THE USE OF 'ENGRISH' TO COMMUNICATE ACROSS CULTURES

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Abstract

The urge to communicate across nations and cultures in this globalized world is increasing and English is chosen by many people in non English-speaking countries as a means of international communication. One interesting phenomenon related to the use of English in these countries is the use of Engrish. That is the use of English by people having insufficient knowledge of the language. This paper scrutinizes the use of Engrish posted in www.engrish.com, a website which shows various uses of Engrish, places and humorous situations in which the Engrish writers intend to communicate despite their limited knowledge of English. The coverage of the discussion is the language used in some data taken from the website, the intended meanings conveyed by the Engrish users and the language functions of the Engrish used across cultures.

Keywords: Engrish, communication across cultures, www.engrish.com, intended meanings, language functions

1. Introduction

In this global era, there is a growing sense of urgency that we need to increase our understanding of people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds; and among international languages to help in understanding people from other countries, English is still the first international language to communicate among nations or across cultures even though it is not the language with the most native speakers. Based on that numerical criterion, Chinese is put in the first position and English in the second. According to Maurais and Morris (2004: 235) another more relevant and decisive factor that determines the language choice for international communication is economic strength, which is usually measured by the GNP (Gross National Product) of the language's native speakers worldwide, which can be quoted country by country, or for multilingual countries in proportion to the size of the respective language community. An economically strong language is attractive to learn because of its business potential; its knowledge opens up an attractive market. Related to this, English is widely used in countries such as China, Japan, and Korea because their industries are growing rapidly and they want to share the global markets.

One interesting phenomenon of the uses of English in non-English-speaking countries like China, Japan, and Korea is the use of Engrish. The word was coined by a website named www.engrish.com to refer to the humorous English mistakes that mostly appear in Japanese advertising and product designs. It is named so regarding the common mistake made by the Japanese when saying /r/ instead of /l/. The Engrish phenomenon, however, can be found all over the world, including in Korea, Thailand, China, Mexico and Indonesia. Most of the Engrish appearing in www.engrish.com in the early-year posting are used as design elements in Japanese products and advertising, such as hats, gift bags, shirts, restaurant or food stall menus, to give them a modern look and feel. Some time later there also appear notices or warnings showing a similar phenomenon. These are captured in public places and facilities like parks, toilets and elevators. Some examples of the use of Engrish are: *Don't jumping in elevator. If you do it, It's gonna be stop; MP3 Prayer; Soul Out*, all of which are written under the Japanese expressions with Japanese writing scripts or alphabets.

The webmaster of Engrish.com through Engrish FAQ - a section of the website used as a channel of answering the visitors - says that most of the Engrish posted in the website is not an attempt to communicate; it is used to give products a modern look. There is therefore less emphasis on spell checking and grammatical accuracy. His statement, however, is not absolutely right since the most essential use of language is for communication. If the Engrish found is seen as a sign, it can be regarded as having meanings. It can also be assumed that the Engrish users are likely to express or deliver something and want other people of different cultures understand it. Starting from this point, this paper is an attempt to describe the use of Engrish to communicate across culture, with three objectives: 1) describing the language used, 2) revealing what the writers intend to say, and 3) identifying the language functions .

2. Culture

What is culture? This question has fascinated many scholars from various disciplines

to find its definition. The study of culture has ranged from the study of external architecture and landscape to the study of a set of implicit principles and values to which a large group of members in a community subscribe (Ting-Toomey, 1999: 9). Further she defines culture as a complex frame of reference that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and meanings that are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community. According to her, culture is like an iceberg: the deepest layer (e.g. traditions, beliefs, values) are hidden from our views; we only see and hear the uppermost layers of cultural artifacts (e.g. fashion, trend, pop music) and of verbal and nonverbal symbols.

Peace Corps (p.10-11) also agrees that culture is aptly compared to an iceberg. Just as an iceberg has a visible section above the waterline, and a larger, invisible section below the water line, so culture has some aspects that are observable and others that can only be suspected, imagined, or intuited. Also like an iceberg, that part of culture that is visible (observable behavior) is only a small part of a much bigger whole. Some features of culture which are invisible are beliefs, values, concepts, ethic, rules and etiquettes. Some features of culture which are observable behaviors include facial expressions, gestures, eating habits, foods, music, style of dress, and so on.

