Contrasting Views of English Advertising Signs in Japan as 'Innovative' and 'Erroneous'

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Abstract

Inagawa (2015) and Barrs (2015) present contrasting views of the role of English language advertising signs in Japan. Inagawa sees signs as innovative and creative whereas Barrs sees signs as hindering communication of information to English speakers. Several commentators support the points of view of Inagawa and Barrs. Ideal reconciliation of the contrasting views presented by Inagawa, Barrs and others might be possible if a local variety of innovative English is preserved for Japanese speakers while, at the same time, mistakes are reduced by proof-reading.

Crystal (2004) recommends that the linguistic slogan for this century be known as 'eternal tolerance', replacing the 'eternal vigilance' prescriptive slogan of former times (p.128-129). A range of varieties of English has emerged, and this is indicated by the emergence of the plural use of the noun 'Englishes'. Jenkins (2007) provides an important survey of attitudes towards world Englishes, including Japanese English. Hino (2009) provides a robust defence of Japanese English. These sources reflect a myriad of opinions about Japanese English. Accordingly, the use of English in advertising signs in Japan merits attention.

Consecutive issues of *English Today* provide contrasting views of the role of English in these signs. Inagawa (2015) defends the uses of particular cases of these signs as "innovative and creative" (p.11), whereas Barrs (2015) identifies the tendency for mistakes in signs to be labelled as "error-laden *Japlish*" (p.33). One can only speculate to what extent these contrasting perspectives represent the views of Japanese speakers by

Inagawa, and the views of L1 English speakers by Barrs. Their differences in interpretation may be explained according to whether the English signs are viewed as innovative word play, or a straightforward means of conveying information. The English signs often succeed in their ability to communicate a message aesthetically to Japanese speakers, but fail in their role of communicating information to English speakers. Although it may be counterintuitive for English speaking visitors, most English language advertising signs in Japan are designed for a target audience of Japanese consumers.

Both Inagawa and Barrs select various English language signs in their studies to support their respective arguments. Inagawa describes signs with puns which are used in clever and arresting ways. She highlights the role of English signs in Japan as featuring humorous puns, "creating multiple layers of meaning" (p.13). She defends these usages as functional, flirtatious and frivolous, in response to perceptions by English speakers that these usages of English in signs are purely decorative. In contrast, Barrs presents signs which demonstrate flagrant disregard for the conventions of English spelling and syntax.

Inagawa's insights are similar to the arguments of Cook (2000), who provides a robust defence of language play, even in the absence of utility, because of the "sheer delight" (p.124) which it can provoke. He claims that language play is "among the uses of language which people most enjoy, remember and value" (p.122). Inagawa defends the transformation of English words into expressions which resemble Japanese, and asserts that they are not perceived as "a foreign entity encroaching on traditional ground" (p.16). Similarly, Seargeant has previously argued that English in Japan "has a prominent alternative presence within society which does not conform in any sense to ideals of universal linguistic communication" (2009, p.78). Many years earlier, Saito (1928, cited in Hino, 2009), appealed to the notion of adopting an original usage of English by Japanese speakers. Yet another perspective is provided by Piller, who considers allusions to foreign culture and languages in Japanese advertising to create an association of

"consumer products with the positive identities and ideologies of the linguistic and cultural other" (2011, p.98).

Interpreting English language signs in terms of their denotational value for L1 English speakers, Barrs identifies and explains commonplace errors; he argues that these tarnish the reputation of Japanese English, and are a source of ridicule on various websites. Barrs produces examples of errors which blatantly contravene the conventions of English writing which have been instilled in English speaking children since childhood. His interpretation echoes that of Piller, who explains that "foreign languages in advertising often sound ludicrously incorrect to actual speakers of the language with which an association is created" (2011, p.99). Such expressions create a barrier between speakers from the country of the origin of the word and those from the country where the word has been adopted and changed: "For by absorbing English into the Japanese language, by managing shifts in semantics and co-opting it for purely ornamental purposes, the language is, in effect, made foreign to the global community, and could thus be said to act as a further boundary between Japan and outside world" (Seargeant, 2009. p.85). Inagawa's stance differs from these views, in that rather than being purely ornamental, the semantically altered English signs in Japanese discourse are functional, communicative, and humorous, at least for their intended audience.

The contrasting positions of Inagawa and Barrs prompt a consideration of Seargeant's (2009) discussion of the disputed ownership of English. He asserts that the notion of what constitutes a language may be challenged, or even rejected (p.152). English phrases and loanwords are widespread in Japan, but Japanese English has not reached the stage of being a predominant mode of communication. Some argue that Japanese English can be used to project cultural expression and an authentic Japanese identity. The use of English in Japan is "both extensive and deep-rooted" rather than "superficial and faddish" (Seargeant, p.153). Seargeant observes how language practices allow for English "in some unlicensed and inadmissible form, to become a part of the fabric of Japanese society" (p.152). These

novel usages of English may appear inadmissible to L1 English speakers, but are an integral part of the linguistic landscape to Japanese speakers.

It may have been helpful if Inagawa and Barrs could have more deeply acknowledged the perspective of speakers from linguistic backgrounds other than their own. Inagawa could arguably have acknowledged the prevalence of English language signs that are confusing for English language speakers, and Barrs could have acknowledged the intelligent and playful use of bilingual puns that Inagawa has identified.

Ideally, the playful usages of these English language puns could be preserved for Japanese speakers, and the mistakes identified by Barrs could be reduced by proof-reading, as he suggests. Barrs' urgings may be particularly important in the upcoming Tokyo Olympics in 2020, during which English is likely to function as a lingua franca. Proof-reading could be borne as a mutual responsibility of L1 speakers of English and Japanese speakers of English. Van Parijs (2007) explains the inequality between L1 and L2 speakers when the language of the L1 speakers happens to be the lingua franca. He calls for L1 speakers to share some of the responsibility for clear communication, likening it to the need to share financial resources when the burden shouldered by various parties is in disequilibrium: "when it is in everyone's interest that one should always meet in the same place, it is fair that those who never need to do any travelling should be charged part of the travelling expenses" (p. 82).

Inagawa and Barrs present differing perspectives of English language advertising signs. The audience to whom the use of English in Japan is directed needs to be clarified. If international communication in English as a Lingua Franca in Japan overrides other concerns, Barr's view deserves greater attention. If the aesthetic pleasure of creative uses of bilingual signs for Japanese speakers overrides their communicative function for speakers of English as a Lingua Franca, Inagawa's perspective should be heeded.

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