

“DRAW A CIRCLE”: AN EXAMINATION OF WORLD

ENGLISHES IN THE *HETALIA* FANDOM

Introduction

The night before my presentation at the First Annual Fandom and Neomedia Studies Conference, I attended the “*Hetalia*: After Dark Panel” at A-Kon 24. There was a flurry of color and laughter, excited fans lining up to speak with the National representations. I stood at the front of a very long, very loud line. For a moment, a Britain cosplayer broke character and threw her arms around me. Her Southern drawl broke through the British accent for a few moments. When she moved back to where the other cosplayers were talking, I could hear a myriad of accents from around the world. While watching the proceedings, I got to witness my research in action. When the panel started, I remember sitting on the floor because I had given my seat to a Switzerland cosplayer who wanted to sit by Prussia—both of whom thanked me in German. As I sat and listened, I could hear almost everything that I had been researching for my presentation. The Russia cosplayer used a put-on Russian accent to make her characterization stronger and to add to the overall credibility of the panel. The Britain cosplayer, whom I spoke with beforehand, replaced her Southern English dialect with that of standard British. Simply by watching the events of this enthusiastic panel, I was able to watch my research regarding the role of World Englishes in the *Hetalia* fandom take life and I got to see the enjoyment that the fans got from that experience—from the way English dialects and accents were employed throughout the cosplay panel. If nothing else throughout my research had proven the important place that English variety holds within the fandom, that enthusiastic panel did. In this article, I hope to explicate on the ways World English varieties are used within the source text of *Hetalia* and how

the fandom employs and motivates these varieties into the forefront of fan thought within the community.

Contextualizing *Hetalia*

The anime, *Hetalia*, has been adapted numerous times between the years of 2008 and 2013 into various genres. It was first established as a web comic, or a comic that is published on a central website, by Hidekaz Himaruya. The success of the web comic was so great that it was adapted into a more popular Japanese genre, manga. To be more specific, the web comic was converted into tankōbon, or individual stand-alone books with drawn images that convey storylines. The first Japanese release date of the manga was in March 2008. The English release dates lagged by two years due to licensing issues with various English publishers. This move—from web comic to manga— was a crucial in the development of the *Hetalia* franchise. It brought the material to a wider audience and with the expanded audience came even more popularity. Both English language translations have topped *The New York Times* bestseller list for manga in 2011. Another crucial transition came in July of 2008. To keep up with demands, the *Hetalia* manga was adapted into an anime.

Hetalia –the name of which is a portmanteau of the Japanese word for “useless” or “pathetic,” *hetare*, and the Italian word for “Italy”— is a comical allegorical presentation of political and historical events (*The Malaysia Star*). The way this is achieved is through the personification of world nations. And this sort of anthropomorphic representation is not uncommon. From Athena to Uncle Sam and from Britannia to Mother Russia, nations have long been personifying their identities. In *Hetalia*, there are two main groups of characters. These groupings echo the battling sides of World War II. Germany, Italy, and Japan make up the “Axis Powers.” America, Britain, France, China, and Russia compose the “Allied Powers.” Each

national representation is characterized by the stereotypes of their respective countries. For example, Germany has a very militaristic portrayal. He is always punctual and generally steps in when the world meetings get out of control. He is loud when angered and drinks quite a bit of beer. Likewise, Japan is portrayed as a very patient and quiet individual who highly values politeness and honor. Due to his old age, he constantly refers to himself as an “old man.” The descriptions could be drawn out for pages.

The continuing evolution of *Hetalia* led to the production of the film, *Hetalia: Paint It White*. At a run time of sixty-one minutes, the film possesses all the original characters plus new additions to the cast. Rather than being based on vague allusions to historical events, the movie instead contains an adventure plot. The characters are placed opposite an alien invasion and they must work together to save the Earth. The invading aliens, called “Pictonians” seek to change the Earth into a mass of white shapelessness. No color or facial expressions, no cultures or music. While it can seem rather arcane in some senses, the film seems to be a commentary on the cooperation between nations during times of hardship and the importance of individuality in the face of conformity. One aspect of the film that points to this sort of interpretation is the way language is used as a means of defining the characters’ individual traits and personas. Once humans are transformed into the blank “Pictonian” image, there is no linguistic variety between them. They all sound the same and speak the same language. Their national traits have been torn away and the lead characters are left to save the world. With this explanation of *Hetalia* in mind, I will first explain my framework and methodology for approaching this text.

Framework and Methodology

First, it is important to understand the framework with which I am approaching this particular project and idea. The idea of Englishes as pluralistic and varied is the frame with

which I intend approach this particular research. This connects to the idea of World Englishes, which is a still developing field of English research that is dedicated to the exploration and encouragement of English varieties from around the world. In fact, “the World Englishes paradigm has successfully worked towards establishing a more positive attitude towards international varieties of English and a research agenda examining the sociolinguistic dynamics and realities of the spread of English worldwide” (Bolton 459). World English studies are not merely concerned with just “English language” as a linguistic system, but rather, and more frequently, with a wide range of other topics, such as: rhetoric, stylistics, language policy, and social practice. Establish World Englishes as the wide-angle lens of this research, I drew on the specific approach of stylistic analysis. That is, the examination of certain literary choices made in a text (Jefferies 3). Essentially, I will be examining what features are prevalent in the *Hetalia* English dub. Furthermore, in what ways, with a light stylistic analysis of *Hetalia*, were World Englishes are portrayed, employed, and understood within the fandom? The latter question will be discussed later in this article. In the meantime, I will pursue the source text.

