The Problems of English
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	作成者: GALLY, Tom
	メールアドレス:
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The Problems of English

Tom Gally

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Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Tom Gally.

This lecture was originally planned for the autumn of 2020, but, because of the pandemic, it was postponed twice. This year, I was hoping to be able to go to Sendai to meet you all in person, but, once again, we decided it would be best if we avoided too much travel. So right now I'm in my home in Yokohama. I'm sorry I'm not able to meet you in person, but this is much better than nothing.

Let me thank Professor Yoshimura for preparing and planning everything for this lecture. I enjoyed her lecture last week very much, as well as Professor Backley's lecture a few weeks ago. I felt quite fortunate to be able to hear those lectures from a distance like this.

Let me begin by introducing myself. I was born in 1957 in Pasadena, California, and grew up there. I attended the University of California at Santa Barbara, where I majored in linguistics. I was also interested in mathematics, and I took a lot of mathematics classes. I studied mostly theoretical linguistics, but I also enjoyed studying languages for their own sake. I studied Russian in both high school and college, and in college I studied Chinese for two years, too. After getting two master's degrees at the University of Chicago, one in linguistics and the other in mathematics, I worked for a few years in the Midwest. Then, in 1983, when I was twenty-six years old, I came to Japan. That's when I started studying Japanese.

My original plan was to stay in Japan for about one year, but I ended up staying here for thirty-nine years so far. After learning Japanese well enough to read it, I began working as a translator. From 1986 until 2005, my main job was doing freelance translation from Japanese to English, mostly business-related texts but also in many other fields as well. I did some freelance writing and wrote a few books, and I also worked as a lexicographer. I have worked on English-Japanese and Japanese-English dictionaries for Kodansha International, Kenkyusha, and Tokyo Shoseki.

In 2002, I started teaching part-time at the University of Tokyo, and in 2005 I was asked to become a full-time faculty member. I work at UTokyo's Komaba Campus, which is near Shibuya. All of the first- and second-year undergraduates study there. We also have some senior division students and graduate students, but our biggest job is to teach all of the junior division undergraduates.

I have been involved mainly with English education. As Professor Yoshimura mentioned in her introduction, I helped to develop and manage an academic writing course that all of the undergraduates take now — more than three thousand students a year. I've also been involved with various undergraduate and graduate programs.

At the graduate-school level, my research and that of my students have been focused mostly on language education — but not much on how to teach languages. Rather, I have been more interested in the questions *why* do we teach languages and *why* do people study languages — or, perhaps better, why are people *required* to study languages? Language education is a bit different from language learning. You can learn a language alone. You can learn from books, you can watch YouTube videos, you can study by yourself. You can also find opportunities to use a language on your own. That's very valuable, of course. But I find it's a more interesting problem to think about education, which is learning and teaching involving many people within an institution: in a school, in a city or region, or especially at the national level. In Japan, education for children is supervised, regulated, and controlled by the government, by the Ministry of Education, so it is important to think about it at that national

level.

Some very interesting questions for me are: Why is English taught to all children in Japan? Why do many people believe that this is a good thing? What does the government think about this issue? What do average people think about it? And what is the relationship among what people believe or feel, the official educational policies, and the teaching that actually takes place? For me, those are the most important problems of English in Japan.

What is English?

The first question I want to think about today is this: How do people understand the word *English*? With this question, I'm not asking what the word *English* means or what the English language is. Rather, I want to know how different people understand the word *English*. This may seem very basic to you. But, in fact, different people have different understandings of what the word means, and those differences have important consequences.

If you look up the word *English* in a dictionary, it will be defined as a language that originated in Britain, that was influenced by vocabulary from French and other languages, as Professor Backley told us a few weeks ago, and that then, through the economic and military expansion of the British Empire, spread to North America, to Africa, to India, to Australia, and to other places around the world. And now English is a global international language.

