

From High-latitude English to Low-latitude English: A Policy Suggestion Based on the Ecology of Language

Katsuhiko Ohashi

Abstract

Debate over "Japanese English" flourished in the 1970s and '80s, when one case after another was made for it by a sector of Japanese intellectuals riding on the tide of the then emerging "neo-nationalism" as it was called in contradistinction to the nationalism in pre-war days. In a way, this paper is an effort to rekindle the old flames. Yet the approach is totally different. So far from being related to politics or political ideology, this writing is an attempt at an applied ecology of language. As such, it borrows a number of ideas and concepts from the field of the ecology of language for the ultimate purpose of proposing the implementation of endonormative English into the English-language teaching curriculum in Japan.

Key terms: ecology of language, Rapoport's Rule, high-latitude varieties, low-latitude varieties, exonormatism, endonormatism

The Ecology of Language

Suppose someone says languages are lost as a result of environmental change, the betting is that nine people out of ten will dismiss the statement out of hand. But that is exactly what happened to thousands of extinct languages and what has been happening to as many endangered languages. Just think of the case of Hokkaido Ainu whose population is estimated to be around 16,000 as of today. In the name of development, they had been increasingly driven out of their home environments ever since the Meiji Restoration, with the result that their language shift was completed during the course of three generations. The Ainu language is no longer used as a means of daily communication and is remembered by fewer than 100 people of advanced age. Forced dissociation of the language with its original environment and a subsequent exposure of it to a hostile environment are accountable for the near-extinction of the Ainu language.

The ecology of language (Haugen, 1972) is based on the premise that all extinctions of languages have as their cause environmental change and that the preservation of language is part of human ecology. Admittedly, such an approach is useful when we grapple with the problems of language endangerment, which is why it has been in the spotlight in recent decades. However, the tenet and principle of the ecology of language as summarized above are found to be more widely applicable to various issues pertaining to languages and language teaching.

My intention in writing this paper is twofold. First of all, I intend to review the history of English-language teaching in Japan since the Meiji Restoration through a prism of the ecology of language. In so doing, my ultimate purpose is to propose a way out of the deadlock the English-language education in existence here has reached. That way, I would like to contribute to expanding the applicability of the theory of the ecology of language, which is the second component of my intention. To my knowledge, this is the first attempt to analyze the English-language teaching in modern Japan on the basis of the ecology of language, and as far as I know, no effort has ever been made to broaden the scope of the eco-linguistics' application in this direction.

The Spread of English

At an early 21st-century stage, English is designated as an official language in 55 of the 191 member states of the United Nations. In terms of geographical distribution, it is the single most widespread language not just in a contemporary world, but historically as well. A closer look at the situation, however, reveals that English in temperate climates is one thing and English in tropics and subtropics quite another. On the one hand, there are the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Falkland Islands for that matter, where English is either the sole official language or one of the official languages of the country and the first language of the majority of the population with the exception of South Africa. Since these countries lie in about the same distance from the equator as Western Europe, native speakers of British English could emigrate into these relatively congenial climates in large numbers, and thus the "pure blood" of the language could take root on the new soils.

