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# ‘Stop the ひったくり’: English language use on a Tokyo police sign

Luke Rowland

## Abstract

Written English language use is pervasive in Japanese society. On billboards and advertisements, on shop signs and on road signs, the English language and Roman script are obvious to even the casual observer. This study focuses on Japanese university students’ interpretations of why English is displayed so prominently in Japan through an analysis of their opinions on the use of the English language on a metropolitan police sign in Tokyo. To analyse the students’ opinions, a method of discourse analysis, known as *motive analysis*, was employed. Motive analysis seeks to reveal the ways rhetors privilege certain elements of a situation, while downplaying others, in any given description of events. Using motive analysis allows the analyst to outline the reasons why rhetors take particular positions on various topics. The findings of this study indicate that the students are cognizant of the main ethnocultural stereotypes associated with the English language in Japan and globally.

## Introduction

Written English language use is pervasive in Japanese society. On billboards and advertisements, on shop signs and on road signs, the English language and Roman script are obvious to even the casual observer. However, in a country which for many years has been considered the paragon of a monolingual, monocultural society (but see Backhaus, 2007; Heinrich, 2012), the motivations behind such prevalent use of English are perhaps less clear. As a starting point for analysis, it seems reasonable to assume that the functions of English and Roman script are

multiple and varied, dependent upon local contexts, administrative policies, and individual preferences amongst many other factors. Moreover, it is likely that people interpret the use of English on public signage in very different ways, regardless of the intentions of sign designers and sign makers. It is these ‘audience’ interpretations which form the analytical focal point of this article.

The aim of this article is to examine Japanese university students’ understandings of written English language use on a metropolitan police sign in Meguro, Tokyo. To analyse the students’ opinions, a method of discourse analysis, known as *motive analysis*, was employed. Motive analysis seeks to reveal the ways rhetors (i.e. speakers or writers) privilege certain elements of a situation, while downplaying others, in any given description of events. Using motive analysis allows the analyst to outline the reasons why rhetors take particular positions on various topics. In the subsequent sections of this article, I will firstly introduce motive analysis as a form of discourse analysis. Following this, I will describe the police sign, its features and its surrounds. Finally, I will apply the analytical method to the students’ written comments on why English is displayed so prominently on the police sign.

### **Dramatism and motive analysis**

Kenneth Burke, a 20th century literary critic and theorist, was a social constructionist at heart, although his work predates the term. Burke’s main concern was with the ways in which humans manipulate symbols to construct and project ‘realities’, or versions of events, and he approached the topic through a form of rhetorical discourse analysis called *dramatism*, which he explained thus:

Dramatism is a method of analysis and a corresponding critique of terminology designed to show that the most direct route to the study of human relations and human motives is via a methodical inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms and their functions. (Burke, 1968, p.445)

As Scollon and Scollon (2004) note, “we say and do things to show our values and attitudes, our positioning and placements of ourselves and others” (p.144) and dramatism is a particularly apt analytical tool for revealing the rhetorical choices that people make in doing this. Scollon and Scollon (2004) refer to their use of dramatism as *motive analysis* and this is the term that I have chosen to use in this article as it is more immediately apprehensible to the uninitiated. The authors explain that:

A motive analysis is an aspect of discourse analysis which seeks to understand how participants, including the analyst, are positioning themselves in giving explanations for actions. ... The goal of a motive analysis is not to try to establish any fundamental underlying or ‘true’ motive. The purpose of a motive analysis is twofold: (1) You want to establish how participants characterize actions and their explanations, and (2) You want to engage in those characterizations to see if taking a different perspective may change the nature of the actions themselves. (Scollon and Scollon, 2004, p.175)

Motive analysis has been employed across a wide-range of academic fields and applied to a great variety of social discourses, including but not limited to celebrity testimony (Darr and Strine, 2009), birth trauma narratives (Beck, 2006)

and professional communication (Fox, 2002). The first step in a motive analysis is to examine a rhetor's discourse for five essential elements, which Burke (1962) named the *pentad*. The pentad consists of the *Act* (what happened), the *Agent* (who did it), the *Agency* (how was it done), the *Scene* (where and when did it happen) and the *Purpose* (why did it happen). One point to note is that *Agency* refers to how an act was done in two different senses: *by what means and in what manner*. The former can be considered a more concrete description of the tools and artifacts used to complete the action, while the latter is often more abstract and can refer to the attitudes or intentions of the agent in performing the act. Once the pentadic elements have been identified, they can be compared and contrasted with one another to ascertain which of them the rhetor appears to be privileging. Burke referred to this as making *pentadic ratios*. By comparing the elements to each other it becomes apparent which element is driving a person's interpretation of events and this allows for a deeper analysis of the person's position on the relevant issue, which in this case is the use of English on a metropolitan police sign in Tokyo.