But when you get involved with learning English, you don't study all of English. All of English is just too much to study. The last print edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary,* for example, which was published more than thirty years ago, has twenty volumes of fine print containing all the words of English that its editors could collect then. Nobody can learn all of that. If you're learning English as either your first language or a second language, you can learn only a small part of it. Many English–Japanese dictionaries published in Japan tend to focus on the vocabulary of English that is used in the United Kingdom, especially England, in the United States, and to a lesser extent in Australia and New Zealand. But if you were to go to Nigeria, for example, or India, where tens or hundreds of millions of people speak English, you will find that many

words they use do not appear in those dictionaries. Their pronunciations of English words also do not appear in those dictionaries. In English–Japanese dictionaries, usually the pronunciations that are given for words are only the most common British and American pronunciations. In fact, even in just the United Kingdom — England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland — there is huge variation in how people pronounce words. But the dictionary will show only one British pronunciation for each. If you start thinking about how people speak English in India and in Singapore and in Japan, then those dictionaries, even the largest dictionaries, do not represent those variations very well at all.

So here's the problem: On the one hand, we have this understanding of English as a global language, a diverse language, a constantly changing language. On the other hand, if we look at the language as it is taught in schools, if we look at language textbooks or dictionaries for learners of the language, only a small subset of that language is covered. Somebody has had to choose what to represent in those books, to decide which words are English and which words are not English.

Part of that choice of narrowing down of the range of English is unavoidable. If you are teaching beginning learners of a language, you have to teach only a small part. Where it becomes a problem, in my opinion, is when the difference between English and non-English, or between "correct" English and "incorrect" English, is used to make important decisions about people's lives or important decisions for society. In Japan, one area where this becomes a problem is in testing. As you all know, a major focus of English education in Japan is preparation for tests, especially entrance exams for university, high school, and now even junior high school. In addition, employers use exams like Eiken or TOEIC to measure the English ability of their employees and potential employees. Any high-stakes examination like that must have a clear distinction between right answers and wrong answers. For people who focus their learning on such tests, the right answer becomes perceived as being English and the wrong answer as not English.

Sometimes, such black-and-white questions are okay, as all the wrong choices in a multiple-choice question will be definitely wrong. That is, no Eng-

lish speaker anywhere will say or accept those choices. But in many cases, if you think about English as a language spoken by people throughout the world, in many countries, of many different social classes, in many different situations, if you think about that huge variety of English, then that distinction between right and wrong, between correct English and incorrect English, becomes very difficult or impossible to draw.

That's why people's understanding of the word *English* is a problem. Some people understand it as meaning this huge, wide, diverse, constantly changing language. Other people regard it in a very restricted sense, as being the narrow slice of the language that is taught in Japanese schools. And, of course, there are many possible positions between those. Just understanding what people mean when they use the word *English* thus becomes a very complex and interesting problem.

What is language?

This is related to a broader question: How do people understand the word *language*?

About fifteen years ago, we began a new program at the University of Tokyo where all first-year undergraduates take a class to learn how to write academic papers in English. When I was teaching pilot classes for that program, I found that it was difficult to teach the class without the students having original content to write about. When you write an academic paper, you do not just write well-formed sentences and paragraphs; you write *about* something. And you write for an audience — the people who will read your paper. You want to say something new to your readers, not just repeat something that somebody else has said before.

The pilot classes were aimed at science students. While I had plenty of ideas about how to teach them the vocabulary, syntax, organization, and formatting of scientific papers, I couldn't figure out *what* they should write about. Science research papers are usually about newly discovered phenomena or newly developed theories; they are not just summaries of what is already known, nor are they the authors' personal opinions. To give the students

something new and original to write about, I asked each of them to design and carry out a scientific experiment. Because of the time and equipment restraints, it had to be a very simple experiment, such as heating water and seeing how fast the temperature changes under different conditions, or measuring the resonance effect of one violin string on another depending on the frequency. Students were able to come up with many other ideas for experiments themselves, and they were able to write scientific papers in English about them. The pilot classes were soon expanded into a required class for all science students. Called ALESS, for Active Learning of English for Science Students, the course continues to this day, with around fifteen full-time teachers, most of whom are scientists themselves, and over eighteen hundred students a year. And the students continue to devise and conduct original experiments as part of the class.

