Faulty English No. 2
Common Mistakes in Japanese English-language Journals

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This paper is a follow-up of my first one published under the same title in 1989. In my first paper I analyzed various common mistakes that appeared in many English-language journals. This paper is also the analysis of various errors in the daily press in Japan which I have come across since then.

I collected fifty-eight examples of confusing sentences in which it is not clear what meaning the writer intended to convey. Some are simple slip-ups in prepositions or punctuation or possible typographical mistakes. I divided the errors into three categories and discussed them. First, the ones whose confusion derives from wrong word order including the misuse or the lack of relative pronouns or adverbs. Secondly, the ones that come from misused words. Thirdly, the simple grammatical mistakes, mostly those in concord.

My whole discussion is on the assumption that some of the articles were written by the Japanese staff in newspaper companies. Therefore their English and mistakes have the characteristics of those affected by the Japanese language.

The discussion is on how the Japanese language structure and sometimes the Japanese way of thinking has affected the English which Japanese write. Since it is our tradition to seek model writing in newspapers, I hope newsmen will keep this in mind and will be the leaders in setting models of the correct usage of the English language of the time.

During the years 1990 through 1992 I collected a number of examples of faulty English from various publications. Most of these came from the daily press in Japan. In 1989 I wrote a short paper on common mistakes in Japanese English-language journals. In it I analyzed various mistakes; mainly from the point of view that they are rooted in the differences between the English and the Japanese languages. These articles were apparently written by the Japanese staff members of the newspaper companies.

In this paper, a follow-up of the first, I would like to concentrate on discussing the confusing sentences and the reasons why they have been made so confusing. Reference will be made to my first paper from time to time.

I have come across many examples of confusing sentences in which it is not clear what meaning the writer intended to convey. These are also examples of simple mistakes in prepositions, punctuation and possible typos. As confusing sentences top the list, I will begin with them first.

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I many cases confusion derives from wrong word order or misused words or grammatical errors. I have divided them into these three categories and will introduce them in this order.

Example 1: A fisherman negotiates with middlemen over prices for the “killer fish” he caught at Haedomari Market in Shimonoseki.

What did he “catch at Haedomari Market?” A good price, maybe? Since “at Haedomari Market” is put in the wrong place, it is a little difficult for the reader to grasp the meaning. “At Haedomari Market” should be
put after "negotiates." Then there will be no misunderstanding. Negotiations were made at this place and it was not the catch that was made there.

In some cases similar to the above, there are two or three connotations which can be made. In the next example the word order does not follow that of English and results in a very confusing sentence. This is in an article reporting an accident of boats on an elevated waterway at the International Garden and Greenery Exposition in Osaka.

Example 2: Expositions are temporary affairs and glitches are to be expected when buildings are not intended to be permanent anyway, readers may object. This comment leaves the reader up in the air as to what he "may object" to: "Glitches?" Making "temporary" and not "permanent" buildings? Probably the writer wanted to say that readers may object and say that expositions are temporary affairs etc. or that readers may object to the fact that expositions are temporary affairs.

English is sometimes flexible in word order, but as far as S+V+O structure is concerned, it is more rigid. The reporting phrase as an object can come first, then a verb and a subject is the usual order as you see here: "I can't agree," said Noel.

In a sentence like above, generally the word order [the reporting phrase + subject (personal pronoun) + verb] is used. But, when the subject is a common noun or a pronoun, except for personal pronouns, the subject and verb order will interchange.¹

Here is another example of a confusing sentence with a wrong word order. In Example 3 "only" is misplaced. It modifies "responsibilities at this position, but not "the driver." It applies to "the driver" not to "responsibilities."

Example 3: In most cases, the only responsibilities of the driver of the car which crashed into a parked car have been discussed.

The proper place for this word would be "the responsibilities of only the driver of the car," for the discussion is on the professional negligence of the drivers who parked their cars in illegal places not being prosecuted. The article is trying to say that their responsibilities should also be discussed.

