

7o Challenge More Better Joke: English Mistakes Commonly Made by Japanese People



Author Jillian Yorke

By Jillian Yorke

Introduction

Anyone who has lived in Japan for some time, or had a long-term connection with Japanese people, will have come across mistakes in the use of English that Japanese people repeatedly make. After a while, these become familiar, and you can often work out where they come from; that is, what the original Japanese expression or thinking in the speaker's mind was. This article looks at some of these frequent mistakes and the reasons behind them.

Only One Possible Correct Answer?

Many of the English mistakes commonly made by Japanese people come from the grammatical and other differences between the two languages. Perhaps the best-known or most obvious of these in written English is confusing “l” and “r” in word spellings, e.g., light/right, long/wrong, etc. This happens even with those with advanced English ability and is understandable, since there is no distinction between these two sounds in Japanese. It is also common to get “she” and “he” mixed up, and to make mistakes in the use of singular versus plural (e.g., “Nature are”, “furnitures”), since these distinctions are generally not made in Japanese. Spelling mistakes of similar words are common too, such as “corporation” for “cooperation”.

Another reason for the English mistakes frequently made by Japanese people is the tendency for a particular Japanese expression to be taught and memorized as a fixed English translation, with no flexibility or space for adjusting the term according to context. The use of multi-choice answers for many questions in English exams in Japan reflects this. These exam problems are seen as having only one possible correct answer, while to a native English speaker, often several of the possible responses are acceptable, not only one. Below are some other examples of English mistakes that Japanese people tend to make.

Literal Thinking

In Japanese the concept of ... *ni chosen suru* (“to take on the challenge of ...”) is generally seen as a positive thing, but it cannot

be translated directly as “to challenge” — this does not make sense in English, or else it has a different meaning. Further, the adjective “challenging” often has a decidedly negative nuance, e.g., “he is a very challenging person” does not mean that he is a person that likes to take on challenges, but rather that he is a difficult person, and it is a challenge (difficult) for other people to be with him. I have been told that Koreans also often use this expression in the same way that Japanese do.

An opposite kind of example is “expect”, which Japanese people tend to think of as always a positive thing (as in *kitai suru*), but in fact in English it can also be used in a negative sense, such as “we are expecting a typhoon.” “Intelligent” and “intellectual” are sometimes misunderstood; intellectuals are not necessarily intelligent. Another example is “interesting”, which can sometimes mean actually NOT all that interesting, depending on the context and nuance. Japanese also tend to use “piece” when referring to the number of something, while in English this is used only in certain cases.

“Thinking in Japanese” and translating a Japanese phrase or term into English literally is a common error. One example of this is *ni taisuru*, which is frequently translated as “against” when in fact the opposite word “for” would be more appropriate, such as “treatment against cancer” instead of “treatment for cancer”. Another example is “welcome home” for *okaeri nasai*, which may be what is meant by the speaker, but which is almost never used in English.

Picking up an English word and then making it into a Japanese expression can have strange results. I recently experienced a Japanese person saying *kanojo wa bureku shimashita*, with the intended meaning of “she had a lucky break”, but I had no idea what was meant. To me, this sounded more like “she broke something” or “she put on the brakes” (i.e., stopped doing what she had been doing) — that is, the sense I took from this expression was the opposite (a negative meaning) to what had been meant (a positive meaning). I recommend checking that the word or phrase you want to use really is English, rather than “Janglish”.

A grammatical mistake I have often seen in Japan is “and etc”. Sometimes mistakes are also made in regard to time and verb tense, such as “I will visit Japan recently” (“recently” refers only to the past and cannot be used for the future). Prepositions are also often

difficult for Japanese people; examples of this kind of mistake include “I need your comments to” (it should be “comments on”) and “participate on” rather than “participate in”. “By” and “until” are also often confused.

Be careful also of redundancy, such as using “follow after” when simply “follow” would be enough. (Many of these types of mistakes are not limited to Japanese people but are also made by native English speakers.) Another common error is “I have ever been” (from the Japanese *itta koto ga aru*); the “ever” is unnecessary. Sometimes Japanese speakers tend to omit “when” or “if” at the start of a sentence. Lastly, “more better” is still used frequently by Japanese speakers of English.

