



## Shorter Article

**Cite this article:** Kawabata T (2024). Exploring wordplay and humour in English usage within Japanese texts. *English Today* 40, 145–148. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078423000305>

First published online: 18 September 2023

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**Introduction**

English has been extensively integrated into various commercial contexts in Japan, infiltrating brand names, clothing, products, packaging (Dougill, 2008), shop signs (Backhaus, 2006; Inoue, 2005; MacGregor, 2003a), advertising copy (Sergeant, 2011; Takashi, 1990a, 1990b), television commercials (MacGregor, 2003b; Stanlaw, 1992), television programs (Jinnouchi, 2007), and Japanese popular music (Moody, 2001; Moody, 2006; Pennycook, 2003; Stanlaw, 2021). Scholars attribute this phenomenon to English's attention-catching effects (Bhatia, 2009) and its ability to stand out amidst predominantly Japanese scripts (Takashi, 1990b). While some argue that English is primarily used for decorative purposes, conveying positive imagery without necessarily prioritising communication (Dougill, 2008; Haarmann, 1989; Seaton, 2001), others contend that marketers capitalise on the public's superficial knowledge of basic English to achieve both decorative and communicative goals (Daulton, 2008). Previous studies have focused on English-based loanwords in the Japanese language system, overlooking the creative use of English wordplay in Japanese advertising texts (Inagawa, 2015; Scherling, 2016). This study aims to fill this gap by examining five instances of English wordplay in Japanese commercial texts that go beyond basic usage.

The study conducts a qualitative analysis of advertisements, signage, and promotional materials found in various commercial contexts in Japan. The selected examples exemplify different forms of wordplay involving English elements, including puns, paronyms, and interlingual connections. These instances are analysed in terms of linguistic and cultural factors, such as phonetic resemblances, semantic connections, and contextual influences.

**Puns with English**

Figure 1 presents an advertisement for sweetfish broth with the text 'Who are you?'. This clever wordplay achieves a punning effect through the paronyms between the Japanese word for sweetfish (*ayu*) and the English phrase 'are you', which sound similar. Furthermore, the advertisement features an additional layer of pun with the English word 'who'. In Japanese, 'who' is translated as 'dare' and sounds similar to 'dashi' (a type of broth). This intricate play on words capitalises on the phonetic resemblance between 'dare' and 'dashi', enriching the pun within the advertisement.

The advertisement achieves a multi-faceted pun that delights readers who possess both English and Japanese language knowledge. While the primary pun does not rely on the pronunciation and meaning of 'who', the inclusion of this additional layer enhances the humour and cleverness of the entire sentence ('Who are you?') when readers have contextual knowledge. As sweetfish broth is a novelty, the phrase 'Who are you?' seems to inquire, 'What is it?' or 'What is in the broth?' The pun targets an audience with Japanese linguistic and cultural knowledge, but phonetic and semantic knowledge of English is also crucial, as the pun relies on similarities in sound and meaning between the English and Japanese elements. In addition, the play on words extends to the Japanese term 'dashi', which refers to a type of broth, adding depth to the wordplay within the advertisement.

**Wordplay with English and Japanese script**

Figure 2 also incorporates Japanese elements, but the understanding the wordplay requires individuals with English reading skills and a certain level of cultural and

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Figure 1. Who are you? Source: Author's photo

linguistic knowledge. Figure 2 displays a sign placed at a dentist's office with the text '歯 appy 歯 alloween', which is a hybrid phrase of Japanese script and the Roman alphabet. The *kanji* character 歯 in the text represents a tooth and is pronounced as 'ha' in Japanese. Thus, the text reads as 'ha-appy ha-alloween' to individuals who understand both *kanji* and English. The individuals who can fully comprehend this wordplay are those who possess graphic and phonetic knowledge of *kanji*, which enables them to recognise the character 歯 and its pronunciation. Moreover, comprehending this wordplay requires bridging the linguistic and cultural aspects of both Japanese and English. Contextual information, such as the location and timing of the text

display, assists in understanding the essence of the wordplay, as teeth and Halloween are not directly related.

