

British or American? Choosing the Appropriate English and Culture in Imperial Japan

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Abstract:

This presentation examines the debate over learning American or British English in pre-1945 Japan. Typically, students, teachers, academics, and policymakers involved in English education do not get to decide which variant to use. Instead, the choice is dictated by factors beyond their control or with little consideration of pedagogy, such as proximity to the United Kingdom or the United States, or the relative strength of American or British influence. For instance, the predominance of American English in Japan today is a legacy of the postwar American occupation and remaking of the country. Before World War II, Japan stood out for preserving its national sovereignty and cultural identity despite its fundamental Westernization since the mid-1800s. Learning from the West and learning Western languages were mutually reinforcing and indispensable. By the twentieth century, English was already established as a world language. Unlike French or German, English was associated with two major powers with different societies, governments, economic systems, and reputations in Japan. Since foreign languages were not taught in Japan as part of compulsory schooling, the Japanese could choose which ones, if any, to acquire. English was more popular than any other foreign language in Japan, but learners still had to choose between British or American English. Some educators advocated British English because they admired the glory of the British Empire and envisioned Japan as “Britain of the East.” They saw British English as the means for the Japanese to emulate their idea of British sophistication and decorum. Others favored American English for its potential to make the Japanese more sociable and Japanese society more egalitarian. It could even transform some Japanese into Americans through emigration and naturalization. While the debate, mostly between linguists and academics, did not result in an agreement or policy, it reveals their attitudes toward English, Britain, America, and Japan. Their arguments also provide historical context and inform current discussions on the purpose and motivation of learning foreign languages. This conclusion is a reminder that for individuals or nations, foreign language learning is less about the language but more about perceptions of the self and others, visions and plans for the future, and allocation of resources such as time and money.

Keywords: English, Japan, British, American, education

