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著者(英)	Sachiko Kotani
journal or publication title	Senri Ethnological Reports
volume	49
page range	59-64
year	2004-02-27
URL	http://doi.org/10.15021/00001743

English as a Lingua Franca? Reflections of a Student

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英語は共通語か？：一学生の見解

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Abstract

After experiencing study and work in Japan and the USA, I offer personal insights into the use of English in a range of social and academic contexts. The discussion leads to wider consideration of the role of English in research internationally. Only by being more connected with many different languages and academic cultures can English become a *lingua franca* in a real sense.

本エッセイは、日本と米国における学生生活にもとづく個人的な経験という観点から、研究活動の手段としての英語という言語の役割について考える。現在日本の大学院に在籍する一人の学生が、英語をめぐる、様々な社会的および学術的な場面で何を感じ、どのように行動してきたのか。このような見識を踏み台にして、人々の暮らしに根ざした生活の言葉としての英語の世界の存在とともに、研究手段としての英語の限界や排他性を指摘する。今日の国際的なレベルでの研究成果の発表および受容という点で、英語や英語圏の学術様式は圧倒的な力をもっているようにみえるが、英語を世界の共通語と呼ぶには、英語以外の言葉を核とする世界の多様な学術様式ともっと積極的な連携関係をもつべきではないだろうか。

Many say that English is a *lingua franca*. I am a non-native writer and speaker of English who has struggled with, made use of, and questioned my relationship to this language. The goal of this essay is to explain what this has meant and means for a Japanese student who has studied abroad, in the United States of America.

When I was thirteen, I started studying English as a school subject just like other students in Japan. English was my first foreign language. I didn't study it just to pass tests or succeed in entrance exams. I studied English hoping that this foreign language could help me meet and communicate with a variety of people beyond my Japanese-speaking world. After graduating from university in Osaka, Japan, I spent three years as a master's student in geography at California State University, Hayward, U.S.A. This state college was located in the San Francisco Bay Area, California, where more than one out of four residents was foreign-born. The campus

population reflected the racial, ethnic and linguistic diversities of the area. At the campus cafeteria, for example, I saw students clustered into different small groups talking not only in English but also in Arabic, Spanish, Cantonese, Japanese, Vietnamese and so forth. Classes were also taught by teachers from various cultural backgrounds. For instance, I had a Korean professor in social work, a British associate professor for my sustainable development seminar, a cartography teacher from Hong Kong, and a Chinese American scholar on my thesis committee.

Despite all this diversity, in the classroom, I was exposed to a single language. Except for some foreign language classes, all instruction was provided in English. Students were expected to master the skill of presenting their ideas in an academic fashion using American English, and this was measured by the Writing Skill Test (WST). Everyone was required to take this test before graduation. If they fell short of passing, they would either have to pay another 30 dollars to take it again, or complete English remedial courses. Otherwise, no degree was given. Actually, I was not a very good student and had a hard time passing the WST and keeping up with the classes. I was so preoccupied with the tasks of reading and writing in my second language that I sometimes didn't even know what I was actually learning. I was not prepared for this kind of situation. I didn't expect it to happen after completing five-months of English language training at UC Berkeley Extension in addition to nearly ten years of studying English in Japan. Didn't I enter the school with a sufficient TOEFL score? With this and the unavoidable daily hassles and stresses of living in a foreign land, I was exhausted. One day, I became sick and could not take a final for the quarter. Confronted with my own limitations, for the first time in my life, I felt helpless and useless about myself.

