

*Original Article*

## English that Breaks Away From The Native Standard As Seen From The Perspective Of A “Culture VS Civilization” Theory

Takehiko Saiki, Sachiko Hashiuchi, Noriaki Ohashi and Junichiro Takeno

*Department of English Communication, Chugoku Junior College, Okayama 701-0197, Japan*

Judo has gone through two major changes in order to be accepted by the world community: the introduction of 1) weight divisions and 2) the blue-colored uniform. Likewise, the English language had to be changed often tremendously to fit the needs of the locals when it travelled across cultural boundaries. This is the fate of what is considered to be an instance of culture. The concept of zero, an example of civilization, does not follow the same fate. This study examines English that breaks away from the native standard from the perspective of a cultural theory and discusses some implications for using and teaching English.

**Key Words:** English, Culture, Civilization, Intercultural Refraction

### Introduction

This short study is part of a larger project conducted by the members of the English Communication Department at Chugoku Junior College in Okayama, Japan. The project attempted to explore the current situation and the future possibility of Globish, a type of plain English advocated by Jean-Paul Nerriere, a former French businessman.<sup>1)</sup> Having explored some linguistic attributes that are said to be characteristic of Globish such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, the project team came up with two conflicting conclusions. One holds that Globish is valid only for business transactions where gaining interests is a first priority, and therefore, Globish should be limited to business people and should not be taught even at schools of higher education. The other says that,

since Globish is a language that even native speakers of English have to learn to use it properly, it may be at this moment the most “power-neutral” English for both native and non-native speakers, and therefore, Globish should be taught at colleges and universities as such. While the team members are divided over the above two conclusions, all are in agreement on another conclusion that English that breaks away from the native standard, with Globish being one example, is inevitable when seen from the perspective of a theory of “Culture vs. Civilization” proposed by Saiki (1995),<sup>2)</sup> one of the authors of this current study. In what follows, we will examine how this conclusion has come about, and we will also explore the implications of the conclusion in accordance with studying English for non-natives, such as the Japanese people.

### Culture VS Civilization

In order to draw a line between culture and civilization, we need to look at two different concepts: the saturation level of a cultural item in foreign countries

Corresponding author.  
Takehiko Saiki  
Department of English Communication, Chugoku Junior College, 83, Niwase, Kitaku, Okayama 701-0197, Japan  
Tel & Fax; +81 86 293 1100

(or cultures) and the ratio of intercultural refraction.<sup>3)</sup> The idea of the first concept can be summarized as follows: the more an item is shared by peoples of the world by transcending socio-cultural differences, the more likely that item is to fall in the category of civilization. An item here can be a material object, such as an automobile or a rule of conduct, such as “**stop at red and go at green**” An automobile is an instance of civilization, not only because it is a modern convenience, but also because it is used globally. A driving law regarding traffic lights is also an example of civilization. Except, perhaps, for Bhutan where there are no traffic lights (as of 2007) and Prague, Czech where only one colour, yellow, is used, the traffic lights have the same three colours the world over: green, red and yellow. And each of the three colours has the same meaning wherever we go. The saturation level of both the automobile and the traffic lights are very high, indeed. To give another example, the service of an *Oshibori*, a moist hand towel, on the plane was first offered by Japan Air Lines (JAL) in 1954 in an attempt to show the spirit of *Motenashi* or hearty welcome to the passengers and is now practiced by most of the airliners in the world. The in-flight service of *Oshibori* is thus an item of civilization originated in Japan.

### Cultural Items

If the saturation level of an item is low, this item can be regarded as an instance of culture, as opposed to civilization. Primarily for the reason that it would not be very convenient -unlike the case of the automobile -and often irrational and illogical, for people with different cultural backgrounds. A cultural item tends not to go beyond where it was generated. What will happen, then, when a cultural item, which in theory tends to stay inside the cultural boundary, is transplanted into another culture? According to Uno (1982),<sup>4)</sup> a transplanted cultural item will not be incorporated as it is, and there will always be at least some distortions inflicted on the item.<sup>2</sup> This is the concept of intercultural refraction, which we need to explore next.

## The Intercultural Refraction: In the case of Judo

Let us take Judo for example. If asked what Judo is, we would immediately answer that it is part of traditional Japanese cultures. Given the fact that the International Judo Federation (IJF) had a total of 199 member nations or areas as of 2009, however, we might feel obligated to add that Judo is also one of the world heritages, another way of saying that Judo is an instance of civilization. Furthermore, if we compare the above number with the number of countries affiliating with the United Nations, 193 as of 2011, it appears that Judo’s saturation level is one of the highest, making Judo look like a model item of civilization. But for Judo to be fully accepted by the international community, it has had to undergo at least two major changes. In this respect, Judo as essentially a cultural item had to pay a huge price for being widely disseminated.

