Manufacturers now tend to specialize in assembling certain modules in which they have particular expertise, while outsourcing work on component modules in which they have less expertise. In an increasing number of industries, the development of international networks is becoming standard practice in the global economy. In order to make this modularized production function smoothly, each party involved with the designing and production needs a lingua franca. Usually, the English language is used for their contact and inter-company communications.

I would like to examine the wide use of English as a lingua franca in the Western world



represented by the EU and the Eastern world represented by Asia. All the European countries are connected with each other on the continent, and the UK is connected by an underwater tunnel to the European continent. In Asia, in contrast, many countries are historically and geographically oceanic nation states separated from each other and scattered around, which has brought about many different and independent languages. Let us compare the differences or features of these two regions as follows :

#### EU :

- Population : A little less than 500 million people are living in the EU.
- Limited number of language families : Many of the European languages, such as the Romance and Germanic languages, are related to each other.
- Religions : Christianity is the dominant religion in Europe, a sharp and major difference from multi-religions Asia.
- Rhetoric : European rhetoric (Aristotle's rhetoric) has not been introduced into Asia, resulting in differences in cultural schemas.

#### Asia

- Population : A little less than 4 billion people are living in Asia. This accounts for more than a half of the total world population.
- Multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic nation states : Many of the states have multi-ethnic groups with different cultures and languages within their territories. For instance, in Indonesia it is said there are 200 to 400 different languages, not dialects, within this huge island nation state. In China and its neighboring states there are seven or more different Chinese dialects, which make communication between Chinese people from different regions utterly impossible, though they share the same language. We can make similar statements about South Asia, too.
- Religions : There are more than a dozen different religions in Asia, and religion has a great amount of influence on the language used in a given territory.
- Rhetoric : While the art of rhetoric in the West can be easily traced to specific origins in Classical Greece and Rome, in China and India rhetorical thinking is widely dispersed over diverse traditions. In Chinese rhetoric, for example, the three ethical and religious paradigms yield very different approaches to the self as effective agent, especially as far as communication is concerned. In India, Hinduism and Islamism also yield divergent rhetorical traditions.

The West and the East are thus different from each other. So, what can be workable in the West cannot be always workable in the East. You may say, for instance, that some differences in BELF employed by a group of Dutch, Norwegian, and British people do exist and can be identified 'at least to some degree'. But the differences are not great. This is because these languages are from the same family tree. The differences between the West and the East, however, are much more than the level of 'some degree', but are to a 'considerable degree'. Both have entirely different discourse styles derived from the different histories of rhetoric, and in Asia multiple styles exist.

Business communication in English as a *de facto* global language cannot be free from various types of communication gaps. Even if we use this *de facto* global language, it is often difficult for us to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds because the language, customs, common sense, etc., all differ from culture to culture and country to country. Words, after all, do not have meanings by themselves ; rather, meanings reside in people, as General Semanticists claim. Moreover, words used for sending and receiving messages represent only a part of the total concept to be communicated. Suzuki (2001) uses the image of an iceberg to discuss this issue :

The tip of an iceberg visible above the ocean is supposed to be about one-seventh of its total volume. The other six-sevenths are hidden under water. The part of reality which can be conceptualized by a word may be regarded as the tip of an iceberg rising above the water . . . Even if there are two icebergs, A and B, more or less shaped alike above water, it does not necessarily follow, as one can easily understand, that their shapes under the water are also similar to each other.

### 3. Communication styles and Englishes represented by each culture

It is true that the West and the East have different communication styles, which have been discussed extensively by language, communication, and anthropology researchers. Here are some representative comments.

Nisbett (2003, pp.60–61) noted in his *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why*, "Westerners teach their children to communicate their ideas clearly and to adopt a 'transmitter' orientation in which the speaker is responsible for the utterance, that is, the speaker is responsible for uttering sentences that can be clearly understood by the hearer – and understood, in fact, more or less independently of the context. It's the speaker's fault if there is a miscommunication. Asians, in contrast, teach their children a 'receiver' orientation, meaning that it is the hearer's responsibility to understand what is being said."

According to Hinds (1983, p.144) in his “Contrastive Rhetoric : Japanese and English,” “In Japan, it is the responsibility of the listener (or reader) to understand what it is that the speaker or author had intended to say. This difference may be illustrated quite effectively by an anecdote as follows : An American woman was taking a taxi to the Ginza Tokyu Hotel. The taxi driver mistakenly took her to the Ginza Daiichi Hotel. She said, ‘I’m sorry, I should have spoken more clearly.’ This, I take to be an indication of her speaker-responsible upbringing. The taxi driver demonstrated his listener-responsible background when he replied, ‘No, no, I should have listened more carefully.’”

In homogeneous cultures, which occur in several Asian environments, in which it is reasonable to assume that people share a large amount of common knowledge with their counterparts, communication styles of this kind are effective. This approach is associated with a common notion of the people in the East in which aggressiveness is not a virtue. On the contrary, it is considered virtuous in Japan, for example, not to force your conclusions on others ; thus speakers and writers show virtue by not proclaiming a conclusion immediately, and it is the duty of message receivers to grasp the meaning.