Riley (2007) refers the word 'culture' to a product of human activity and effort, the sum of knowledge which humanity has produced, accumulated, stored and transmitted throughout hystory. According to Levine and Adelman, culture can also be defined as shared background (e.g., national, ethnic, religious) reflecting a common language and communication style, and shared customs, beliefs, attitudes, and values. It can also refer to art, music, literature, food, dress, and so on (1982: xvi-xvii).

Wardaugh (2006: 221) states that culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. That knowledge is socially acquired: the necessary behaviors are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment. Culture, therefore, is the 'know-how' that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living; only for a few does it require a knowledge of some, or much, music, literature, and the arts.

3. Communication across Cultures

When people talk (say or write something), they do this with the intention to communicate something to somebody. It is called the Communicative Principle (Mey, 1994: 55). Even though this principle is not mentioned in the pragmatic literature, according to Mey, it is nevertheless the foundation of all linguistic behaviour, and the minimal agreed-on premise of all investigation into the pragmatic activity of humans. Furthermore, he says that communication is not a matter of logic or truth, but of cooperation.; not of what I say, but of what I *can* say, given the circumstances, and of what I *must* say, given my partner's expectation (1994: 57). In short, communication principles work beyond words or grammatical rules; they operate in concrete contexts, rather than in the abstract space of linguistic speculation. Context is the decisive factor in understanding a communication process. It is to be understood as the surroundings, in the widest sense, that enable the participants in the communication process to interact, and that make the linguistic expressions of their communication intelligible (1994: 38).

In a process of communication, when somebody says something, the interlocutor must jump to some conclusion about what he or she means, or draw inferences. Scollon and Scollon (1995: 10) state that inferences are based on two main sources: 1) the language that has been used, and 2) the interlocutor's knowledge about the world. That knowledge includes expectation about what people would normally say in such circumstances.

In spite of the application of communication principle, it is a fact that sometimes people fail to communicate. However, most miscommunication does not arise despite mispronunciation/ misspellings or poor uses of grammar (Scollon and Scollon, 1995: xii).

Bonvillain (2003) says that every culture has systems of belief about the world, including ideas about human beings, their abilities and rights, and the ways they interact with each other. In understanding communication across culture, it is very improtant to know the cultural pressupositions. Presuppositions are assumptions underlying a statement, which remain in force even though the statement itself is denied (Mey, 1994: 28). Trask (1999: 165) defines that a presupposition of statement P is something which has to be true before P can possibly be a plausible thing to say.

Regarding functions, Ting-Toomey (1999: 91-99) states that there are several diverse functions of languages across cultures: as the group identity, perceptual filtering, cognitive reasoning, status and intimacy, and creativity function. Language is the key to the heart of a culture. Language serves the larger cultural/ ethnical identity function because language is an emblem of "groupness". As perceptual filtering, language reflects the worldviews and the beliefs of the people speaking it. Based on the cognitive reasoning function, language categorizes the totality of our cultural experience and makes an infinite number of unrelated events appear coherent and

understandable. Language can also serve to signify status differences and regulate intimacy through verbal means. The last function is related to human ability to change their language habits.

To conclude, interpreting what is expressed and meant by someone doing communication across cultures can be done at least through understanding the (cultural) presuppositions of the language used and inferring what is said based on the normal or common use of the language.

4. About www.engrish.com

This website was formed in 1996 and was hosted at various servers, including lumine.net and was formally registered in 1999. Engrish.com uses only original samples of Engrish both sent in by individuals for use on this website and collected personally by the webmaster. Some site visitors think that the photos in Engrish.com are doctored in photoshops and some others ask the webmaster about why the Engrish writers do not check and correct the wrong spelling and grammar to get good English.

To the first question, the webmaster's answer is that the Engrish contained in Engrish.com is real. All pictures and the Engrish there are true examples of flawed English since there are no touches on the photos in any way (for example to enhance their humor or otherwise) except to lower their resolution and to add www.engrish.com. The webmaster, who is not Japanese but had lived in the country for ten years, personally took many photos and can assure that they are genuine. Engrish.com scrutinizes all pictures very carefully before posting them. Regarding the possibilities of pictures' ingenuity intentionally made by those forwarding them to Engrish.com, the webmaster has a policy to remove them to a special section named "fake Engrish" if the "edited pictures" are revealed.

To the second question, the webmaster's answer is that many companies do check their English before they launch their products or advertise them. They get it right. On the contrary, there are just many companies or individuals that either do not care to do so, or do not have the resources to check their English, a fact which causes the Engrish phenomenon to happen.

