

"Chicken Meets on Rise": Meaning in Decline Lexical Havoc in L2

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The L2 learner is often sabotaged by his/her lexical and phonological limitations in the target language, and most people attempting to express themselves in a foreign language have experienced a semantic disaster at some point. Former US president Jimmy Carter, for instance, in a speech to the Polish people attempted to express himself in that language by proclaiming that he "loved" the Poles. Due to an unfortunate choice of words, he announced instead that he "lusted after" them. The good-natured Poles applauded him anyway, and to this day the two nations remain on speaking terms.

Such errors are often amusing --at least to native speakers. The rendition of "chicken meat on rice" in the title of this article is an example of our struggles to communicate in foreign languages. In this case, Japanese students taking a university entrance examination were required to translate, as part of the English test, the word "oyakadon," the term for a Japanese dish consisting of both the meat and eggs of an animal (oyak = parent and child); the combination, such as chicken and eggs, is served on rice. Although the translation task seems fairly straightforward to a native speaker, it is in fact quite a challenge for non-native speakers, and the mysteries of the English lexicon led students to improvise, as in the title and the following samples:

- pieces of meet and egges, which are confused and cooked on rice
- eggs and chickens are shuffled and be boiled
- parents and eggs on rice
- eggs are flown on rises and chicken soak eggs

Of course, even when students had the right words in mind, they could still be undermined by their phonological problems in English, as in this example:

- it is lice with egg and meat of bard

In the course of gathering data for a study on lexical processing in L2, I posted a request on the [NETEACH-L](#) list, and received many interesting L2 malapropisms representing a diverse group of language learners. Some of the responses to the posting are shared below (the contributor of each example is acknowledged in parentheses). Lexical processing errors in L2 fall into three broad categories --lexical, morphological, and phonological_ and there are subdivisions within each of these groups. Since the objective here is more directed at enjoyment than edification, the samples are limited to a few lexical and phonological categories and analysis is minimal.

1. Lexical Confusions

A common problem faced by the L2 learner is simply finding the correct approximation of the intended expression. Words that have very distinct meanings to the native speaker may be treated by the L2 student as synonyms. For instance, in the Japanese-to-English examples above, students could not yet differentiate between the culinary terms "mix" or "combine" (the chicken and eggs) and their own perceived lexical choices: "confuse," "throw," and "shuffle." It doesn't require much effort to understand how such mistakes might occur. With instruction and experience, a language learner develops the lexical knowledge that will promote better communication in the target language. In the process, however, the unfortunate learner has to muddle through, as in these examples contributed in response to the Neteach posting:

- I was working with a young man from Uganda who had written an anthropology paper on marriage rituals in his country. The information in his paper was good. There were some things which he found difficult to express in English. However, try as I might, I could not hold back my laughter when I read the last line of his paper: "Spontaneous cows are the main source of

marriage in the Lwo province." In context and translated, he meant: "In the Lwo provinces (of northern Uganda), a man who shows up at another man's home with two cows shows interest in the man's daughter." (From David Beach)

- In the largest bookstore in Nagoya, Japan, one can see the following sign: No Fires Allowed! (Alan Mackenzie)

2. Direct Translations

Frequently, lexical errors are the result of literal translation from the first language lexicon, as in these anecdotes:

- I have a student from Germany, whose English is quite good, though he tends sometimes to translate a bit literally. He just turned in a paper yesterday on Tristan und Isolde, and on the first page, referred to the "overture" (vorspiel in German) as the "forplay.") (From Clay Bond)
- Sign in a candy-store in the center of Salzburg: We send Mozart's balls to America. This is a Salzburg candy specialty by the German name of Mozartkugeln, which doesn't mean anything dangerous at all. (From Reinhard Auer)
- When I was teaching English in Germany, I had occasion to consult a doctor. He took this opportunity to practice his English on me, and referred to my body throughout the entire consultation as a "corpse." (German Körper-English corpse-an understandable error.) I didn't have the heart to point out the mistake, but I did have trouble keeping a straight face. (From Gillian Hanney)
- One of our students wrote a composition about "the pickled surfaces" when he wanted to write about "the occupied territories" (a direct translation from Hebrew where these words serve both meanings). (From Gitit Seri via Lily Vered)

3. Similar-sounding Words

Another common type of lexical mismatch is the result of similar-sounding words in the L1 and L2 which either require distinct formulas depending on meaning, or may or not actually have the same meaning in L1 and L2, such as in these examples:

