

2nd Column (2016. 1. 15)

「The Hyoujungo of English」

Japan is a country with a plethora of dialects, and this is one of the first things you might realise when visiting Japan. Despite dedicating years to learning the language, it is not rare for someone to come to Japan and have someone with a heavy dialect that you can't understand a word of.

Japanese is only spoken as a first language in Japan, while English is spoken as a first language in around 20 countries. Therefore, it is not too surprising to see words, intonation and phrases that are unique to each country. Personally, one of the most interesting things about Japan is that there are so many dialects in a small island state, and by "many", I mean over 100 if you include the regional variations.

I heard that because there are so many ways to speak this language, even Japanese people have trouble communicating to each other. So what am I, a mere gaikoku-jin supposed to do? Thankfully, Japan has a 'standardised' version of Japanese, and so people use this standardised version of the language in important situations to facilitate communication.

So, what about a standardised version of English? For example, in business meetings, Japanese people will strictly speak in the standardised version of Japanese. What about if English speakers from different countries with different dialects were to meet at a conference? Which English would you say is the "standard" English? In this case, we do not have a standardised form of language that we explicitly rely on, because most people nowadays are used to hearing different accents and dialects, so there is no need for "standardisation" as such. I suppose the closest thing we have is written English, used in journalistic publications, academic documents and diplomatic contexts. Perhaps this is our "standardised" version of English that is used across different countries and is closest to the more extreme "hyoujungo", the standard Japanese.

Since coming here, I have felt that many Japanese people tend to think of American English as the standard in the English world. An ALT friend of mine had his pronunciation "corrected" to speak in American accent by his Japanese supervisor. He then ended up speaking in a thick Southern accent to the dismay of his supervisor. The point he was trying to make was, that there is more than just one American accent, and also that American accent is not the only accent that is accepted as the "standard" English. If the goal is to train people to become part of a global workforce, perhaps focusing on which accent is "correct" or "incorrect", it makes more sense to teach English learners that there is a wide range of accents that are all valid, and that any of these accents can be used for formal communication.

I think English will become a much easier language to learn here if we focus more on what is "right" than what is "wrong".