

Japanese imbued with English

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In my previous column, in which I discussed New Year's greetings, I mentioned that "*Yoi otoshi o omukae kudasai*" (Have a good year) was an expression influenced by English.

These days, one hears things like this regularly on TV. NHK announcers say "*Yoi ichinichi o osugoshi kudasai*" (Have a nice day) in the morning, and on Friday evenings one hears "*Yoi shūmatsu o osugoshi kudasai*" (Have a nice weekend). I don't recall ever hearing such expressions in the past. I am sure these are new creations influenced by English.

Another fairly common phrase that I believe is adopted from English is "*Oai dekite ureshii desu*" (Pleased to meet you).

Such Japanese that stinks of English (*eigo kusai nihongo*), can often be found in modern usage. Just to be clear, I am not speaking simply of the countless borrowed words (*gairaigo*), many from English, that have been incorporated into daily use. What I want to talk about today are some places where English thinking has directly affected Japanese phraseology, i.e., how people choose to say what they say.

First, I'd like to briefly touch on one interesting and peculiar way in which contemporary Japanese people use certain English words in their daily conversation.

Each of the following Japanese sentences contains a word which has been borrowed from English. However, the original English words are, surprisingly, not nouns, verbs or adjectives, but prepositions! Can you guess them?

(1) *Suzuki-san no hanashi wa itsumo abauto dakara...* (Mr. Suzuki's story is always ambiguous, so...)

(2) *Okane wa betsugaisha o surū shite shihara-waremashita.* (The money was paid by way of a separate company.)

In Sentence (1) above, *abauto* is used to mean "ambiguous," but as you may have guessed, this word is actually the English preposition "about." It is used as a noun (of the type considered to be adjectives that go with *na*), as in *abauto na hanashi* (a vague story) or *itsumo dōri abauto datta* (it was ambiguous as always).

Sentence (2) includes *surū shite*, which means "by way of." This was probably harder for you to guess. *Surū* is a Japanized version of the preposition "through." Because Japanese does not have [th], that sound is represented by the closest available sound: [s] in this case, like in *Sumisu* for Smith. Interestingly, here the "preposition" is used as a verb. To make it into a verb, that most versatile Japanese verb *suru* is added. To say "go through" you need to say *surū-suru*, whose *te*-form or gerund is *surū-shite*, or "going through" meaning "by way of" or "via."

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Far-fetched as these may appear, oddities of this type are frequently seen when foreign words are adopted. When I was a young boy, the French preposition "*avec*" ("with" in English) was often used to refer to young, usually unmarried, couples. The Japanese adaptation was *abekku*.

Even pronunciation has been much influenced by English. In my childhood days, I was puzzled by the katakana spelling of *ウ* with two dots, i.e. *ヴ*. It was on a big poster for *Gone With the Wind*, saying, "starring ヴィヴィアン・リー." With no knowledge of English, I could not read it. It was not until I studied English and came to know the strange [v] sound, produced by putting my upper teeth on my lower lip, that I realized she was "Vivian" and not "Bibian."

A change can also be found in the world-famous Japanese difficulty with [r] and [l] sounds. Because the American missionary and linguist James Hepburn (1815-1911) used "r" in romanizing Japanese, "r" became the general choice for representing a group of Japanese sounds; the actual sound, however, is neither "r" nor "l." Some young Japanese pop singers intentionally employ the English [l] sound in their Japanese lyrics. They think it's cool.

The effect that English has over Japanese can be seen to extend even as far as grammatical transformations.

Suki is usually represented by such English verbs as "like," "love" and "prefer," but *suki* itself is not a verb. Though many Nihongo textbooks classify it as an adjective, it is clearly a noun, because it behaves as a noun predicate. So, "*Suki desu*" can only be precisely translated as "Liking occurs/exists," which could therefore mean "I like you" or "she/he likes me" or many other possibilities, depending on context.

To explicitly say "X likes Y," most Japanese who know English would likely say "*X wa Y ga suki desu*," but I dare say that this unfortunately is not the only possible translation. Indeed, this Japanese could just as well mean "Y likes X." All that the Japanese means here is, literally, "As regards X, Y is the subject matter involved in the liking." In other words, the Japanese particles, *wa* and *ga*, do NOT correspond to the "case" notion (subject, object, etc.) found in English. In fact in Japanese, without supporting context, one cannot 100 percent clearly state "X likes Y."

As support for this surprising statement, however, I see and hear many people today saying "*X wa Y o suki desu*." This usage is new, and would have been considered incorrect in the past. Nowadays, most Japanese, including intellectuals and novelists, seem to have settled on using the particle "o" for "*suki desu*" to indicate the object of "like." This is for clarity's sake, but it is absolutely influenced by English. Despite "*suki desu*" being a noun sentence, people have strongly equated it with the English verb "like" in their mind, so they give an "object" to the "action." Perhaps this is Japanese that stinks of English of the highest order.