In Japanese the word equivalent to "only" is used so loosely that it does not make much difference in the meaning whether it is put in front of "responsibilities" or "driver." However in English, as has been shown, the proper word order is essential to free sentences from ambiguity.

I have found a few examples where the word for an object is muddled up as in the editorial of February 27, 1990 in THE DAILY YOMIURI. It is an article about the war against drugs and drug-production.

Example 4: Importantly, the plan not only recommends that producing nations substitute narcotics-producing crops for benign crops but also asks advanced nations to extend financial, technical and farm development assistance to the drug-producing nations.

The expression "substitute A for B" means originally where B is, you put A. In other words, it means to replace B with A. For example, when you say to substitute an experiment for a theory, you mean to replace a theory with an experiment. Or to substitute margarine for butter means you use margarine instead of butter. You can say "substitute butter by or with margarine," but it is more or less colloquial usage and I believe it is not suitable in an editorial.

After reading the above article, we get the impression that it recommends nations to plant "narcotic-producing crops" and begs other nations to buy them.

Some articles had no proper verb or subject and were accordingly, terribly confusing. It is natural that the more words one uses, the more difficult it is to construct a logical sentence. A person is likely to lose track of his sentence sequence. Example 5 is not a complete sentence as there is no verb connecting the first long clause with the rest.

Example 5: Any item of personal pro-
property given to residents of Japan which would otherwise qualify as a bona fide gift however it is presumed not to be a bona fide gift if the purchase price or reasonable market value on the Japanese economy is in excess of $25.

In this example, the writer must have meant the terribly long subject by "it" which is right after "however." But the subject was so long that he must have got mixed up on the way. A better way would be: Any item...which would otherwise...bona fide gift, is presumed not to be a bona fide gift if...

In another case of a long sentence, the subject is missing for a verb and this makes it hard for a reader to understand.

Example 6: This year's spring offensive resulted in shorter working hours for the steel industry, and Shiratori is not missing any chances to take the expanded vacation time is another "carrot" to keep the workers working.

Here a clause is needed as the subject of the last part of the sentence. So, if one puts a relative pronoun before the be-verb, the preceding clause changes into a good subject.

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It is amazing to find there were quite a few cases of mistakes in the use of relative pronouns, especially subjective pronouns, which are not eliminated in any case.

Example 7: Rainfall at Hakone, Kana-gawa-ken, totaled 516 millimeters. Elsewhere in the Kanto and Tokai regions, precipitation was from 30 millimeters to 70 millimeters per hour fell.

Example 8: Another problem with Mr. Bush's insistence on operating in a clandestine way is that there is often no one to warn him when he is taking a course goes against the grain of most Americans.

In both cases, if a relative pronoun "which" is inserted before the verb "was" or "goes," the meaning would be quite clear.

But some grammar books do write that the elimination of relative pronouns, even if they are subjective case relative pronouns, is acceptable. According to A USAGE DICTIONARY OF LIVING ENGLISH, such sentences as "It was I bought these for Mr. Elliot," and "Here's a gentleman wants to know you," are quite acceptable. However some traditional grammar books do not admit such usage. A UNIVERSITY GRAMMAR OF ENGLISH lists, "The pen writes best is missing," as an impermissible structure.

Now I would like to talk about a few articles which were most likely to have been written by Japanese staff or are direct translations from the Japanese-edition newspaper. I believe these might be more interesting and useful in dealing with the differences between the Japanese way of thinking and that of the English-speaking peoples.

Quite often it is said that the English language makes use of passive forms more frequently than the Japanese language. There must be some detailed study on this subject, but here I will use a simple example: "He died in the war." The Japanese gives this flat statement of this fact. Whereas in English the emphasis seems to be more on the result of the action of the affected person—"He was killed in the war."

The article in question deals with a traffic accident involving a group of Japanese high school students. Reiko Hatano, a Japanese correspondent of YOMIURI SHIMBUN (THE DAILY YOMIURI) in Washington reported it:

Example 9: Of the three students, Toshie Nakajima suffered the most serious injury when she was hit by the rear wheel of the bus and broke her leg.