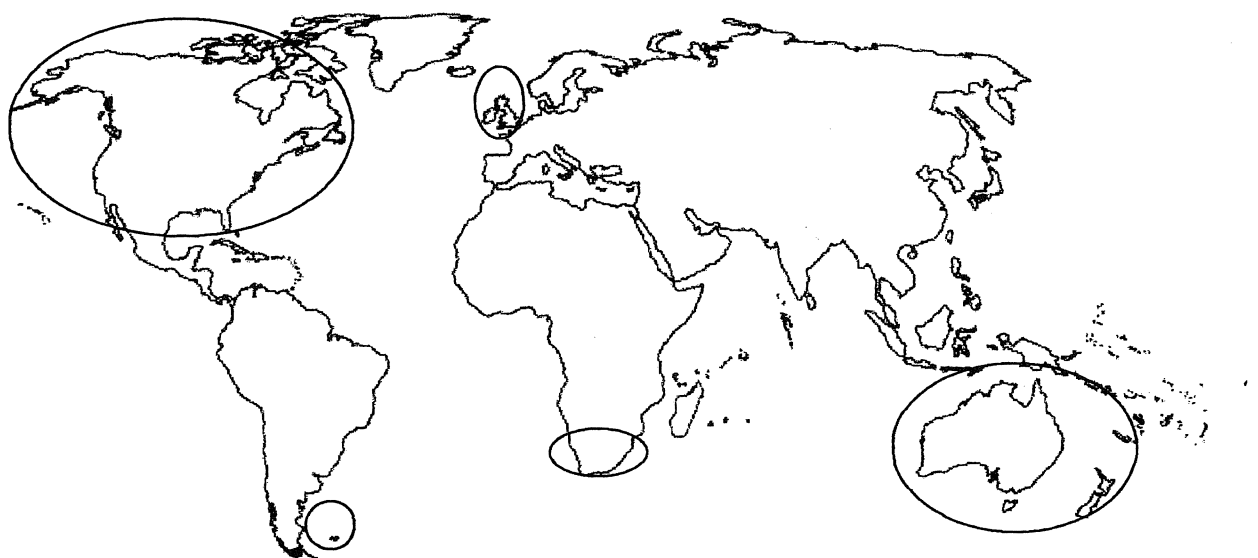


Figure 1 High-latitude English

That is not what happened to English in tropics and subtropics. The climates of those lower-latitude regions did not welcome Europeans and their languages. English people could not settle there, neither did the climates allow their language to stay in its original shape for long. What happened is that left alone by its speakers who fled north, the language gave in to the local environments, giving rise eventually to pidgins and then creoles, such as Tok Pisin (PNG), Bislama (Vanuatu), Jamaican Creole (Jamaica), and Krio (Sierra Leone), to name but a few. The fate that awaited English brought over to Asia was not very dissimilar because it was quickly localized as "varieties" (e.g. Indian, Sri Lankan, Singapore varieties of English) or else it had to lose ground and retreat eventually as in the Mid-East, Myanmar, and Malaysia. In some of those countries English may still be one of the official languages, but it is not the first language of the majority of the population.

In the field of ecological studies, scientists speak about an observation that the higher the latitude, the greater the latitudinal extent of a species range (Rapoport's Rule). Applied as a view of the language distribution on the globe, the same rule explains why European languages are more broad-niched than tropical languages and why English, originally a high-latitude language in a temperate climate, could advance into the other continents. Just think that the temperate climate has a larger territorial range than the tropical, subtropical, frigid or subfrigid climate and that it is spread over the two hemispheres as well. Just like British livestock could be transported and bred in the New World and New Zealand, British English could be transplanted in other temperate climates in northern and southern hemispheres. This very fact, however, indicates at the same time that English could not be transplanted in tropics and subtropics as successfully as it was in temperate climates.