But in the early days of the program, many people — both teachers and students — questioned the requirement that students conduct scientific experiments for the class. This was supposed to be a language class, an English class! Why are students in an English language class doing scientific experiments? Shouldn't they be studying grammar and vocabulary, working on their pronunciation, improving their conversation and presentation skills? Experiments belong in science classes!

A few years later, when we developed a similar class for humanities students called ALESA, or Active Learning of English for Students of the Arts, we faced a similar problem. We wanted the students to be able to write a convincing argument about some topic, some principle or phenomenon in society or some work of art or literature that they had insights about. Making a convincing argument requires more than just grammar and vocabulary skills. It requires knowledge about the world, it requires knowledge about a specific field, and it requires analytical thinking. The writer also has to think about what the objectives of the paper are and how readers will respond to the argument. Our demand for knowledge about specific academic fields seemed to go beyond the appropriate range for a foreign language class. A language class shouldn't have students focusing so much on topics like history and literature

and gender and ethics! Critical thinking is not as important as practical language skills!

That's when I came to realize that people have different understandings of the word *language*. I also realized that the views of a single person might change over time. In fact, that happened to me as a language learner. I started studying Russian when I was in high school in the early 1970s in California. At that time, almost nobody in California spoke Russian, and I had no opportunities to meet any Russian speakers. This was during the Cold War, and it was very difficult for Americans to go to Russia and nearly impossible for Russians to come to the United States. But even though I had no opportunity to use it, I enjoyed studying the Russian language. We began by learning the Cyrillic alphabet, and soon we moved on to grammar and vocabulary and pronunciation — the nuts and bolts of language, so to speak. Those are, of course, important. But they are what I call the cognitive parts of language, the aspects of language that emphasize memory and processing inside the individual's brain. I took Russian classes at school, but I studied largely by myself. I memorized vocabulary. I read grammar books. After a few years, I started reading novels. I found that my Russian ability would get better and that I got more satisfaction out of learning the language when I knew more words and when I understood the grammar better — that is, when I could remember and process the language better with my brain, by myself.

At that time, I had little interest in using Russian productively. I didn't try to improve my Russian conversation ability, as, other than for a few months after two Russian-speaking immigrants from Armenia arrived at my high school, I had no opportunity to speak Russian with anyone. Once, I got the name and address of a potential penpal in Russia and I wrote a letter to him in Russian and English, but I never received a reply. This was during the Cold War, remember, and it's possible that my letter or his reply was seized by Soviet postal inspectors. I didn't even think about using Russian for business, as there was very little economic activity between the United States and Soviet Union. Because there was no need or opportunity to use Russian with other people, the only approach to the Russian language that made sense to me

was the cognitive approach — studying it on my own and using it passively.

When I arrived in Japan in 1983, I knew no Japanese, so I started taking language classes immediately, first at the Kanda YMCA in Tokyo and later at a language school in Harajuku. For someone with my background, Japanese had a very interesting grammar, the writing system was very interesting, and the vocabulary was interesting as well. Thinking about the cognitive or linguistic aspects of the Japanese language was very enjoyable to me. But I was living in Japan. I was surrounded by people who spoke only Japanese. I would walk through the streets of Tokyo and see the signs written in Japanese. The announcements on trains then were only in Japanese. I worked for Japanese companies teaching English and doing editing, so I had to interact with Japanese people every day. I quickly came to realize that the Japanese language had another very interesting aspect: as a tool for interacting and doing things with other people. Let's call that the social aspect of language. Language viewed in that way is not just a mental phenomenon that takes place within the individual; it is also something people use with each other in many ways. At the age of twenty-six, I finally realized that the social aspect of language could also be important when learning a second language.