### **The Tokyo Metropolitan Police sign**

The sign (see Figure 1) discussed in this study is a police sign situated in Meguro ward, an affluent neighbourhood in Tokyo, Japan. It is a metal sign measuring approximately 30cm by 20cm affixed to a fence bordering a pavement beside a canal. The main message on the sign reads, 'Stop the ひったくり', which translates as 'Stop the bag snatching' in English. The message is written in a mixture of Roman script and *hiragana*. Below this message are two lines in *kanji* indicating the authors of the sign, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police and the Committee for the Prevention of Crimes. The sign has a light blue background in the centre of which

is an inverted dark blue triangle with the main message written within the triangle in light blue lettering. The two lines of kanji are written in dark blue against the light blue background below the triangle. The English words are capitalised and written in a serif font with the word 'STOP' noticeably bolded and larger than the word 'THE' and indeed larger than all the other writing on the sign. The words 'THE' and 'ひったくり' are a similar font size but a different font type. The *kanji* is the smallest font size on the sign and is in a different font to the English and the *hiragana*.



Figure 1: The Tokyo Metropolitan Police sign in Meguro ward.

The photograph was taken in 2013. It is an official police sign warning the local community about bag-snatching and urging people to either cease the activity or to

prevent the activity from happening in a mixture of languages, scripts, fonts and colours. The sign raises a number of questions for researchers interested in language contact issues and multilingual displays on public signage. For example, why is the main message in two different languages/scripts? Why is the word 'STOP' the most prominent linguistic element on the sign? Why wasn't the word 'ひったくり' made more prominent (through bolding, for example)? Why was the English definite article included? What is the symbolism of the colour scheme and the inverted triangle? Who is the intended audience of the sign? What percentage of the Japanese population is able to read and understand the English on the sign? What percentage of foreign residents or visitors is able to read and understand the Japanese on the sign? And of paramount interest to this author, how do Japanese people interpret mixed language signs such as this one? While all the questions are deserving of further investigation and discussion, I have chosen to focus on the last one and I sought the opinions of Japanese undergraduate students to help me do this.

### **Student opinions on the use of English/Roman script on the police sign**

I have selected three of the student opinions (below) that are representative of a commonly held idea about why English is featured on the police sign. The pentadic elements that they share are listed beneath the student comments.

**Student opinion 1:** *I think that written in English signs have more impact than Japanese written signs. If they were written in Japanese, many people would not care about the signs. However, if they were written in English, many people would think "What is written here?" for a fleeting moment. This is the aim of the people*

*who made the sign, the police and the committee. It can give us stronger impression. If we see “STOP”, we understand instantly something is banned without thinking deeply.’*

**Student opinion 2:** *I think if using English “STOP”, it will have impact for people. If there are only Japanese, nobody pay attention to this sign because there are many Japanese sign, advertisement and so on in town. This police sign should be striking because of bag snatching prevention. Also, all Japanese people know meaning of “STOP”. Therefore, everybody can understand what this sign wants to say.’*

**Student opinion 3:** *The purpose of this sign is reducing the crime for the police, so this sign should be noticeable to people. Using English has more impression than using Japanese in the sign board. In Japan, we always use Japanese such as Kanji, Hiragana and Katakana in writing, but if we want people to attract attention to something, we often use English. Using English is the one of ways to attract attention.’*

**Act:** Displaying English in public

**Agent:** The police and the committee

**Agency:** On a bag snatching prevention sign (*by what means*) and through conscious choice (*in what manner*)

**Scene:** An almost monolingual Japanese linguistic landscape

**Purpose:** To attract people’s attention and make a strong impression on them

An analysis of the three student opinions reveals five common pentadic elements. As the students were instructed to focus on the multilingual nature of this police sign in their comments, it is of little surprise that they framed the *Act* as being the use of English on the sign. As they mention, the linguistic landscape in Japan abounds with Japanese scripts and the Japanese language, so the marked action – the action most worthy of comment by dint of it being unusual or different – is the use of a non-native language, English, on a Japanese police sign. As for the *Agent*, the sign explicitly states that the authors of the sign are the police and a committee for the prevention of crimes; thus, the *Agent* of the action is clear in all three student opinions too.