More properly it should be either, ", which broke her leg" or "and she had her leg broken." This is because she is not the action party; the bus wheel is.

Of course both of these English sentences are correct: "The boy broke his leg," and "The boy had his leg broken." But in the former more subjectivity is added to the subject and the subject person is responsible
for the result of his own action. While in the latter, the main point is in expressing the suffering upon the subject and the subject is not to be blamed for his condition.

To the Japanese correspondent reporting the accident, the expression with a causative verb “have,” which has passive connotations and the flat statement, “She broke her leg,” where she is the action party, were the same. The reporter probably didn’t see any difference between the two.

The same kind of mistake can be seen in another article of THE DAILY YOMIURI:

Example 10: His most memorable footage, Friedman said, was of marines lofting grenades at the enemy on the other side of a hill. He wounded his rib and won a Purple Heart.

The last sentence sounds as though he deliberately injured himself so he could get a Purple Heart. It should be, “His rib was wounded.” or “He suffered a rib wound.”

Example 11: The two victims shot and dumped him in a Rio suburb.

Here is a physical impossibility because “victims” would not be able to shoot anyone. The passive voice is required, “...were shot...”

My attention was drawn to an article about a 54-year-old children’s dentist committing suicide because of guilt over his patient’s death caused by heart failure from anaesthesia.

Example 12: Sumoto, who had campaigned for the education of children with physical and mental disabilities, was friendly with Dr. Glen Doman, a specialist in the medical treatment of mentally handicapped children and the chairman of the Institute for the Achievement of Human Potential.

Sumoto referred Yoichi Fukunaga, a professional jockey, to Doman after Fukunaga fell from his horse during a race.

What the native speaker pointed out as a mistake or strange is that the last paragraph is a non sequitur. He says there is no relationship between the penultimate and the concluding paragraphs. Also why is a professional jockey in an article about a 3-year-old boy’s death?

To me the last paragraph is an additional piece of information to help the readers understand the above better and was written to give background information to the readers and I did not find it strange or confusing. I interpret it as follows: Sumoto, who was a leader in a campaign for the education of mentally and physically handicapped children, felt all the more guilty for the accident because of his social status. Furthermore Yoichi Fukunaga’s accidental death had cast a shadow over him and caused him to glance into the dark world of death, which affected him mentally. Fukunaga must have been someone whom Sumoto respected and there was some special personal relationship between them. However there is indeed an inconsistency or a jump in logic, but the Japanese readers do not feel it odd at all. I am sure most of us would not question it and can read the article as it is.

Why do Americans see a non sequitur when we do not? I believe it comes from the differences that exist in the two cultures; each with its own special way of thinking. How a person thinks largely determines how that person writes. It is well-known that in English the central idea is stated and the writing follows the direct line of development. On the other hand Oriental writing tends to follow a circular line of development. In other words, Oriental writing circles the incidents or gives examples and gradually guides the reader to the heart of the matter at the conclusion. In this stage of going around, incidents that do not seem to have much relationship with one another, turn out to be a careful preparation for the conclusion. There seem to be jumps in logic on the surface, but we read so to speak “between the lines” in reaching the conclusion. And Japanese are used to this kind of writing.

So going back to the original article, I am afraid the literal translation from Japanese sometimes makes the article confusing for foreign readers who are not cognizant of
Japanese thought patterns.

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Now I would like to go on to the second category of confusing sentences with misused words. In the case of misuse of words the main trouble seems to be that the writer does not have a thorough knowledge of English and has used words which are similar in meaning but should not be used. Example 13 has the misuse of "indigence."

Example 13: For Japanese, eating the same dish every day would mean indigence of materials and imagination.

While "indigence" does mean "lack of" or "wanting," this has more to do with liveliness and not with quantity. What is needed here is "paucity" or "dearth" or maybe simply, "lack." This sentence comes from an article on Japanese cooking and diet written by Ayako Sono, a famous contemporary Japanese writer.