I think that communication has three major functions. The first is transmission and exchange of information (or, ideas). The second is confirmation of identity. And the third is formation of human relations. People use communication to transmit and/or exchange information with one another, to signal to other people who they are and what groups they belong to, and to form human relations with other people. If the prime purpose of communication is to play such roles as these, being fluent in English does not necessarily lead to better business communication. Eastern indirectness not only fosters modesty. It also facilitates the exchange of ideas and relationship building because it leaves room for other opinions. In this case successful business is not due to English fluency but rather to Eastern rhetoric.

Whatever the purpose of doing business may be, it is surely necessary to transmit and exchange pieces of information such as requests for and acceptability of product, price, place of delivery, etc. All business people must identify themselves as to who they are and whom they are talking or writing to, etc. In order to do good business that either party wishes, however, each has to form and deepen his/her relationship with his/her counterpart.

### **III How to Easternize Business English**

From these points of view, the goals of business people are to be good partners with each other and to make their personal or human relationships close and deep for the sake of both

parties. For this purpose Easternized English is very effective and plays an important role. First of all, with Easternized English you cannot help but put yourself into the position of others to bridge the gap between nations and cultures. While thinking of the receiver of your messages, you can still retain confidence in your own style of writing, showing in emails, for example, a deep consideration of others. The following writing examples illustrate how Easternized English can be successful, even with Westerners :

1. Dear Dr. Sooun Lee,

Sorry for contacting you by mail.

Here in Kyoto, our sweltering summer is now behind us,  
and the cooler days of our Autumn are in sight at last.

How are things with you?

2. We're having a lot of rain here in London.

Hope you are having some good spring weather in Tokyo.

The first example, from a Japanese student, was examined and edited by Bruce White, a British sociology professor. He wrote to me saying, "Wonderful! Always nice to see mixed styles and language – to give a flavor of one culture through the language of another. I find that I am often tempted to use such openings in my letters/emails to anybody these days – almost if I have been retrained in opening written conversations! Sometimes I have to remind myself that the non-Asian may not be used to the format! But so what! We all could do with the best that each other has to offer!" (personal communication 12 October 2010).

The second example is a model provided by an American business consultant. One of her customers had asked her, "I noticed that when Japanese write to me, they often mention something unrelated like the weather. Should I do the same?" She answered as follows: "Certainly. It's a Japanese letter writing custom to mention something general, such as the weather, or inquiring if someone has had a nice weekend, before getting into the business at hand. This is a way to keep the correspondence from seeming cold and impersonal. It's a good idea for you to do this too." Then she suggested the above example (Kopp, 2010).

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed new Englishes as a lingua franca for global business with the introduction of and proposal for "Easternized English," which is my coinage. Based on my belief that English ability cannot be considered equivalent to global communication ability, I clari-

fied the following claim in the paper : English and communication are two entirely different things.

The paper provided three matters that are relevant to this claim. First, I tried to give the definition of “Easternized English.” Second, I discussed the reasons why English should be Easternized – particularly when BELF or “Business English as a Lingua Franca” is used for global business negotiations. Third, I analyzed some of the different communication styles between the West and East, including the distinctive features of Japanese language style, before I proposed some concrete ways to Easternize Business English.

My point in the paper is that attempting to acquire fluency in the English language should not be the sole aim of learning to communicate in the global business environment.

I have argued in the paper that the English language, originally associated with Christian culture, has now become widely used by non-Western people in the world, particularly in Asia, a non-Christian region. However, differences in religious perspectives have fostered differences in communication styles.

Similarly, I have noted the differences in logical argument based on Aristotelian philosophy and Eastern philosophies. This issue requires further study. Finally, creating and lubricating personal relationships using Easternized Business English in written messages is especially important for international business people to make their business communications smooth and successful. What is important to make global business communication effective and successful today is modesty and communication based on consideration of others.

Thus it is important for us to consider the other person’s particular outlook on the basis of his cultural background before trying to communicate our thoughts and ideas in BELF. In other words, when communicating with people coming from different cultural spheres, each of us should have the attitude of putting himself or herself in the other person’s shoes. We can make our cross-cultural business communication successful if we first consider how the other person is going to respond to our dialogues or emails before we speak or write. In this regard, Dogen, a Zen Buddhist of medieval times in Japan, once instructed his disciples along the following lines (Matsunaga, 1975) :

An ancient saying tells us to think about something three times before saying it. This means, of course, that whenever we are about to say or do something, we should think it over three times before expressing it in speech or action. Most Confucians of old understood this to mean to withhold speech or action until a matter had been considered three times and found worthy each time.

If we could practice this Confucianism of old in our modern communication practices, we

would surely be able to make our cross-cultural business communication successful.

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