- The worst mistake I made in German was the day I came home in August in sweltering heat and my neighbor asked politely how I was. I replied, "Ich bin heiss." (I am hot.) In German this is used only for the *hot* as a sexual connotation. The phrase I should have used translates as "It is warm to me." This elicits hoots and howls in my classes when I tell them, but also helps them to relax and take their mistakes with a grain of humor. (From Margaret Ann Doty)
- So after [the student] was told what he said, he exclaimed: "Estoy embarazada" ("I'm pregnant"). We had several good laughs that day. (From David Beach: see the rest of anecdote below in "phonological errors")

4. Phonological Problems

An incomplete grasp of the target phonological system can lead to a range of interesting errors, some of which are represented in these examples:

- In Yemen, I was always just a little worried when passing a small office which proclaimed that the occupier [a physiotherapist] was: PHYSIO THE RAPIST All body problems fixed (From Douglas Craig)
- A student wrote in her essay on marriage about one's "inmate." She meant husband. In Japanese 'shujin' means husband, 'shuujin' means inmate. (From Laura Kimoto)
- In a Spanish class, we were discussing what we liked to eat. One young man wanted to say that he liked shellfish such as clams, mussels, and oysters. So he said: "quiero los maricones pequenos" which elicited raucous laughter from the native Spanish speakers and L2ers who knew what he said. Instead of "mariscos," the word for shellfish, he had used the word for homosexuals -- "I want little homosexuals." So after he was told what he said, he exclaimed: "Estoy embarazada" ("I'm pregnant"). We had several good laughs that day. (From David Beach)

- A friend (Japanese as L2) was in a bank, he was in a hurry, he had just started learning Japanese and started shouting at the bank teller, "Usagi, usagi!" which means "Rabbit, rabbit!" He meant, "osoi" = I'm late. (From Alan Mackenzie)
- In a letter describing places he would want to show a foreigner visiting his country, one Palestinian student expressed the desire to show his visitor "the Doom of the Rock and other holly places" (in Jerusalem, of course--the Dome of the Rock being the most famous mosque there (From Miriam Seaver)
- Vietnamese student's reply to a question about his favorite foods: "chicken, shrimp, and crap" . What class did you take last semester? "Keyboring" (From Tomi Cunningham)
- I had an (Arab) male student, who furtively came to me after a class asking me where he could find "naughty books." An embarrassed few minutes followed, where I tried to find out exactly what he meant. Nothing was clear and his explanations were confusing. Eventually I mentioned a few specific titles, like "Playboy." Now it was his turn to be embarrassed: he actually wanted a "note book," but there was a considerable pronunciation error in his spoken output (Peter Neville)

A lengthy list of translation "howlers" was sent by David Van Hammen. He was not sure of the source, but I believe many of these may be found in a little book called "Anguished English" (whose author I cannot recall), and possibly elsewhere. A brief selection from David's list follows; all of the amusing language errors here are lexical:

- In a Bucharest hotel lobby: The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable.
- In a hotel in Athens: Visitors are expected to complain at the office between the hours of 9 and 11 A.M. daily.
- In a Yugoslavian hotel: The flattening of underwear with pleasure is the job of the chambermaid.
- In an Austrian hotel catering to skiers: Not to perambulate the corridors in the hours of repose in the boots of ascension.
- In an East African newspaper: A new swimming pool is rapidly taking shape since the contractors have thrown in the bulk of their workers.
- On the faucet in a Finnish washroom: To stop the drip, turn cock to right.
- In a Copenhagen airline ticket office: We take your bags and send them in all directions.

In Spite of Ourselves

Whatever the source error in foreign language expressions, there are two "universal" features about them that are worth remembering. First, everyone makes these mistakes; they are a natural, healthy part of learning. Second, in spite of such errors cross-cultural communication does happen. Paradoxically, saying the wrong thing -but giving the audience a good laugh-- may do more for international understanding than clear speech.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the people who generously responded to my posted request for L2 boo-boos on the Neteach-list, a great source, by the way, for a lot of language information (neteach-1@thecity.sfsu.edu). Although I could not use in this brief article all the examples I received, all examples that do not appear here are included in more serious L2 lexical analysis currently in progress, and all contributions will be acknowledged. I am still collecting, and anyone interested in contributing examples of L2 malapropisms for that study can send examples to me at the snail-mail address or email address listed above (please list source if samples are from published accounts). First language developmental errors are also welcome, since the study includes a comparison.