The problems of English education

Which aspect of language should be emphasized in schools? What kinds of skills — cognitive or social — should be evaluated on tests? In Japan, English is a foreign language, and the large majority of children and young people in Japan who are studying English have little opportunity or need to use English socially. As a result, the education system has naturally focused on the cognitive side of language. Traditionally in Japan there has been an emphasis on teaching grammar and learning vocabulary, and examinations have focused on lexical and grammatical knowledge and on passive understanding of the language. The ability to interact in the language is almost never assessed, especially on high-stakes exams, so interaction has not been emphasized in the schools.

But if you leave Japan and go to a place where many people use English to

communicate, then the social language skills — the ability to do things using English, to do business, to make friends, to ask for directions on the street — become much more important. Many Japanese people, of course, have noticed this. Many people say, "Well, I was taught English for many years in school, but I learned mainly grammar and vocabulary. When I went to America, when I went to England, I could barely speak a word, and I could not understand what people said." As a result, there has been a move in English education in Japan for the last few decades to focus more on "communication," which seems to refer mainly to speaking ability. The Ministry of Education and many English teachers have been trying to put more emphasis on conversation, on interaction, on the social aspects of language.

But they get resistance. One reason is that it's hard to measure the ability to use the language interactively. It's easier to test the cognitive language ability. Because tests play a very important role in Japanese education and Japanese society, much school teaching still focuses on explicit knowledge and passive understanding. And many people continue to believe that those are more important. Just today, my recent book *Eigo no Aporia* ("The Problems of English") was reviewed in the *Mainichi Shimbun* by the poet Toshiko Watanabe. In her review, she mentioned why she studies languages. She said she doesn't do it for business or to be able to talk with people. Rather, she studies languages in order to understand other ways that language is used and how people using different languages think. Because she's a poet, I'm sure she is very sensitive to the nuances of language. But her interest in other languages is not for practical or social purposes; rather, she is focused on the cognitive and cultural aspects of language.

This question comes up again and again in language education and language teaching: What should we teach when we teach language? Should we just teach the cognitive aspects, the structural aspects of language, which are relatively easy to describe and measure? Or should we focus on language as this complex interactive medium that people use to communicate and interact with each other?

Recently this conflict has played out in the national university entrance

exam, what was called the Center Exam until 2019 and is now called the Common Test. The English portion of that exam has changed radically. For decades, the Center Exam focused on the cognitive aspects of language. It measured how well test-takers could recognize the pronunciation and meaning of individual words, and it asked them to make judgments about the grammaticality of sentences. The new Common Test, adopted in 2020, doesn't ask at all about pronunciation or individual words and grammatical forms. Rather, it might, for example, show a text that would be used in a particular situation and ask the test-takers to identify how people might act based on that text. In other words, it tries to measure how well the test-takers would be able to understand and use English in social situations. There's a fundamental philosophical difference between the exam taken by half a million students a year before 2020 and the exam taken by the same number of people since. The old exam conceived of language as a cognitive phenomenon, while the new one treats it as a social phenomenon. This represented a radical shift in the view of language, and I doubt if the Japanese education system has adapted to it yet.

Global English

Let me turn to another question: How well is English functioning as a global language?

I raise this question because it is connected to some other very interesting questions: Why is English taught to all children in Japan? And why is *only* English — that is, English and not other foreign languages — taught to all children in Japan? There are, of course, many languages in the world. English is indeed one of the major languages, but it's not the biggest language in terms of number of speakers. That is Mandarin Chinese. And there are other languages, like Spanish and French and Hindi and Indonesian, with more than 100 million speakers each. Japan is located in East Asia, and geographically the closest foreign language to Japan is Korean, followed closely by Chinese and Russian. But the foreign language that is taught to all children in Japan is not Korean or Chinese or Russian. It is English. Why?

The Course of Study, the official curriculum guidelines of the Japanese

government, says that English is the foreign language that should be taught to all children because it is a global language. That is supposed to be the reason why we're not teaching French or Chinese or Spanish in the schools. But to what extent is English really a global language? That's a complex question, but one simple answer is that English is not functioning as well as a global language as many people seem to believe.