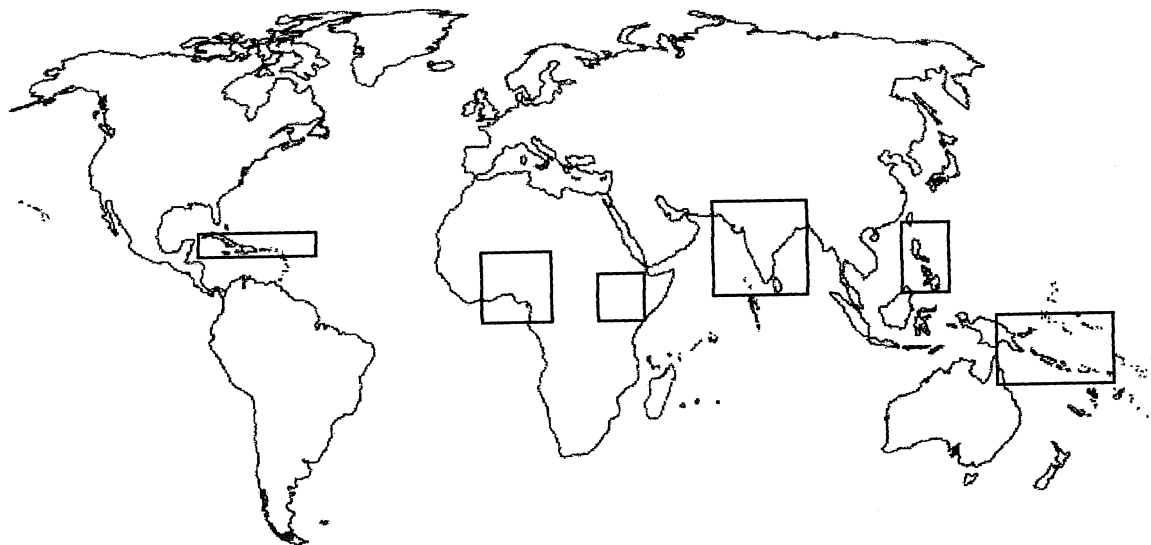


Figure 2 Low-latitude English

While the literature tends to lump together British English, American English, Canadian English, Indian English, Singapore English, and others as varieties of English or even Englishes, it is crucial to differentiate between English in settler colonies and English in non-settler colonies because the two types of English are vastly different in the degree of rooting. Put simply, English as it originally was has been so firmly rooted on the soils of temperate colonies that British, North American, Australian, New Zealand and South African English are mutually intelligible, whereas English in a non-settler colony is more specialized to a particular environment, and thus speakers of Singapore English and Fijian English, for example, may not be able to easily understand each other. In light of the importance of differentiation between the two types of English, I suggest that the first type be called "high-latitude English" and the second type "low-latitude English."

English and Japan's Natural Environments

We have seen how movement of people was a key factor to the successful transplantation of English in the New World, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa and that this biological expansion of Europeans did not occur to the moist tropics and subtropics, which resulted in localization of English in such forms as pidginization and then creolization in tropics and indigenization in subtropics. Given this dichotomy, where does English in modern Japan place itself?

Climatically, Japan is a product of subtropical, temperate, and subfrigid climates combined. To the south of the main island of Honshu lie the Ogasawara Islands, the Amami Islands and Okinawa that are entirely subtropical. At the extreme north of the archipelago—barring the debate over the ownership of the Kurile Islands—is Hokkaido that lies within the subfrigid temperature zone. It is to be admitted that in terms of geographical range, the largest part of Japan is temperate. Unlike Western Europe, however, the temperate part of Japan is under the direct influence of tropical monsoons, thus making the weather in such areas much like that of the subtropics, if not the tropics. The mix of high temperature and extreme humidity during the summertime in, say, Tokyo, Kyoto, or Hiroshima is daunting enough for Europeans and North Americans. Precisely because such climatic environments are unhealthy and difficult for them to acclimatize to, there has been a negligible number of Caucasian settlers in modern Japan. These hostile natural environments, coupled with Japan's adverse social environments, such as the parochialism of the country's immigration policy, citizenship law, or employment system, have precluded English from taking root in its earth for the same reason that English could not take root in the tropics or the subtropics without being seriously corrupted. In the sense

that English was carried over to modern Japan without mass movement of its native speakers, Japan is clearly on the low-latitude side of the dichotomy. Yet this is an unfair comparison, indeed, because whatever transformation English might undergo in Ghana, PNG, India or the Philippines, its offspring did take root there, whereas in Japan English remains a heterogeneous language not used by Japanese for internal communication. If there is one type of English that is here to stay in Japan, it is a multitude of English-derived loanwords, such as *bācharu* (virtual), *infura* (infrastructure), *risutora* (restructuring, downsizing), *yūbikitasu* (ubiquitous), *pawapo* (power point), and so forth.

From Exonormatism to Endonormatism

After reviewing Japan's history since its contact with English in terms of the language's maladjustment to Japan's environmental conditions, we now begin to take a proactive look at the current situation and, in the belief that producing a significant number of English-speaking Japanese is the pressing need to be met, we will make a string of proposals with a view to having English rooted in Japan. Our approach remains that of the applied ecology of language.

The view we have encountered in the previous section that Japan largely belongs with the low-latitude, non-settler group of countries awakens us to a realization that the exonormative standards must be given up in favor of an endonormative one. It is a matter of common knowledge that British English used to be enthroned as the only and supreme model for Japanese learners to emulate in pre-war Japan; with the end of the second world war as a turning point, their desideratum has shifted to American English, whose heyday still continues to this day. Whether it be British or American, either one of these exonormative standards is the language whose first-language speakers are virtually non-existent inside Japan. As long as the educational priority is given to the acquisition of reading comprehension, which was the case with English education in pre-war days, such exonormatism is not a serious hindrance. But how can a group of, say, 200 high school students develop productive skills of an exonormative English when they share one native speaker with three to five equally-sized high schools? A theoretical and practical turnaround is necessary to reconsider this 140-year-old practice.

In search of an alternative approach, we do not have to go as far down as the geographically low-latitude countries. Hong Kong, which geographically is not in sufficiently low latitudes yet can be grouped with the low-latitude countries in the same way as Japan is, provides a shining example of educational endonormatism. Its climatic environment being more inhospitable to Westerners than Japan's, Hong Kong was another of non-settler colonies until 1997. During the 100 years when it was under colonial rule, Hong Kong Chinese twisted British English to their own way. Or rather, in the absence of native speakers to be modeled on, they could not help but localize it. That is how Hong Kongers became speakers of English, albeit of an endonormative type. Both before and after Hong Kong's turnover, English education in that territory has been typified by a scene of Chinese teachers teaching English to Chinese students, thereby recycling "English, HK-style" (Tongue and Waters, 1978).