It is worth noting that Halloween has gained significant popularity in Japan, particularly among younger generations. While older generations may not be as familiar with the custom, Halloween has become a well-known cultural event in Japan, largely influenced by Western culture and global media. Celebrations, such as costume parties and trick-or-treating, have become increasingly common in various cities and communities. However, the level of familiarity with Halloween may vary among individuals, with younger generations generally being more acquainted with the customs and symbols associated with the holiday. Therefore, individuals with a certain level of exposure to Halloween and its cultural significance in Japan are more likely to grasp the underlying meaning and humour in the wordplay presented in Figure 2.

### Wordplay with romanised Japanese words

Figure 3 showcases a message on a display cabinet at a boutique with the text 'MERRY MANY ARIGATO', a hybrid sentence composed of English and Japanese words, with the Japanese word transcribed in *romaji* (Romanised Japanese). The text requires readers to have semantic knowledge of the English words 'merry' and 'many' and the Japanese word 'arigatō' (which means 'thank you' in English). Furthermore, the English words 'merry' and 'many' sound

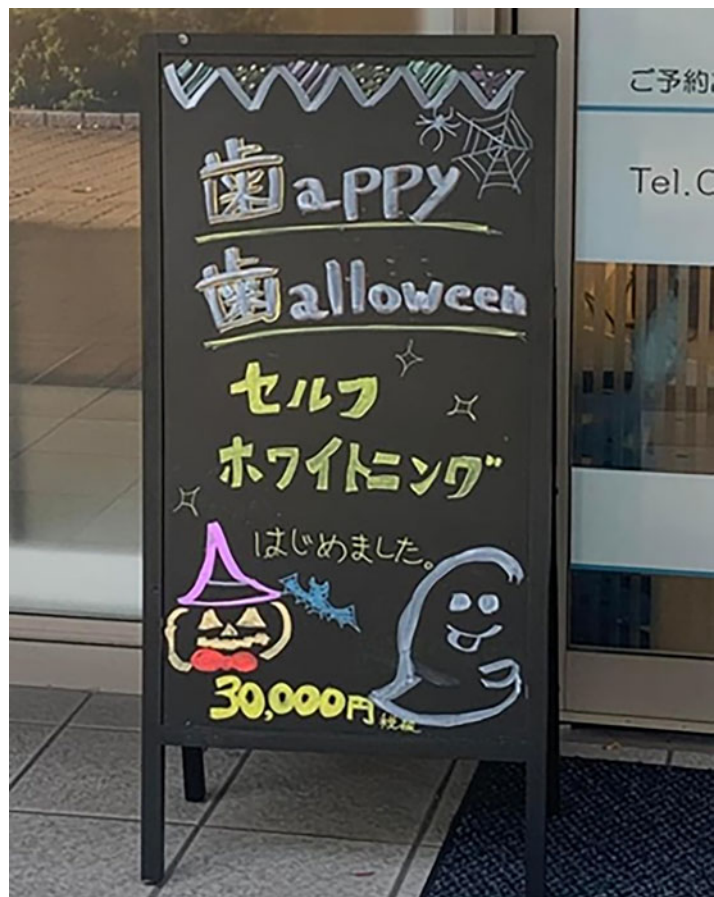


Figure 2. 歯 appy 歯 alloween



Figure 3. MERRY MANY ARIGATO

similar, adding an interesting phonetic effect when read together.

To fully appreciate the wordplay, readers also need cultural and contextual knowledge. The text contains part of a Christmas greeting ('Merry Christmas') and is typically displayed during the Christmas season. While Christmas is a well-known holiday in Japan, and the phrase 'merry Christmas' is recognised by the majority of Japanese when transcribed in Japanese script as 'メリークリスマス' (*merii kurisumasu*), readers still need to comprehend the message in English and Japanese written in the *romaji* spelling. Therefore, similar to the example shown in Figure 2, this wordplay is targeted at individuals who possess knowledge of both English and Japanese. They are able to recognise the semantic and phonetic connections between the English and Japanese elements, understand the cultural context of Christmas, and appreciate the clever fusion of languages in the text.