The next example deals with the more delicate nuance of a word and some readers might not notice its misuse. As there are many examples of this kind, I will just list them.

Example 14: Chai Ling escaped with her student activist husband, Feng Congde, who also heads China's most wanted list.

This sentence leads one at first reading to believe that Feng Congde is an official at the head of some organization. Because the verb "head" is used as "to be put at the head of a government or a company, or some organization," not of the most wanted list. Therefore "lead" is better used. "He heads a procession: or a "a delegation headed by Mr. X."

Example 15: the DC-8 (name of an aircraft bought by JAL in 1960), had, in effect, circumvented the globe 886 times. "Circumvent" does have a meaning to "go around" but generally is used to mean to use tricks for one's own ends. Here "gone around" or "circumnavigated" are proper choices.

Example 16: A 31-year-old woman, distraught by her father's constant rapproachement of her divorce, strangled him in his sleep at their home.

"Rapprochement" has the meaning of furthering friendly relations. In this case it is at variance with the last paragraph which explains the reason for her action; her father's constant complaint of her "leading an idle life." So here "bitching about" or "griping" would be the proper way to word the actions and deeds of the father. Quite possibly the writer might have mixed up "rapprochement" with "reproach."

I will introduce here an example which I found most interesting from the point of view of the differences between English and Japanese.

Example 17: When asked what kind of dishes they (Japanese housewives) make when they are busy, 20 percent said they cooked food that could be prepared in a microwave oven.

"Prepare" is the process of cutting or mixing or seasoning food before cooking it. It can be done by a person or a food processor but not with a microwave oven. So it should be: "they prepared food that could be cooked in a microwave oven." "Prepare" can be used like this: "She prepared potatoes for chips." But the Japanese for both "prepare" and "cook" are the same-"tsukuru" or "chorisuru."

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My third category is grammatical errors, which are mostly of subject and verb disagreement. Example 18 illustrates the confusion which can arise from this error. (I might say that this could also be a typo).

Example 18: The ghetto have been getting worse and worse with drugs, gangs and alcohol," said the Rev. Paul Banet, a white Josephite priest, who serve only black communities.

The "serve" could apply to Paul Banet and I assume that that was what was meant but one could also get the meaning that Josephite
priests as a group serve only black communities.

In Example 19 the use of “there’s” could be for humorous effects but it is not such good usage in a book review about a book entitled VINELAND.

Example 19: Because the next thing Zoyd knows there’s federal agents all over the place, with automatic weapons and helicopters.

An English be-verb works not only as a copula but also as a function word that completes a sentence and in S+be-verb+C construction, a be-verb carries the function of number and tense.

In my paper in spring 1989, I wrote: In English a sentence does not function as a sentence without a verb while in Japanese noun + adjective construction does exist. Therefore our awareness of a copula or a be-verb is weak. As a result, Japanese combine a subject and a compliment with a be-verb rather loosely.

I have many more examples of this kind and I believe Japanese are still inclined to be careless in the use of be-verbs.

Example 20: ....since only one of four doors on the fourth and fifth floors.... were properly shut when the blaze began.

The subject of this sentence (one of the four fire doors) is singular and therefore requires a singular verb, “was.”

Not only Japanese newsman but also American newsmen seem to err in concord.

Example 21: American reporters is not taking note of much of it....

In mistakes in concord, difficulty comes from the errors in concord of modified subject and verb. When a subject is accompanied with “lot,” “both,” “many,” or “much, the idea in the number in the subject gets harder to grasp, resulting in more mistakes in concord.

Example 22: The Japanese press, not unanimously, but there has been a lot more reports that say....

Of course the subject is considered to be plural even without “a lot,” and its verb should be “have.”

An item about a new mountain bike reads:

Example 23: With thick tires, wide handlebars and as much as 21 speeds, a rider on a mountain bike can perform maneuvers....

“Many” and “much” are sometimes mixed up. Example 24 is oxymoronic in the linking of “many” and “few.”

Example 24: It (Okinawa) is an island with many few diverse influences.