Let me give an example from my own experience. I'm a native speaker of English. I grew up in California. I help to edit English dictionaries. I use my native ability in English to give judgments about what is correct and incorrect. More than a decade ago, the University of Tokyo produced a video on English pronunciation for which I provided the model pronunciations of American English. That video can still be viewed on the UTokyo TV website. In Japan, at least, many people have regarded my version of English as being "standard."

Well, ten years ago, I spent a month in Goa, India. India has the second largest number of English speakers of any country in the world, after the United States. Not everybody in India speaks English, but there are many people in India who speak English very fluently, and the state of Goa probably has a higher average English ability than India as a whole.

I spent that month at Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science in the town of Margao. The language of instruction at Chowgule College is English, so all of the faculty and students spoke English. But we often had trouble understanding each other. Sometimes I couldn't understand the Indians, and sometimes they couldn't understand me. The latter was surprising to me. I had assumed that American English as I spoke it was widely known in the world. American movies are viewed throughout the world, I thought, as are American television programs, so I assumed that English-speaking Indians would be used to American English. But, in fact, many of those people in Goa had not heard much American English. They have their own English, with its own pronunciation and vocabulary and grammar that they use when they speak English. I had expected that we would be able to use English as a common language, but in fact our communication did not go very smoothly.

There are many cases like that. Many movies made in Nigeria, for exam-

ple, are in English, but they are given English subtitles when they are shown in North America. The people in the movies are speaking English, but the accent is so different that North Americans need subtitles to understand them.

The image of English as a global international language, as the common language for the world, is thus much more complex than it seems. The notion that everybody learning English in Japan can learn "standard" English and therefore become able to use the language globally is unrealistic. A person can learn English through the Japanese education system, get a very high score on the Eiken or TOEIC examination, and then go to Mumbai or Lagos or London or New York City and have real difficulties communicating with people. There is a big gap between the ideal of language education and the reality of how the language is actually used.

The Course of Study not only says that English is a global language. It also says that English ability is necessary for Japanese people because we live in the age of globalization. Globalization is one of the fundamental reasons for the supposed increasing need for English: Because the world is going through this process called globalization, it is claimed, the need for English and English communication ability is increasing.

What is — or what has been — globalization? To define it very simply, globalization is the increased movement of people, things, and information across international borders on a global scale. In other words, more people traveling between country and country, not only between Japan and other countries but between France and Paraguay, between Indonesia and China, and so on — the increased global movement of people. Globalization also includes the growing movement of things — cars and computers and all kinds of other things that are bought and sold internationally. And it includes information, including news and email and entertainment and social media and much else.

The world has been globalizing to varying degrees for centuries. Four or five hundred years ago, ships set out from Europe and elsewhere for trade and military conquest. That was the beginning of modern globalization. The pace of globalization increased rapidly in the second half of the 20th century, especially after the end of the Cold War — after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the

Soviet Union collapsed. Around the same time, China went through some economic and political changes and began opening up to the world again. The volume of international trade increased, and it became cheaper and easier to travel between countries. And the movement of information skyrocketed, first through mass media and then through the Internet.

Globalization was a genuine phenomenon. In Japan, many people felt that, in order to protect the country's economic status and to keep the country prosperous, the Japanese people needed to adapt. Of course, as shown by its robust international trade, Japan has been fairly successful in adapting to globalization. But many people saw one issue as a barrier to further adaptation: language. You could ship Japanese semiconductors to other countries and you could import oil from the Middle East, but that did not require much language ability. The movement of information and the increasing flow of people into and out of the country made language ability more important. The importance of language in responding to globalization became a driving force behind Japanese educational policy. That's why, I think, the university entrance exam was changed. People thought that, because of globalization, young Japanese people would have more and more need to use English in interactive contexts, and so the test was revised to measure language ability in social situations.