The sign itself is quite obviously the primary means – the *Agency* – of performing the *Act*; after all, it is the physical police sign which carries the display of written English language use. However, there is also an acknowledgment of the general awareness that Japanese people have regarding the symbolic power of English on signs, and this indicates the manner in which the *Act* is performed (i.e. through a conscious decision to include English on the sign so as to achieve a particular outcome). This point warrants further discussion below.

The *Scene* is described as one in which written Japanese, in a variety of scripts, predominates, creating an almost monolingual Japanese linguistic landscape. Using English on the sign thus becomes a point of difference. Finally, the *Purpose* is outlined by all three students as a desire to attract people's attention and make a strong impression on the Japanese public. Overall, the student comments characterise the display of English on the police sign in broadly similar terms. The

five pentadic elements (as outlined above) can be identified in each opinion and thus a comparison of their relative importance can be undertaken.

### ***A Scene-Agency ratio***

Through a comparison of the various elements, it becomes clear that all three of the students are privileging *Scene* over *Agency* as a way of explaining the use of English on the police sign. All three comments are unequivocal in their summation of a Japanese society in which Japanese scripts are commonplace and thus of limited value when it comes to attracting the attention of passers-by. The preponderance of *kanji*, *hiragana* and *katakana* on signs and advertisements in the Japanese linguistic landscape is the catalyst for *Agents* to make the conscious decision to employ the English language on signs, such as the police sign in this study, if the signs are to have any meaningful informational or commercial effect.

In student opinion 1, the point is made that when confronted with English on a sign Japanese people will often pause '*for a fleeting moment*' to try and make sense of the foreign language. The same response is not triggered by displays of Japanese. Indeed, Piller (2001) makes a similar point in her study of multilingual advertising in Germany. She suggests that, "a general advantage of the use of a foreign language [on a sign] is that it impedes automatic processing and thereby arrests the attention of recipients for a longer timespan than monolingual native language advertisements would" (p.163). In a sense then, written English is seen to function as a symbolic 'tout' of sorts, drawing potential audience members in closer to appreciate the finer details of the sign's message.

Student opinions 2 and 3 also make mention of the need for the sign to be *'noticeable'* and *'striking'*, while all three opinions acknowledge the *'impact'* that English can have in written form on signs in the Japanese linguistic landscape. The reason that English has the necessary impact to make a sign noticeable or striking to Japanese people is because of the ethnocultural stereotypes associated with the English language in Japan (see Haarmann, 1984). Haarmann (1984) explains that an ethnocultural stereotype is a "stereotyping image of a foreign culture" (p.101) shared by members of a separate ethnic group or community. The stereotype can be positive or negative and can relate to a foreign culture's social organisation, physical location, or cultural practices, as well as of course their language. In the minds and the discourse of the stereotyping community, associations are formed between a foreign culture/language and particular qualities. Haarman lists 'international appeal', quality, confidence and practicality (p.105) as being associated with English use in Japan. If signs featuring English can invoke such positive notions in the minds of passers-by, then it goes some way to explaining why sign makers, even the police and committees for crime prevention, would choose to incorporate the language into their signs.

## **Conclusion**

The reasons for the extensive use of written English in the Japanese linguistic landscape are likely multifarious, oftentimes opaque, and clearly deserving of further research. Equally important too are the different interpretations of English on public display that the Japanese people hold. As this article has shown, using a discourse analytical method such as motive analysis is one way of exposing commonly held opinions on this phenomenon. By isolating the various

pentadic elements in the students' opinions about the use of English on the police sign in this study and then by comparing the elements to each other, it is possible to identify a *Scene-Agency* ratio at work in their comments. In their view, the monolingual Japanese linguistic landscape is the catalyst for sign makers to incorporate English into advertisements and other signs in Japan. The positive qualities associated with English ensure that signs featuring the language will most effectively attract the attention of the Japanese public for informational and commercial purposes.

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