The term 'Engrish' is used to describe flawed English found in Japan and other countries. The most popular alternative word to refer to Engrish is 'Japlish', standing for Japanese English. Some other terms proposed to replace Engrish are 'Janglish', 'Japanglish', 'Jinglish' and 'Nihonglish', but the word 'Engrish' is still used until now.

5. The Use of Engrish to Communicate across Cultures

As mentioned previously, the use of Engrish can be found in many products such as T-shirts, bags, hats, snacks, and in public places like parks, elevators, hotels, and toilets. Related to the data analyzed, this paper also shows respectively the dates of posting, the titles from the website master (or his administrators), the pictures in which the Engrish expressions are used, the comments (if any), the contributors to the website and the places where the expressions are spotted. The first to be observed is the use of Engrish in a T-shirt:

May 28th, 2011
Yes, Fine Thanks For Asking

Picture 1

If not, try one size up…

Photo courtesy of Morgan VDC.
Found in Fukuoka, Japan.

1) Men's T-Shirts
   Do You Feel So Good

The Engrish is put on the plastic rapping of T-shirt for men, above the Japanese alphabets. The use of –s in the word 'T-shirts' marks the flawed English. The question without a question mark 'Do you feel so good' makes the Engrish even more peculiar. This question, without the word 'so', is usually used to ask whether someone is alright or in a good condition. That is why this phenomenon is titled 'Yes, thank you for asking'.

In relation to the product offered, the seemingly approppriate question –if it should be there- is 'Does this T-shirt suit you?'. This proposed question is based on an assumption that the T-shirt producer wants to give satisfaction to the consumers when they wear the cloth. The proposed question is also in accordance with the comment given, which suggests the prospective customers to try one size up.

The Engrish in the T-shirt might functions as cognitive reasoning or signaling status. The

cognitive reasoning function is underlied by the T-shirt producer's expectation to sell the product to either the local or global market; the function of offering status is related to the producer's attempt to give a modern touch or impression to attract the local consumers.

The next is discussion on Engrish used to name foods. From the so many examples of the use of Engrish in the menus of restaurants and market food stalls around Japan, Thailand, Korea and China, it can be concluded that the culinary business owners consider that adding the English names to the local names of the foods will attract future customers. It will become a great help for foreigners, especially tourists, who come to those countries to get some ideas about the foods. The four countries have their very different traditional alphabets and unless there is explanation in any other languages, for example English, outsiders will have no ideas of what the offered foods are like: the ingredients, the tastes, the cooking processes, etc.

To certain extent, the use of Engrish in the menus can be regarded as a way to communicate to people other than the local ones. Their choice is English since it is the first international language and using it is possibly the most effective way of communication across cultures. Some data are taken from these pictures:

May 30th, 2011
I think I prefer American Thai food…

Picture 2

Photo courtesy of Tom Raynes.
Night market stall menu found in Chiang Rai, Thailand.

2)   a. The Ark Shell Scalds/ Burns
     b. The Shrimp Burns
     c. The Meatballs Fries, Every The Wood

The food names do not meet the English grammatical requirements since names are proper nouns and therefore must be represented by noun phrases, not (object-missing) sentences as written.

The more common naming of the foods using the similar words are Scalded/ Roasted Ark Shell, Roasted Shrimp and Fried Meatballs.

Nevertheless, the Engrish names inspire people who do not understand the local alphabets the ingredients (ark shell, shrimp and meat) and the cooking processes (scalded, roasted and fried). It can be assumed that the seller actually wants to offer the foods to both Thai people and foreigners. By giving the English names, they hope that the foods attract the future consumers. The title given ("I think I prefer American Thai food…") probably indicates that naming the foods using English gives the American nuance to the local foods. It is preferable to buyers since they get ideas about the foods.

The following discussion is still about food name in Thailand.

May 20th, 2011
Breast or thigh?

Picture 3

Lightly aged, very sassy…

Photo courtesy of Sam Spooky.
Menu found in Phuket, Thailand.

3)   a French chick on a plater

English speaking people will also find the name of this food strange. The writer's intention in choosing the word 'chick' is to say that the chicken cooked is of young age. However, referring to the flesh that is used as cooking ingredient -regardless the age- the English speakers use the word 'chicken'. The writer's inadequate knowledge makes him simply think that the expression is already correct. He also probably thinks that giving information about the age is necessary since the flesh of young chicken is more delicious, not as tough as that of the old one.