In contrast, outside the classroom, I was surrounded by multiple languages and English spoken with various accents. I was treated as a skilled girl who can handle English. For a part-time job, I was working as a cashier at a campus cafeteria that was owned by an immigrant woman from Hong Kong. The floor staff were mainly Chinese-speaking from different national and cultural backgrounds, and the kitchen staff consisted of one Chinese man and a number of Spanish-speaking Mexican men. Although English was used to deal with customers and communicate among staff, English was not necessarily the principle means of communication. Almost all staff members were from foreign countries, and we mainly served typical American style meals for lunch and dinner, with cheerful Spanish radio songs coming from the back of the kitchen. One of the tasks assigned to me was to write daily menus on the board in English since I was one of the best English-literates among the staff. With all the senses of inferiority experienced through my academic performance at an English-centered institution, it was ironic and sad to find myself regaining a sense of self-worth by using English among those who had less competency than myself.

My English skills also turned out to be useful for seniors at a local Korean senior center. Since many of the center members had immigrated to the United States at older ages, they tended to have more difficulty in learning and using the English language. One of my teachers at university was serving on the center's executive board, and this Korean immigrant scholar suggested I volunteer there. Regardless of my inability to comprehend Korean (at that time), the center welcomed me and appreciated my work. With a certified English language instructor, I helped Korean immigrant seniors learn English. Although I was pleased that I could be of use, deep inside, my feelings were ambivalent. I was really not sure if I was credible as a teacher of English. I was neither a native speaker nor an English-Korean bilingual. What was more confusing was that some of the Korean seniors proceeded to tell me about their lives in Japanese. This was unexpected even though I knew some members of this generation could speak Japanese. I also knew that their Japanese language skill was acquired under Japanese colonial rule in their homeland or elsewhere (1910-1945). When these foreign-born elderly Koreans were young, they had been forced to learn Japanese history instead of Korean history, and the Japanese language in place of the Korean language. Knowing this colonial history attached to the Japanese language, I had never imagined that I would converse with former colonial subjects of Imperial Japan by using the Japanese language. As a Japanese national, I didn't want to be insensitive or imperialistic, or to put it more honestly, I didn't want to be perceived that way. However, I then had to face the fact that I didn't know how to speak Korean. My choice was either to withdraw or to stay and listen to their Japanese-language stories, and I chose the latter.

Eventually, with tremendous support from the Korean seniors, I could transform our conversations into a master's thesis. While writing this thesis, I had to face again the challenge of the English-only academic system. I had to write about Japanese-speaking Korean immigrants in my second language, English. Even though Japanese remained the main language of communication between the elderly Korean immigrants and myself, being exposed to a multilingual and intercultural environment, our conversation was often a mixture of three different languages: Korean, Japanese, and English. Each of these languages had a different significance for the relationship between the Korean seniors and myself, and for each of us as individuals. For some elderly Koreans, Japanese was their first language. The complexity in nuances was beyond imagination.

While working with elderly Korean Americans and their life stories of multiple migration and colonial experience, and throughout the writing process, I had to deal with a sense of incompatibility between the complex subject and my effort to tailor it into a single cultural and linguistic format, the format of academic English and argument. I could not help but find it a contradiction to commit myself to English-language scholarship after stating in my preface that oral life history has the

potential to give voice to those who do not speak the dominant language of a society. For my ethnographic oral history study, instead of hiring a person of Korean descent as a research assistant, I developed questions and methodologies with the help of the subjects of the research. The study was thus not just my work but also our work. However, while converting their inter-lingual voices into a single-language text according to my own judgment, I had the feeling that I was becoming the owner of their voices. In response to this, I devoted almost half of my thesis to the description of context and methods.