Crazy Katakana

Japanese are ingenious at coming up with all kinds of hybrid English expressions that are often wonderfully evocative. But beware! They are likely to not work when used as is in English. This can often come as quite a shock to a Japanese person who assumes that the expression was actually English in the first place. A *katakana* term I came across recently is *recepto*, meaning “health insurance claims”, which I assume comes from “receipts” but would not be understood by a non-Japanese to mean that. English words are also often abbreviated drastically when used in Japanese, sometimes in odd ways, such as *besu-appu* for “an increase in base pay”. (The opposite can also occur, with a word or phrase that would normally be shorter in English being said in full by Japanese speakers, such as the “at mark” expression to signify the “@” sign that Japanese people often use, whereas a native English speaker would say simply “at”.) Other examples include *kyara* for “character”, *biiru* (beer), *fuirumu* (film), and *howaito* (white). The *o-rai, o-rai, orai* (from “all right”) often used by Japanese people when reversing a car is generally not understood by a non-Japanese hearing it for the first time. Again, all of these work fine in Japan; they are a problem only when you try to use them in the same way in English-based cultures.

Also, even if the *katakana* expression is based on a real non-Japanese word, its origin is not necessarily English, and the monolingual listener who knows only English might not understand it. Examples of non-English *gairaigo* (foreign loan words) abound in Japanese, such as *arubaito* from the German. Even if the word actually is English, its pronunciation could well be quite different, such as *sutoraiku* for “strike” and *shidoru* for “cider”. Or it could be an English expression that is valid only in one particular country, and not understood elsewhere.

Further, the term itself may apply to something that exists or is done only in Japan, and so would not work in any other culture. I recommend that Japanese people do their best to put aside *katakana* terms as much as possible, and learn afresh what the appropriate English term in each situation actually is. Learning “*katakana*-speak” can be a real challenge for non-Japanese people. I see it as neither Japanese nor English, but an entirely other language.

As for people’s names, rather than trying to “*katakana*-ize” them, which often does not work well, it’s preferable to simply listen closely to how the names are actually pronounced in English, and try to mimic that. Talking of names, an English error I have frequently encountered is the use of “Miss”, “Ms.” or “Mr.” with a person’s first name, whereas it should be used only with their surname, that is, “Miss Susan” is incorrect, while “Miss Smith” is correct. Also, when referring to yourself, for example when answering the telephone, it is preferable to use your full name rather than just the surname, as you would in Japanese. That is, “Jiro Tanaka” or “This is Jiro Tanaka” or “Jiro Tanaka speaking” rather than just “Tanaka”.

Just Joking

Having been in the position of being expected to do so myself, I know how challenging it can be to translate a joke or humorous story from one language into another. But speakers and presenters often have no idea how difficult this is, and tell the same jokes and make the same puns or wordplays that they would when speaking to an audience from their own cultural and linguistic background. However, even if it is translatable, the joke is unlikely to be funny in the other language. A helpful suggestion that I was given long ago by a professional interpreter is, if the speaker tells a joke, do not bother trying to interpret or explain it, but instead simply tell the audience, “The speaker just made a joke” and hope that they will be kind enough to laugh.

Another tricky area is “machine translation” (MT) whereby computer software does an automatic translation for you. For the Japanese-to-English language combination, this still often has very dubious results, with the software apparently “reading” the Japanese characters literally, such as coming up with “three moons” when the intended meaning was “March”. Another example that I’ve encountered is “Chinese conference” when the original Japanese expression was *kaigi-chu* (“meeting in progress”). Some Japanese people assume that computer software does not make mistakes and must be correct, but if you do use MT, be sure to have an English expert check the document carefully afterwards.

Take the Risk

All the above examples might make a Japanese reader want to avoid using any English at all in case they make an error, but please go ahead and take the risk. It is much better to speak and make a mistake than to say nothing at all.

(My e-book on English proverbs can be downloaded from:
<http://quickbooks.impress.jp/?p=3794>)

JS

Jillian Yorke worked for the Public Relations Office, Minister’s Secretariat of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in Tokyo as an English editor and checker for over a decade. She now lives in New Zealand, where she is curator of the Japan Library: Pukapuka, as well as a freelance writer, translator, and interpreter, and often visits Japan.