But there's a problem. Is globalization still moving ahead? Today, in November 2022, if you look at Japanese government statements about education, they still mention globalization frequently. Japanese universities continue to create programs and organizations with the word "global" in their names. In fact, however, globalization seems to have stalled. It might even be going backwards. Goods and people and information are still moving around the world, of course. But the volume and freedom of that movement are no longer increasing as they were ten or twenty years ago, and it's not clear when or if the pace of globalization might pick up again.

One of the early signs that globalization was slowing came in 2016, when people in the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. The EU had been one of the symbols of globalization, as it had eliminated barriers to the movement of people and goods among countries that, not too many decades

before, had been at war with each other. The member countries even gave up some of their sovereignty to take part in that larger unit. Other efforts to lower the borders between countries included the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Throughout the world, there was a trend towards more integration, freer trade, and freer movement of people. Even China, which had been poor and isolated not long before, was admitted to the World Trade Organization and became the leading supplier of manufactured goods to the world.

But then, by a narrow vote, the people of the UK decided to pull back from that internationalization and leave the EU. Around the same time, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. He was a nationalist and opposed immigration and free trade. Other countries, including Poland, Hungary, Brazil, and India, experienced similar political changes, with nationalist and populist governments opposing globalization to varying degrees.

Another brake to globalization has been the COVID pandemic. The last time I was in Sendai was about four years ago. I spent several nights at a hotel near Sendai Station. Most of the guests in that hotel were Chinese tourists. They seemed really excited to be in Japan. In those days, if you went to Shibuya or Ginza in Tokyo or Namba in Osaka, you saw thousands of foreign tourists, not only from China but from many other countries as well. Mass tourism like that, which was taking place throughout the world, was yet another sign of globalization. But it all stopped in March 2020, when it became almost impossible to travel internationally for quite a while. Being unable to travel was a big setback to the idea of globalization.

This year, in 2022, we've seen yet another setback: the Russian invasion of Ukraine — a horrible, violent war taking place in the heart of Europe. Soon after the war broke out, many national governments and private companies in the West imposed severe sanctions on Russia. Companies like Starbucks and Toyota and Ikea, which had been symbols of globalization, shut down their operations there. Russia is the world's largest country by land area, and both business and travel with Russia have become very difficult.

China is similar in some ways. Not only did it impose a severe lockdown;

even before the pandemic, the government was becoming increasingly authoritarian and nationalistic. For the last decade or more, it has censored and blocked the flow of information over the Internet both domestically and internationally. It has become difficult for people in China to access information from outside the country. Russia is starting to impose similar restrictions, as have Iran and Vietnam and other countries. The global flow of information is no longer as free as it was five or ten years ago.

Supposedly the reason all children in Japan study English is that we live in the age of globalization. English is, it is said, the global language, and steadily increasing globalization increases the need for ability in that global language. Well, those assumptions no longer seem to be true. I don't know what will happen a year from now or five years from now, but at least right now globalization is no longer moving ahead. In some ways, it is going backwards. Japanese educational policy needs to recognize how the world is changing and adapt accordingly.

Changing language

Not only is the world changing. We're also seeing rapid changes both in language and in how people use language. Think about what we're doing right now. I'm here in Yokohama and you're there in — well, actually, I don't know where you all are. I know that some of you are in a classroom there in Sendai. But I can see on my Zoom screen the name of a person I know who is probably in Tokyo now. Some of the other participants could very well be in Seoul or Bangkok or Honolulu. For the online participants, our location doesn't matter. This kind of online lecture was possible even before COVID, of course. But because of the pandemic, many activities — work, socializing, entertainment, and much else — have shifted online.