### The First Refraction

One critical change that Judo had to accept was the introduction of the rule of weight divisions, as in the case of wrestling and boxing, at the time of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. One of the core ideas of Judo is “*jū yoku gō o seisu*” or “gentleness controls hardness,” which means “resisting a more powerful opponent will result in your defeat, whilst adjusting to and evading your opponent’s attack will cause him to lose his balance, his power will be reduced, and you will defeat him.”<sup>5)</sup> This is the image of a little guy flinging away a larger guy. And the idea of *jū yoku gō o seisu* is more vivid when matches are held in the open-weight division. While the rule regarding weight division has served to dispel a handicap resulting from weight differences, it has deprived of Judo the dynamism at its very core idea mentioned above. It is not difficult to imagine that many Japanese Judo practitioners were against the introduction of the new rule.

### The Second Refraction

Another major change made to Judo was the introduction of the blue-colored *judogi* or uniform in 1997. Many practitioners in Japan also opposed this

new development. They argued that the traditional colour of white represented the pureness of Judo; and therefore, “the replacing the pure white *judogi* for the impure blue, is an offence.”<sup>6)</sup> While, at contests held in Japan, practitioners still wear a traditional white *judogi*, it is today mandatory that a blue uniform be worn by one of the two competitors for all the World Judo Championships sponsored by the International Judo Federation. And this is said to be “for ease of distinction by judges, referees, and spectators.”<sup>5)</sup> Cultural considerations of the birthplace had to give way to practical reasons of host countries.

### In the case of *Furoshiki*

*Furoshiki* are another traditional Japanese cultural item. They are commonly used to wrap and transport cloths, gift and other goods. A very interesting thing happened when a student of one of the authors gave a *Furoshiki* to her American host mother as a gift when she visited the USA years ago. The students did not offer even a shortest explanation as to how to use the *Furoshiki* when she handed it to the host mother. The following morning the student was surprised to find one of the host daughters wearing the *Furoshiki* around her neck. This is another example of the intercultural refraction in action. It should be quickly added at this point that *Furoshiki* can become an item of civilization once the proper usage of it is known to the users. In fact, nearly 20 years after the above incident, *Furoshiki* has now been gaining the worldwide popularity as an ecology conscious item.

### Zero As An Example Of Civilization

One more quick look at an instance of civilization, namely, the mathematical number of 0 or zero, may help advance our understanding. Having been discovered in India in the 7th century, the concept of zero has travelled throughout the world and widely shared by the international community. By the age of six or so, many children around the globe know what zero means and how to use it in their daily living. This fact alone is sufficient to suggest that the saturation level of the number zero is extremely high. Furthermore, and this is very important, the concept of zero remains the same everywhere, and only

the word to describe it varies from one language to another. To put it differently, the number zero will stay at the zero refraction level wherever it is used.

### English Too Follows The Fate Of Culture

According to the Saiki's theory, a cultural item is destined to suffer from the intercultural refraction, while an item that is inherently “civilizational” in nature is not. This is what has been demonstrated with the examples of Judo, *Furoshiki* and the concept of zero. Now we will apply this theory to a language in general, and English in particular. As a cultural product, it is readily expected that a language will inevitably be modified to some extent to fit the linguistic habits of a host culture when it travels across the borders. English is no exception. As in the case of Judo, English has not been able to transplanted to the foreign soil without going through numerous changes. The users of each language group would appropriate English and shape it to their own needs. The result is the emergence of many varieties of English around the world today: Chinglish, Singlish, Spanglish, Indian English, Jamaican English, to mention just a few. All those non-standard English forms may have been the price that the English language has had to pay for being used widely as the primary international language for over the past several decades.

### Implications For Users and Teachers of English

As users of English, we should be fully aware that English as a cultural product is destined to become transformed as it is used by people with different linguistic backgrounds. This awareness would make it possible to contemplate that English has long been in the process of breaking away from its native standard ever since it was introduced to the foreign world. This line of thought would further allow one to conclude that the standard native English will eventually be used only among the native speakers. To put it in another way, for communications between non-natives and even between natives and non-natives, using English that breaks away from the native standard may become a norm. And in fact this is what is emerging now.

As non-native teachers of English, we should encourage ourselves to think that we are model communicators for our students. If one of the goals of studying English is to meet native speakers norms, only native speakers can serve as a model. With what we have discussed thus far, however, this is not the case anymore. We do not equate a “model” with a person who will show only good examples, but with a person who can show negative examples (or non-native’s limitations) as well.

### Concluding Remarks

This current study attempted to explore the English language as an incident of culture as opposed to that of civilization. While the latter does not tend to change when transplanted in foreign cultures, the former is fated to go through often tremendous changes. We have examined these phenomena with the examples of Judo, *Furoshiki*, and the number zero, and then applied this theory of “Culture VS. Civilization” to the English language. A number of

varieties of English that exist around the world today can be said as the result of the nature of the language, which is extremely cultural. In this study, we argued that breaking away from the native standard is the fate of English, and suggested that non-native teachers of English should assume a more active role as a communication model for their students.

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