In a social science that involves human contact, some see these self-reflexive concerns as an important aspect of research, and others see the personal and empathetic descriptions as irrelevant. Each view has its justifications, as usual. When self-reflexivity does get into a research project, this seems to be more often in the English-language texts of such theoretical concepts as Orientalism, post-colonialism, and post-modernism. Most of the discourse in these texts has revolved around concerns with the power relationships inherent in fieldwork, emphasizing the relationship between researcher and the researched as a socially-constructed practice based on exploitation. In anthropology, the relationships have been discussed in the critical contexts of “the West” vs “the East”; urban vs rural; the colonizers vs the colonized; modernity vs tradition, and so forth. For some researchers who follow this academic trend, English is the language of Anglo-American cultural imperialism. However, to me, English means more. By actively using the English language as a non-native user, I became aware not only of the privileged status of native and non-native academics who use this language, but also of the practical limitations for conveying meaning when writing about the world in English. Knowing English certainly has given me access to many kinds of people, as I had long ago hoped, but even in a so-called English-speaking country, my skill with the language of the dominant society only enabled me to reach out to certain parts of the population, to particular lifestyles and worldviews, or to particular aspects of the life of an individual. At the same time, for those parts of people’s lives that do become visible through English, English is a living language for all users, “native” and “non-native”. Whether I am smooth or not, I have studied, argued, communicated, dreamed, and lived in this language. Some of my memories, knowledge and perceptions are linked with English. This is why I am writing the present essay in English, and I feel adequate about it.

Nevertheless, as an English-writing Japanese student who now is based in Japan, I don’t feel adequate about the disparity between how much I learn about English-writing scholarship while living in Japan and how little I learned about non-English-writing scholarship while living in the U.S.A. Although there surely are Japanese academic societies and literature that function independently of English-language materials, most graduate students in Japan are expected to read in English or at least

be familiar with translated work, regardless of the student's field or specialty. In contrast, when I studied geography in the U.S.A., I was hardly ever introduced to the work of foreign scholars who have mainly published in their own native languages. In addition, while I rarely find the names of Japan-based social scientists in the English-language text and bibliography of so-called 'international' refereed journals, English-language books and articles are frequently cited and translated by Japanese-writing scholars here. In fact, most of the academic translation projects in Japan have taken place in the direction from English to Japanese, and have been initiated by Japan-based scholars who find the work innovative and useful for related fields of Japanese-language scholarship. When Japanese-language articles are translated into English, as far as I know, Japanese authors themselves translate their own studies or pay someone to do the job in hopes of gaining an 'international' audience. Unlike scholars and publishers in Japan who are under pressure to keep up with English-language scholarship, North American counterparts appear to be less interested in Japanese-language scholarship as a source of learning.

While learning to write in English more, and better, I have become more annoyed by the one-way flow of knowledge. This is because I start to see another limitation in my own use of English-language scholarship. Did I spend all these years studying English just to absorb knowledge and become a messenger to spread that knowledge? Do I need to be a specialist in my native culture to be heard outside of Japan? Am I going to write in English for self-satisfaction, after all? These questions keep lingering in my mind. I am no longer be satisfied with only critical explanations about unequal power distribution in the world, and am desperate to find a way out. Perhaps, the trickiest part of this one-way flow of knowledge is a sense of superiority that is often given to non-native writers of English working outside of English-speaking societies. In my case, for example, some of my classmates tell me how lucky I am to have an education from an English-speaking country. Writing in English is commonly assumed to be an advantage for researchers. This leads to the frequent promotion of Japanese scholars after they return from visiting scholar positions at universities in Western countries. This is probably why so many students and researchers from non-English-speaking countries keep moving to English-speaking countries to study, or spend so much time, energy and money trying to publish and present their research in English. People usually don't dare to say this, but it is not just about reaching more readers. What "international recognition" means is to earn respect from Euro-American English-literate elites who seem to have the power to control today's global academic standards. Under this English-centered academic globalization, scholars from English-speaking societies tend to find little need and benefit to communicate in different languages and learn from non-English-language scholarship.

Of course, there are scholars and students in Japan and elsewhere, who are intelligent and thoughtful, despite not publishing in English. I hope more efforts will be made in the future to recognize them, whether or not their studies have been published or presented in English. As a step toward this effort, I would like to ask scholars, translators, and publishers all around the world to pay attention to quality research that is not written in English, and to cite such research in their English-language articles. In this way, we can expect more translation of non-English research writing into English, at the initiative and with the effort of native speakers of English. Only by being more connected with many different languages and academic cultures can English become a *lingua franca* in a real sense.