In some examples, “both” plus plural forms of countable nouns is followed by a singular be-verb, which is apparently a mistake. Or “majority” used with uncountable items can be seen.

Example 25: The majority of the stolen money was used to pay off some of these debts, police said.

Money is uncountable. Therefore “most” should be used. Also sometimes I have noticed sentences where two phrases, which should be arranged with the same importance, are not quite written so. Example 26 starts out with the divers “performing operations” and continues with “as well as” which should be followed by another gerund; in this case, “startling shrimp....” Another way would be to eliminate “as well as” and use the connective, “and.”

Example 26: TV monitors aboard the ship showed the two (divers) performing operations such as triangular surveying; as well as startled shrimp and starfish, all partially shrouded in clouds of marine snow,” or plankton carcasses.

Whether to use a gerund or an infinitive is always a problem for Japanese students because it is pretty difficult for them to learn which verbs must be followed by gerunds and which by infinitives. Consequently questions concerning verbids are the most typical types of problems given in Japanese entrance exams for college. Both of the next examples of grammatical mistakes can be made into a problem of “Correct the errors.”

Example 27: For how does one satisfactorily define something like group con-
sciousness, never mind compare it cross-culturally?
Of course here a gerund is required: “never mind comparing it cross-culturally?”

Example 28: I have many nieces and nephews, so I used to caring for babies.
This is from a MAINICHI interview of John Travolta, well-known American dancing star. Here the proper wording is: “I was” or “am used to caring for....”

Japanese students often mix up “used to+root infinitive” and “be used to+gerund.”
Next I would like to discuss the errors related with pronouns. I touched upon the difficulty we have with English pronouns in my last paper on FAULTY ENGLISH. As the Japanese language does not use pronouns as frequently as the English language does, our consciousness of pronouns and articles is rather weak, I would say. This holds true with any type of pronouns—personal, reflexive or possessive. Personal pronouns function as replacements for coreferential noun phrases in neighboring (usually preceding) clauses:

John told Mary that she should wait for him.

In the Japanese translation of this sentence, it sounds more natural without personal pronouns, and it is understandable:

John wa Mary ni matte kureruyoh ni itta.

Who waits for whom is clear from the context. Therefore we are prone to omit personal pronouns, or at least I can say our consciousness to the concord in case or number for co-referential nouns gets weak sometimes, which leads us to err. There are several examples of this sort, but I will refer to just two of them.

Example 29: The little device is a paper bag on the outside and a double-lined plastic bag on the inside. Dog owners can extract the plastic bag containing the excrement, without soiling their fingers, and deposit it into the paper bag.

Here what “it” refers to is the plastic bag only, and “it” can not refer to the excrement as the writer must have intended. So what a dog owner should do with his dog excrement is not clear and confusion results because it appears that the plastic bag is inside the paper bag. So why does it (plastic bag containing the excrement) have to be taken out and then reinserted into the paper bag?

The next an article on training a chimp-panzee whose name is Ai.

Example 30: Matsuzawa taught Ai to push a specific button when shown a specific human face on a color television monitor. Ai was then asked to recognize the faces after they were presented vertically and horizontally.
Here one is puzzled over how many faces Ai was shown and whether he picked out one from many or what.

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Lastly I will write about repeated mistakes in prepositions seen in the journals in Japan. Prepositions play a big role in English and must be used correctly. But again they are a headache for Japanese students; partly because there are no such things as prepositions in our language and partly because the usage of English prepositions is so common and yet so complicated.
“To” and “from” are often misused in Japanese journals when linked with “immigrate” (to go or remove into a new country or region in order to settle there) and “emigrate (to leave from a country).” A person “immigrates to” and “emigrates from” a country.

Example 31: They (Jewish ethical values) also had significance because they were connected to my father, a small businessman who immigrated from Romania in the 1920’s.
In this case the writer should have used “emigrate” or changed the country to “the USA,” because his father had left his country Romania and settled in the USA. It is interesting to find out that practically every time
these two words “immigrate” and “emigrate” appear, they are mixed up and wrongly used. The following article, dealing with the descendants of Japanese immigrants to Brazil or Peru coming back to Japan to work, was written by Chikako Mogi, a staff writer of Kyodo News Service. There are a couple errors in the use of these words.