The irony about modern Japan lies in the fact that it has not obtained either an exonormative or an endonormative standard. While in pursuit of an impossible dream of acquiring an exonormative standard without living models to turn to, Japanese have never thought about "Japanese English" positively and whatever embryos of an endonormative English have been brushed aside by none other than English teachers. The end result is that English does not exist in Japanese as yet. From the look of its language education policy, the Japanese government seems still intent on pursuing exonormatism. Its infatuation with the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program is typical¹. Private universities are increasingly reliant on native speakers when it comes to teaching English. Businesses and industries are even more aggressively exonormative. Despite all this, English is not likely to make Japan its home for the simple reason that native-speaker English can be a viable model only in settler environments, such as the U. S., Canada and New Zealand, where the majority of the population are mother-tongue speakers of English. Suppose a class consisting of 40 Japanese students and a native-speaking teacher use English for in-class communication for three years. The probability is that Japanized English of the students will prevail over the native speaker's English. Why hasn't this happened in

actuality? That brings us to our second observation-cum-suggestion.

From Learning to Using

"Use it or lose it" is a truism, yet this truism is worth recalling and digesting when we reconsider our language-teaching problems. Thousands of language losses occurred because people ceased to use those languages, and thousands of languages are being lost because people no longer use them. Let us look back on Hokkaido Ainu. What Fishman (1991) calls "intergenerational language transmission," which is considered the most crucial dimension in evaluating the vitality of a language, is no longer observable with regard to their language. Ainu children nowadays are brought up and educated entirely in Japanese—a clear sign that the Ainu language is at risk. Ethnically minded Ainu youth may attend Ainu-language classes. But learning that language does not guarantee its maintenance. If the Ainu language is to be preserved, there must remain a community of its users.

Getting back to the question posed at the end of the previous section—why the localization of English did not happen in Japan—we can now come up with a definitive answer: It is because English has not been used in modern Japan. How, in the first instance, can people vernacularize a language that they do not use? Here again, our truism leads us to a realization that English cannot be acquired by a mere dint of learning it any more than the Ainu language can be maintained by merely attending an Ainu-language school. It is in this sense that the modern Japanese practice of offering English as a school subject should be reconsidered. In fact, school-subject approach is a frequently adopted policy when the government of a country sends minority languages or socially weaker languages on the road to extinction. The examples of Korean in Korea under the Japanese rule and Chinese in Hong Kong until 1974² spring to mind. Also, you may call to mind the museum-bound languages in present-day Canada labeled with ironical aptness as "heritage languages."³

The lesson we can learn from the age-old cliché "Use it or lose it," which is consonant with the lesson to be drawn from Japanese learners' collective experience of some 140 years of contact with English as a school subject, should be that there is a serious gap between learning English and using it. It is about time that English was used rather than merely learned. In this regard, there has been a notable development in the recently-proposed government language education policy. Starting April 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) instituted English immersion into the curriculums of a selected number of high schools across the country as part of its "strategic plan to produce Japanese with English abilities." Although the domain of English is, of necessity, restricted to school subjects, this is really a viable solution for the sake of letting students use English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Those "Super English Language High Schools"⁴ as they are nicknamed by the Ministry are not companionless because there has been a growing number of universities and graduate schools that offer discipline courses in English, such as Miyazaki International College, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Nagaoka University of Technology, the University of Aizu, and Akita International University, among others.

Policy Option—from making it happen to helping it happen

The suggestions made in the preceding two sections—"From Exonormatism to Endonormatism" and "From Learning to Using"—can be sewn together by arguing that offering English as a language to use will eventually lead to the generation of a localized variety. In order to better grasp the point of this argument, it is instructive to look again at the case of "English, HK-style." That endonormative English was not something given top-down by the government—how could the British make and give it?—but it is the product of a populace who used English their own way and passed down their version of English through generations. The same can be said about "Singlish," Philippine English, Indian English, and other low-latitude varieties. If only English is used by local people in non-settler situations, its localization will happen as a natural course of events. This is attested to by the fact that the political leaders of the former British or American colonies only chose to keep using English internally as an official language and a medium of instruction at schools, leaving it to be fostered bottom-up by the people. In his attempt to criticize the excessive

advocacy of Japanese English back in the 1970s and '80s, a certain Japanese linguist made a remark publicly to the effect that "proponents of Japanese English merely cry for its needs and do not begin to write its grammars or compile its dictionaries."⁵ We now know that this is an untenable criticism. Since a localized variety is not something to be imposed top-down but something that happens bottom-up, all the policy makers have to do is help it happen.

