

WRITING REPORTS in ENGLISH: A COMPARISON of JAPANESE and AMERICAN WRITERS' PROBLEMS

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Writing reports, especially in a second language, is often an excruciating task unless the writer is one of the lucky few who can master a second language, including its semantic and cultural aspects, yet avoid being influenced by his native language.

In this paper, I will compare some problems of style and usage which bother Japanese and American writers, suggest possible causes of these problems, and show that, at times, identical errors have a different cause in each culture.

Many lists of common problems and errors are available as are their subsequent analyses. Therefore, I chose to limit this paper to those problems listed by F. Scott Howell and Akira Sugimori in their article "Scientific Papers Written in English by Japanese,"¹⁾ and to those mentioned by the editors of some American journals in response to a questionnaire I sent as part of the research for my master's thesis.²⁾

In my questionnaire, I asked the editors of 45 journals, almost evenly divided among the fields of agriculture, business, and engineering, what they found to be the most common problem of style and usage in the copy they receive.

Five problems were mentioned by editors in all three fields:

improper punctuation, faulty capitalization, poorly organized sentences, unclear writing, and lack of commitment to style. Four more problems were mentioned by editors in two fields: verbosity, misuse of prepositional phrases, bad spelling, and lack of consistency of tense.

Comparatively, Howell and Sugimori list the most common problem areas of Japanese writers as spelling, punctuation, verb usage, style, uncountable nouns, adjectives, and negatives. In addition, they devote a separate three page section to problems with articles.

Four general problem areas—punctuation, spelling, verb usage and style—are, therefore, common to both groups of writers though the errors and their causes within these areas may differ. For example, the American writers' errors in punctuation may be mostly comma errors, while those of the Japanese writers may be mostly semi-colon errors. As well, the cause of American writers' spelling errors may be carelessness or lack of a solid background in phonics, while the Japanese writers' errors may be caused by too strong a reliance on the Romanized Japanese alphabet.

Then, let us compare these shared problem areas one by one.

The first is punctuation. The American editors reported that the punctuation errors they saw were usually characterized by over-punctuation and the misuse of commas. However, these mentions of overpunctuation may, in part, show a desire of the editors for greater mechanical efficiency. That is, the

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fewer characters that are written on a page, the quicker it is to type and print that page. In some cases, my research showed, this desire caused practices that seemed to come dangerously close to creating unclarity as is the sentence: "The sales department gave its sales projection to the president and the treasurer gave him the financial report." While 14 editors said a comma before "and" was necessary, 9 said a comma was optional, and 11 said no comma was necessary. That there were any respondents that thought a comma optional or unnecessary is surprising since the first time the sentence is read, the reader is apt to understand incorrectly that the president and the treasurer were given a copy of the sales report.

So, as we see, comma placement is controversial and, thus, sometimes a problem may exist because of controversy.

I will not elaborate here on other less controversial problems for American writers except to point out that the Iowa State University freshman English manual lists run-together sentences, seriously excessive use of the comma, and misuse of the semicolon as serious errors. That is, they are errors which make a passage difficult to understand or deviate from some firmly established convention in a way that distracts the reader. These errors usually reflect carelessness or lack of logic.

In contrast, Howell and Sugimori deem it important to point out the strength of the different marks of punctuation, to explain run-together sentences, to comment on the use of the colon, and, finally, to comment on how to use punctuation when listing data. They also find it necessary to point out that some

punctuation marks cannot be placed at the beginning of a line, while others can not be placed at the end of a line. However, they consider these misplacements errors of spelling rather than punctuation.

If I interpret their explanations correctly, they suggest that, in these cases, Japanese writers can avoid these errors by learning the proper conventions. That is, it is not carelessness or lack of logic that causes these errors.

The second shared problem area is spelling. Howell and Sugimori list six words which are often misspelled by the Japanese writers and warn that there are many cases where the spelling of a word differs from its pronunciation. Perhaps this warning should be given to American writers more often also, since half of the sample words can be found on a list of 400 words most commonly misspelled in student writing, and likely, the other half would be found if the list were increased, say, by only 25 words.

Spelling is difficult even for American writers because many letters or letter clusters represent more than one sound, and, in fact, the letter "o" represents about ten different sounds.

This, of course, is also a problem for Japanese writers of English, but many of their errors also seem to be caused by an unfortunate tendency to assume that the sounds represented by the Romanized Japanese alphabet are equivalent to and include all those found in American usage. Howell and Sugimori give the words "describe" and "decide" as examples where "i" is often substituted for the initial "e." The Romaji "i" does rep-

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resent the correct sound, but in these two words that letter does not match the conventional American spelling.

In addition, other spelling errors made by the Japanese writers are somewhat understandably caused by confusion between letters that represent sounds that are not distinguished in Japanese, in particular b/v and l/r, though I have trouble understanding how they can be used inconsistently in the same word in the same essay.

There are no certain methods to avoid spelling errors. The most helpful methods are, perhaps, memorization and, obviously, consulting the dictionary.

The third shared problem area is verb usage. The American editors said they most commonly saw problems with pronoun and verb-tense agreement with subjects and a lack of consistency of tense. That is, pronouns and verbs did not agree with their noun or pronoun references, or a writer started an essay using one tense but unaccountably shifted to another.