Example 32: ...said Muneyoshi Hada, who emigrated to Brazil in 1957.
...people who emigrate to Brazil from other nations.

If this way of using “emigrate” continues, I even start to wonder if it will come to be used the same as “immigrate” someday. New word formation is always taking place. Therefore after some wrong words or usages are used over a period of years, they acquire acceptability as standard English. For example: “Who’s there? “It’s me.”

Another common mistake in prepositions derives from the lack of knowledge by the writer as to whether the verb is intransitive or transitive.

Example 33: The last radical was arrested around 10 A.M. after police approached to his tower on a gondola suspended by the crane.

“Approach” means to “go to” or “towards.” Therefore “to” is redundant. It is always very difficult for Japanese to learn when to use prepositions and which ones. Sometimes they put prepositions when they are not needed as in “resemble to” or “discuss about.” This results from the fact that these verbs look like intransitive verbs in the structure of the Japanese language.

Example 34: Chinese authorities, concerned of any renewed pro-democracy activities, sealed off Tiananmen Square.... “Concerned” should be followed by “about” or “over.”

In addition to the types of errors covered above, there are some cases of confusion caused by punctuation marks. For clarity English has to rely upon punctuation marks. In Example 35 the sentence has none and it requires careful reading to determine who operates in Chuo-ku.”

Example 35: The coin dealer recently found to have purchased fake coins from the British broker also operates in Chuo-ku, Tokyo. It reportedly bought the 7,000 coins on several occasions last month.

Proper punctuation would have made this clear:

The coin dealer, recently found to have purchased fake coins from the British broker, also operates in Chuo-ku.

Also the next sentence should have had a different pronoun, “he” instead of “it” because a pronoun has to agree with the noun it stands for.

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When we discuss mistakes in a language, a point we should not forget is that a language is a living thing. It is breathing. It is changing. You can never pin it down with inflexible rules. Words are taking on different meanings; neologisms, new word formations are taking place and grammar is changing. One recent trend I have noticed is the verbalization of nouns. I commented on this in my first paper and said: “using ‘waitress’ as a verb, seems to have captured the imagination of a wide range of writers.”

Example 36: The reasons are the democratic maturity of the Germans, the Soviet loss of will to empire—and the determination by....

“Empire” is not a verb, but maybe was verbalized following this current fad. However I am not sure if this usage is the result of a new verbalization or a mistake. Maybe “loss of imperialistic designs on neighboring countries” would sound better. This article was written during the time when the USSR was an imperialistic country, which now no longer obtains.

So what do we regard as mistakes? This is a very difficult problem. But it is true that there is a Japanese tradition to put full reliance on the articles in the daily news-
papers. We regard them as models of writing. Therefore because the Japanese readers seek model writing in Japanese newspapers, likewise they look for proper guidance in the English papers. I hope newsmen keep this fact in mind and work still harder for perfection because newspapers are educational as well as informative and they are the leaders in setting a good example or model of the correct usage of the English language of the time.

In conclusion I would like to add that my discussion was based on my assumption that many of the articles were written by the Japanese staff and therefore are influenced a little by their mother tongue. I believe this because I come across every so often in THE DAILY YOMIURI the advertisement for staff writers whose nationality or 1st language was unquestioned. Another assumption was that some of the articles were apparently direct translations from the Japanese version of the newspapers, which generally appear a few days ahead of the English papers.

Notes

2. ibid.
4. FAULTY ENGLISH-COMMON MISTAKES IN JAPANESE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE JOURNALS, p. 62, VOL. 23, NO. 1, 1989, BY YOKO KISER.
5. ibid. p. 63.
6. ibid. p. 65.

Examples

3. THE DAILY YOMIURI, April 24, 1990.
5. TORII, April 12, 1990.
27. THE DAILY YOMIURI, September 17, 1989.