Kinds of policy create kinds of English. Promotion of the use of English among students is a policy option worth experimenting. Just let Japanese students use English across the curriculum, and the rest will take care of itself. As candidates for constituents of Japanese English, we already have a host of user-generated phonological features unique to Japanese speakers of English. Further, at the level of pragmatics, an extremely implicit way of speaking English (e.g. overuse of 'maybe,' 'probably,' 'I think...') built on Japan's high-context communication culture, an inductive organization of ideas frequently reflected in Japanese-English discourse, a high-considerateness style (i.e. a non-imposing way of taking part in conversation) peculiar to Japanese, and other traits are shared by Japanese speakers of English. What has happened thus far is that the frequent occurrence of 'I think...' has been frowned upon as a typical "Japlish" by none other than English teachers, and uniquely Japanese pronunciations such as [s] as replacement for [θ] and [r] as replacement for [l] have been the butt of everyone's jokes, which has led to the mass production of tongue-tied Japanese. Such counterproductive attitudes must be given up for the cause of Japanese English. Lin Yutang (1940) once remarked that "if Japanese are to be fluent speakers of English, they must be remolded as something other than Japanese, or else their English must be remolded as something other than English." The new policy must be based on endonormatism (or the belief in remolding English) instead of the traditional exonormatism (or the belief in remolding Japanese people).

Conclusion

As stated in the first section, the ecology of language has been inseparably associated with language endangerment and applied almost exclusively to the study of problems in that specific area. Breaking the ground, I have attempted to broaden the scope of its application and have used its perspectives and concepts to analyze the English education in modern Japan. In an effort to be consistent with this approach, I intentionally refrained from geopolitical discussions and historicist analyses. The reader might stop and shake his or her head where, for example, Japan was equated with Hong Kong and other erstwhile colonies of Britain and America. I feel as if their demurring were ringing in my ears that it is not for ecological reasons so much as because Japan has never been colonized by any English-speaking country that English has not been rooted in Japan. In defense, all I could say is that the ecology of language is premised on the assumption that any human activities, including geopolitical and historical developments, are at the mercy of environments and that Japan was not colonized by any Western power due primarily to its hostile environment to Westerners. By the same token, it must be restated that English as it is in its homelands cannot be rooted in Japan because it does not find a niche there. My intellectual experiment must be brimming with flaws. Be that as it may, I expect it provides a fresh viewpoint from which to revisit the past in order to create a future.

Notes

1. Besides extending the maximum period of assistant language teachers' contract from three to five years, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) proposes the employment of "excellent assistant language teachers of foreign nationalities" as full-time teachers. (A text analysis of the MEXT website article indicates that by the "excellent assistant language teachers of foreign nationalities" they mean "native English speakers" because the two phrases are used interchangeably in the same online article.) Furthermore, placement of ALTs in elementary schools that teach English is proposed. (MEXT, 2002 [Online]).

2. Chinese was designated as Hong Kong's second official language in 1974.
3. Domestic languages of Canada other than official and aboriginal languages are generalized as heritage languages. (Laponce, 1995)
4. "Super English Language High Schools," which started in April 2002 with 16 high schools across Japan designated as such, are expected to be increased up to 100 by 2005. Some of the already designated schools are experimenting with the immersion program.
5. See Japan Esperanto Association (1987), *International Languages in the Context of Linguistic Diversification*, page 9.

References

- Fishman, J. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters 76.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Haugen, E. (1972). *The Ecology of Language*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Japan Esperanto Association (1987). *International Languages in the Context of Linguistic Diversification*.
- Laponce, J. A. (1995). *The Language System and the Language Policies of Canada: Functionalities and Dysfunctionalities*. Draft prepared for the Budapest Conference of 9-12 September.
- The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (07/12/2002). Developing a strategic plan to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities." [Online] <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/news/2002/07/020901.htm>
- Tongue, R. and Waters, D. (1978). English, HK-style. *South China Morning Post*. 29 Sept.
- Lin, Y. (1940/1982). *Shina no yūmoa* ("Old China's Humor"). Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten.