What makes the name of the food funny is the fact that the word 'chick' also means 'small child' or 'girl'; the word's ambiguity creates the funny sense since the food name can also be interpreted as offering a French girl. To make the

offer sexually attractive, the webmaster titles it "Breast or Thigh?" That is why the comment given by the webmaster is "lightly aged", meaning 'still young', "very sassy", meaning 'lively, stylish'.

Consciously or not, the use of Engrish aforementioned in data 2 and 3 promotes the local cuisine. The restaurant and the food stall owners keep serving their traditional foods instead of the modern or western foods, which probably can be found easily in the country. The local ark shell scalds/ burns, the shrimp burns, the meatballs fries, and the French chick compete with the global beef burger, French fries, fried chicken and spaghetti. The promotion of the local culture is done through their Engrish. The data of food names shows that the Engrish fulfills the intimacy and the creativity functions. Through Engrish, the owners try to make the consumers familiar with the foods offered. They are creative because they change the habit of using only the local food name by adding the English names. They are creative because they want to target more market segments.

Other examples of how Engrish is used as a means of communication across cultures can be seen through public signs or notices. The next discussusion is shown in data 4 and 5, which are found in a park, which is possibly near a tower in Korea and in a public bathroom in Mexico.

May 26th, 2011
Oh, I'm beyond pissed!

Picture 4

Photo courtesy of Tammy Sawyer.
Found in Korea.

The picture shows that under the Korean alphabets, there is a funny Engrish notice saying:

4) Refusal of pet's piss!!
   Piss make me like this. Piss make me die.

The first assumption that underlies the notice is that it is not addressed to any animals, including pets, but to people in general, or at least those possessing pets. It can be assumed later that some animals or people pass water in that place, or there is possibility in a certain circumstance that they do it. The writer of the notice (who is probably someone representing the authority), to euphemize his/ her language, personifies the plants around the place using the word 'me'. The notice reads as if there were a protest from the plants to pets.

The writer's anger with the bad habit of people's passing water in public places cannot be hidden despite the use euphemism. The use of double exclamation marks (there is only one in the Korean language) and the word 'die' reveals that the writer is irritated.

But why in Engrish? Despite the poor English the writer has, he/ she wants not only the local people but also foreigners to pay a serious attention to keep the environment clean.

In the last datum taken in a public bathroom, similarly people are asked to pay attention to the cleanliness of the place.

September 29th, 2011
Let's see your brain

Picture 5

Is that a diploma in your pocket?

Photo courtesy of Jllian.
Spotted at bathroom in Tulum, Mexico.

It can be seen from the picture that the Engrish notice written above the Spanish says:

5) Please show your education

By intention, the Engrish notice is an instruction that tells people to show their good behaviors in using public facilities. However, the use of the word 'education' creates the humorous sense because it is an abstract noun meaning 'systematic training and instruction' or 'knowledge and abilities, development of character and mental

powers, resulting from such training'. The literal meanings of the notice might be 'show your knowledge and abilities', which is relevant to the title given "Let's see your brain" or 'show your educational certificate', which is in line with the comment under the picture "Is that a diploma in your pocket?"

To know what is intended by the writer can be achieved by making an assumption which can be applied generally in the situation. Since the notice is put around a public facility, the readers can infer that it must be about maintaining the facility, for example keeping it clean.

The use of Engrish in the last two examples can be regarded as fulfilling cognitive reasoning since bad habits of neglecting to keep public facilities are still common and people will be aware if they are reminded. The Engrish also functions as the perceptual filtering since the users believe that maintaining public places or facilities can be done through reminding people so that those people behave as expected.

6. Conclusion

The phenomenon of Engrish can be found in many parts of the world, including Japan, Thailand, Korea, and Mexico. In spite of having insufficient English, many people in these countries use Engrish to communicate across cultures since they are in need of delivering certain messages to both local people and foreigners. Even though their Engrish sounds strange and funny, miscommunication or misinterpretation are not likely to occur.

The appropriate interpretation of the use of Engrish can be based on communicative principle, which is underlied by cooperation. This principle goes beyond words and grammatical rules and operates in certain contexts. Using the contexts, such as settings and situations, and knowledge of the world, an interlocutor can infer the intended meanings in accordance with the language used and the normal expectation in the certain circumstances.

Related to functions, the Engrish used in the data analyzed fulfills the functions of perceptual filtering, cognitive reasoning, status and intimacy, and creativity.

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