### Wordplay with English-like words

Figure 4 illustrates a billboard displaying a catchphrase, 'Very Benly'. This phrase represents a clever combination of English and English-like Japanese words. The pun in this instance replaces the Japanese word 'benri' (meaning 'convenient' in English) with 'benly' due to their similar sounds. The term 'benly' appears to have been created

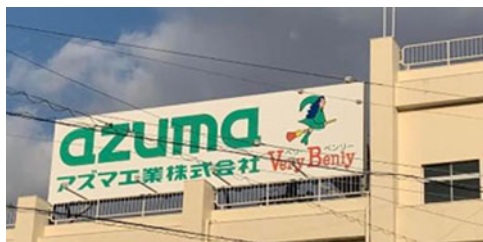


Figure 4. Very Benly



Figure 5. Love Bicycle Tender

by substituting the final '-ri' of the Japanese word 'benri' with '-ly', using English orthography for romanisation and mimicking the structure of an English adverb.

Similar examples were also identified by Backhaus (2023) in which commercial signs modify the spelling of certain words from *romaji* to resemble English, thus giving the impression that the Japanese words are English. Moreover, the English words 'very' and 'benly' possess a phonetic resemblance to native Japanese speakers, resulting in an intriguing phonetic effect when the two words are read together. Therefore, to fully appreciate the humour behind this catchphrase, readers are required to possess phonetic and semantic knowledge of English, Japanese, and *romaji*, as well as a contextual understanding of the service being promoted.

### Wordplay with English

In contrast to the aforementioned texts created for commercial purposes, Figure 5 showcases the use of English in a non-profit organisation's poster. The text, 'Love Bicycle Tender', is attached to a utility pole by local police to raise awareness and prevent aggressive behaviours towards cyclists. The humour embedded in this message is recognised by those familiar with Elvis Presley's song, 'Love Me Tender'. The connection between the English phrase 'Love Bicycle Tender' and Elvis Presley's iconic song adds a humorous twist to the poster. Furthermore, the reference to former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's admiration for Presley, where he famously sang a phrase from 'Love Me Tender' during a meeting with President George W. Bush in 2006 (AP Archive, 2015), adds another layer of cultural significance and amusement for those who are aware of this context.

It is important to note that while the English phrase contributes to the humour and cultural reference, the essential



information of 'drive slowly' is prominently displayed in Japanese with a larger size on top of the poster. Thus, understanding the English text is not necessary to grasp the message of the poster. As a result, individuals who possess both cultural knowledge and English proficiency can fully appreciate the wit and cleverness of this poster, finding enjoyment in the interplay between languages and cultural references.

The findings reveal intriguing instances of wordplay in Japanese commercial texts, showcasing the incorporation of English elements to elicit humour, capture attention, and create memorable associations. The analysed examples demonstrate the importance of possessing knowledge in both English and Japanese languages, along with cultural literacy, to fully appreciate the intended humour and cleverness behind the wordplay.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of how English is creatively employed in Japanese commercial texts, moving beyond mere decorative purposes. The identified wordplay techniques, such as paronyms, phonetic similarities, and interlingual connections, highlight the interplay between languages and cultural references. The comprehension of these instances requires readers to possess linguistic and cultural knowledge in both English and Japanese, emphasising the role of context in appreciating the intended humour. By shedding light on these linguistic and cultural phenomena, this research enhances our understanding of the complex dynamics between languages within commercial contexts in Japan.

Future research in this field could further explore the audience's perception and understanding of the English wordplay used in Japanese commercial texts. Conducting surveys or interviews with Japanese readers could provide valuable insights into their interpretations and the effectiveness of these linguistic strategies. Additionally, investigating the impact of English wordplay on consumer behaviour and advertising effectiveness could offer practical implications for marketing and communication professionals.

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