Feature Scene III

Liquid Grammar, Liquid Style:
On the East-Asian Way of Using English or
the Phenomenon of “Linguistic Air-Guitars”

“Thinking Logically to Feel Confident About Reading English”
(from a Chinese Time-Newsweek subscription campaign)

1. At Full Love With Vivian
The Western visitor of East Asia marvels at English expressions that he encounters in advertisements, in magazines, on T-Shirts, and elsewhere that seem to come “out of another world”. Single words and short English sentences, rarely longer than five words, suggest something like the invention of a new language. In Japan and in Korea this phenomenon has been thriving for decades. In China it is more recent but it is developing along the same lines.

The use of English in East Asia is linked to a certain part of East-Asian social history. “Japano-English” for example, is neither “real” English nor Japanese but symbolizes, within the domain of linguistics, the co-existence of two cultural spheres. In Japan, after the mid-1880s, an earlier uncritical and unsystematic acceptance of things Western gradually gave way to the view that Japanese and Western cultures can exist side-by-side. From then on the question was: how can East Asia incorporate the West without being culturally overwhelmed by it?

In the domain of language, Japano-English brought forward schemes of cultural coexistence of utmost sophistication. Wasei eigo (made in Japan English) is a well-known phenomenon. Most of the time, it concerns the invention – or rather re-invention – of words like arubaito (part-time work from the German Arbeit) or mansion (a modern apartment block), attributing new meanings to foreign words. More fascinating – though much more difficult to analyze – are the peculiar English sentences in which words and grammar follow almost normal usage rules but which nevertheless express an unmatched strangeness. Because such English is common in Japan (Engrish),
Korea (Konglish), China (Chinglish), and other East-Asian countries like Indonesia and Thailand, I suggest labeling this “language” as East-Asian English (EA English). I am well aware that there are differences between these national branches of English, but I think that a certain overall similarity enables us to speak here of a new “Pan-Asian language” based on a common East-Asian cultural experience.

2. For Your Tasteful Life

Often it is simply the vagueness of these languages, as well as the lack of many prepositions, inflections, copula like ‘and’ and ‘or’, articles and personal pronouns in Japanese and Korean, as well as the indistinction of concepts, verbs, and adjectives (especially in Chinese), which makes a literal translation from an Asian language to English imprecise and confused. In these cases the result is a kind of East-Asian Pidgin: “Do not play water”, “400% expectation coffee”, “Classics of world translates into film…”

However, EA English covers a range of phenomena much broader than the scope of Pidgin English. Therefore – though many cases might overlap – I distinguish simplified (Pidgin-like) English from EA English, defining it as an autonomous way of speaking determined by layers of an interculturally determined cognition that reside at deeper levels than those produced only by the grammar and vocabulary of the host language. The cognitive structure underlying the apprehension of EA English is not based principally on the process of derivation from an already existing language, but almost represents the creation of a new language.¹ Already Donald L. Smith, who wrote one of the first academic essays on “Engrish” in 1974, stated that “[a]n educated Japanese using English will quite naturally feel uncomfortable with the language, especially as he tries to observe all the rules governing the new and exacting foreign terms, but with Engrish he is released from the elements of his industrialized society for precise terminology” (Smith 1974: 188).

In the present “Feature Scene” I will argue that the English fragments that appear in East-Asian contexts are experienced on a relatively immediate level of cognition that in many cases does not refer to linguistic models of the host language (Japanese, Korean, Chinese). I am aware that writing about a phenomenon like EA English is difficult because the attribution of an expression to decorative English (also called ornamental English), simply false English or a genuinely new way of speaking is often debatable. Many cases overlap. Still I