In comparison, the Japanese writers' most common problems, according to Howell and Sugimori, are the use of an auxiliary verb with a past tense verb when the simple past tense would be sufficient and the inability to distinguish between such verbs as "rise" and "raise."

Here, the errors and their causes originate more definitely along cultural lines.

The American writers probably have been careless and neglected to follow the usual grammatical formulas, unless they happen to belong to a group whose dialect does not match

standard English and experienced some carry-over to their writing.

The Japanese writers' errors, on the other hand, seem to stem from a problem common to anyone who acquires a second language—an incomplete understanding of the semantics of the second language. The best prescription, possibly, is to use and listen to the second language as much as possible.

Finally, the fourth shared problem is great variance in style. The American editors said many writers pay no attention to style or are careless and fail to consult a style manual.

The problems listed for Japanese writers are sentences that are too long, burying the important idea in the middle of the sentence, and the improper use of present participals. Here, the cause seems to be an unawareness of the visual and psychological effects of word placement and sentence structure including the relationship of a participial phrase to its antecedent.

Style is, for the most part, individualistic. This is especially apparent when comparing works of fiction. Even those authors who claim to have been "greatly influenced" by another author still reflect their own personalities and, therefore, instill a unique style in their writing.

Variance in style is more strictly limited in technical writing because uniformity is beneficial in scientific work, and the writer's purpose is quick and accurate communication rather than the creation of a mood or the building of a character. To control the variance, many journals have their own style manuals stating at least the unique requirements of their publi-

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cation, requirements which are usually determined by idiosyncrasies in the field of study covered by the journal. Other journals find general manuals such as the *Associated Press Stylebook* sufficient for their needs.

So, in brief, for American writers correct style is, in great part, being sure their style conforms to that of the publication they submit their articles to. For Japanese writers, improving style means stressing important ideas earlier in shorter, clearer sentences, that is, learning the psychology of the language.

Beyond these four shared problem areas, the American editors also noted problems with capitalization, syntax, unclear writing, verbosity, and prepositional phrases.

On the other hand, Howell and Sugimori next note problems with uncountable nouns, adjectives, expression of negatives, and articles.

So, at this point, the errors made reflect whether English is the writer's native language or not.

As an example, capitalization is a problem for American writers even though as Glen W. Kerfoot writes in the June 1977 issue of *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*,³⁾ "The rules for capitalization are fairly simple. Capitalize all proper nouns and keep common nouns in lower case." He continues, however: "For most writers the problem is knowing which nouns are common and which are proper..." Indeed, one writing handbook devotes more than four pages to clarifying when words should be capitalized.

Further, for American writers, problems with prepositions

include using redundant prepositions, as in "Get off [of] the roof," where "off" would be sufficient or omitting needed prepositions as in "He was fond [of] and attracted to her," where "of" is need to complete the phrase. The redundancy is probably a carry-over from the writer's speech, while the omission is probably carelessness.

The other problems listed for American writers seem closely related to each other, and, perhaps, are mostly caused by carelessness, lack of consideration for the audience, or affectation. In fact, the *Handbook of Technical Writing*⁴⁾ states that

"Affectation is the most serious single problem in business and technical writing because many people apparently feel that affectation lends a degree of formality, and hence authority, to their writing. Nothing could be further from the truth. Affectation simply lays down a smoke screen that the reader must penetrate to get to the writer's meaning."

In contrast, the problems of the Japanese writers seem to originate from not understanding patterns of English usage which are usually unconsciously acquired by native writers. That is, problems with uncountable nouns, adjectives, negatives, and articles are comparatively infrequent in the writing of Americans because, though intricate, these patterns are regular enough and repeated enough to become, in effect, habits. Thus, American writers are not as apt to err here as they are in other instances such as subject and verb agreement which may

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vary uniquely in each situation. Again, the best solution for Japanese writers seems to be to use English as much as possible.

So, in these brief comparisons of a few problems out of the limitless number possible, we see that the errors of the American writers seem to be caused by controversy, carelessness, lack of logic, irregular phonetic groupings, carry-over from speech patterns, failure to consult references, vague rules, affectation and lack of consideration. All of which, I think, can be considered characteristic causes for native-language writer errors.

In comparison, the problems for the Japanese writers seem to be caused by not being acquainted with standard English conventions, relying on inadequate alphabets, not making distinctions between sounds, and not understanding the semantics, the psychology, or the usually unconsciously acquired patterns of English usage. These, I believe, can be considered characteristic of writers of any second language though the specific errors might differ from culture to culture.

In sum, if any conclusion can be reached from the above comparisons, it is that each problem must be approached individually with consideration given to the cultural background of the writer if we are to suggest a satisfactory solution.

FOOTNOTES

- 1) *Kagaku no Ryoiki*, (Tokyo: Nankodo), Vol. 33, Nov. 1979, pp. 943-946, 1037-1039.
- 2) Merritt G. Aljets, *A Study of Current Standards of Style in Business Writing*, thesis (Ames: Iowa State University 1977,) pp. 34-37.
- 3) "Tips on Technical Writing," p. 18.
- 4) Charles T. Brusaw et al, (New York: St Martins Press, 1976), p. 26.

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