Aside from my interactions with my family and one or two neighbors, all of my own language use for the last two and a half years has been online. In addition to talks like this one, I regularly take part in online meetings with people not only in Japan but also in America and Europe and Asia, and I often chat with friends and relatives over Zoom. Some people spend even more time than

I do online, with almost their entire lives conducted through streaming. On sites like Twitch, people spend many hours a day streaming their activities over the Internet, and thousands of other people watch them and interact with them. If you tune in to one of those streams, you'll see one or two people sitting in a room by themselves. They're talking about video games or music or whatever they're interested in. And where are they? Is this person in Korea? Are those two people in France? Often there's no way to tell. Viewers send them messages and chat among themselves, and it doesn't matter where those viewers are, either.

One of the fundamental assumptions of language education has long been that Japanese is spoken in Japan, French is spoken in France, English is spoken in the UK and US, and so on. There has always been a strong association between language and people's physical location. Of course, long before COVID, we did have books and radio and other media that crossed borders easily, and we could travel to other countries as well. But since COVID, more and more people are using language interactively in this new online space, this locationless location. As a result, our languages are changing as well. If you look at the comments that people make to each other online, they are full of words and expressions and emoji that didn't exist even ten years ago. It might look as though a new common online language is emerging, but I suspect that it's actually many languages, with the words and expressions and emoji usage being different for each online community.

But if you look at junior-high or high school English textbooks or the entrance examinations in Japan, there is almost no recognition of how language and language use are changing. There are no emoji, and there is no use of Internet slang. There has always been a gap between the English taught in school and the many different Englishes used around the world, but that gap is now growing wider very rapidly.

Another way language use is changing is through the rapid development of artificial intelligence. The first AI-related change was spurred by a sudden advance in machine translation six years ago. Until 2016, machine translation could barely be used. If you tested it ten years ago, perhaps by running a para-

graph of normal English through MT and having it translated into Japanese, you probably couldn't understand what the writer had been trying to convey. But first Google and later other companies like DeepL have improved the accuracy of MT enormously. It's still not perfect; it still makes mistakes. But it's now possible to use machine translation to actually do things in real life. In social media, for example, if I look at my Instagram feed and there's a post or comment in, say, Korean, there's a link that says, "Translate into English." I can just click on it and see the translation. That usually enables me to understand what the person wrote. I can now converse in writing with people with whom I don't share a common language.

What does this mean for language learning? Well, I have always been interested in the Korean language, and I have thought it would be useful for me to study it sometime. But I'm now getting old, and learning new languages is harder than when I was young. Since I can communicate with Korean people and read texts in Korean using machine translation, it now seems too much effort for me to actually try to learn the language at my age. What about young people? Do they really need to spend hundreds or thousands of hours studying English when this new technology allows them to interact with people who speak not only English but Korean, French, Hindi, Chinese, and many other languages?[1]

English and Japan

To sum up: What are the problems of English in Japan?

Well, one is that the education system is still focused tightly on a view of language that is increasingly out of date. The use of language is changing rapidly, but the curriculum is stuck in the past. If you look at the English textbooks adopted two years ago for fifth and sixth graders, they teach children

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[1] Less than a month after I gave this talk, the American company OpenAI released a preliminary version of interactive software called ChatGPT that pushed the frontiers of artificial intelligence much further ahead. The implications for language education seemed even greater than those posed by machine translation a few years earlier.

things like how to direct somebody to the post office or train station. Those textbooks were written on the assumption that there would be English speakers coming to Japan, and that Japanese children could help them on the street. For two years, that didn't happen. There were almost no foreign tourists on the streets of Japan. The Tokyo Olympics took place with almost no foreign visitors. And even though travel has since resumed, many people throughout the world are living their lives increasingly online, where being able to tell someone "Turn right at the grocery store" or "Go straight along this road" is not a useful skill.

Another problem of English in Japan is the view of English as a limited phenomenon, the belief that English is what is taught in schools and evaluated on exams. But, as we have seen, English is much vaster and more diverse and complex. While it's impossible for anyone to learn all of English, there's also not much use in teaching everyone only a tiny part of that English.

Those aren't all of the problems of English in Japan, but they are, in my opinion, two of the most important. Even for just those two, I don't know what the best solutions might be. Do you?