When considering how to approach *Hetalia* for examination, I knew that I needed to limit my observations down to a single cross-section of the series. With five seasons, the entire English-dubbed *Hetalia* anime would be quite an extensive corpus from which to draw my findings and would ultimately yield too large of a number set. Instead, in an effort to remain concise, I decided to examine the film of the franchise, *Hetalia: Paint It White*. Within the movie, I limited my observations even further. Two particular characters caught my attention: Japan and Germany. Concerning why I chose these two particular national representations, I selected them based on a preliminary observation of features. These particular features used within *Hetalia* in reference to these specific characters gesture toward the idea of World

Englishes as it puts forward the notion of Englishes in relation to another regional language; in these cases, German and Japanese.

Studies in this strain of racial identification through English language patterns are not uncommon. Michael Newman and Angela Wu in “Do You Sound Asian When You Speak English?” discuss that there are factors that lead to the perception of speakers as “sound[ing] Asian” due to certain dialectal and phonological traits. Just to clarify, phonology is the study of sounds—spoken sounds. Likewise, a discussion in “Practical Phonetics and Phonology” is one of many instances in which the /v-w/ connection is explicated in detail concerning German-English L2 (L2 denoting English second language) speakers. By referencing these and other materials, a framework of the German and Japanese English variants will be established—and thus a particular awareness and commentary on World Englishes by the English dub and subsequently, the fandom. From there, we will then look at how these dialects and accents might be or have been incorporated or employed in the Hetalia fandom—via fan fiction and other fan activities.

Analysis of Germany’s Phonological Features

It has become very clear through research that many linguists studying second-language acquisition are very much aware of the difficulties facing German-English speakers. That is, those who have German as their native tongue and English as the second language being acquired. This difficulty seems to be largely connected to differences in spelling and homophonics. It is important to note that there are major differences in the phonemes (simply put, sounds) of the two languages. These major differences include the fact that English /θ/ and /w/ which possess “no counterparts in German” (qtd. Bastug 3). These differences are certainly in keeping with the data collected from *Hetalia: Paint It White*. There were no issues in syntax or word order within the source text. Beyond the examined features, there were no others that were

employed in the portrayal of the dialect. The features examined (/w-v/, /θ-s or z/, and loanword usage) were the only features present in the portrayal aside from very few instances of vowel modification. This vowel modification was not drastic enough to be thoroughly scrutinized in this paper. Instead, each above listed features will be discussed one-by-one.

The usage of /v/ in the place of /w/ in the speech text of the film was somewhat overwhelming. Nearly every instance in which a <w> would appear in the spelling of a word, a /v/ would take its place. This occurred 47 times throughout. As Prussia was also counted toward Germany's total occurrences, his number of /w-v/ events can be added to Germany's overall total. This brings the number to a round 50. Examples of this from the text would be: what/vhat, we/vee, whatever/vhatever, and with/wiz. Most of the interchanges (96%) occurred in the initial syllable of the word. When two exchanges were present, it was always in a situation in which the word could be understood by a broad (and ultimately an English-speaking) audience. Due to problems in acoustics, certain usages were difficult to hear in the film—this was usually due to several characters speaking at once. Each of these six unidentifiable features was possibly examples of the /v/ and /w/ interchange. One particular example is the word “while.” The /wh/ is replaced by /v/, so far as the listener can tell. However, the acoustics were such that there was some uncertainty as to whether Germany pronounced the /w/ or replaced it with a full /v/ sound.

Analysis of Japan's Phonological Features

Differences in pronunciation of English /r/ and /l/ phonemes are a marked feature of Japanese English varieties. Some linguists, such as Hiromu Goto, explain that there is some difficulty in perception of the “acoustic differences” regardless of how long the adult-learners have been speaking English. Essentially, the difference is often attributed to perception. Many researchers claim that English /r/ and /l/ are assimilated into one Japanese phonetic segment, /r/

“at least in syllable-initial position” (Tagaki 565). This particular point—the assimilation of the phoneme—is often debated amongst those studying within the fields of cross-language speech perception and second-language acquisition. In fact, it can be said that “despite the articulatory difference between Japanese [r] and the English liquids [l] and [inverted r], Japanese speakers seem to perceptually assimilate both English liquids to Japanese /r/ (Aoyama et al. 234). When one considers this in connection to the way Japan’s dialect is portrayed in *Hetalia*, it would seem as though the interchange of /l/ and /r/ is somewhat reasonable for this representation. It is certainly a feature of Japanese English second-language (L2) speakers.

With this in mind, we will examine the usage of /r/ and /l/ interchange in *Hetalia* to see if the dialectal representation was accurate and, ultimately, to see if the usage could be described as stereotypical representation. The results of the observations were staggering. Of 59 words with an English [l] present, all contained the /r/ feature in place of the /l/ phoneme. Some examples of this would be: less/ress, cultural/curturar, sporadically/sporadicarry, and well/werr. No matter the placement of the English /l/ in the word, regardless of it is it present in the first or last syllable, an [r] sound replaces it. This shows that this particular feature (the Japanese [r]) was used carte blanche in the portrayal of Japan’s dialect. This sort of indiscriminate employment is important to note as it seems to be a gesture toward the stereotypical representation of the dialect by the sheer invariability of its employment.

Despite the heavy usage of phonological replacement and approximation, the audience is very much able to understand via sentence structure and context clues what Japan is saying, despite the overtly heavy usage of phoneme approximation. When Japan explains why he is having the aliens sign a peace agreement the next day, he states “That is the way to true hospitality.” Hospitality in this instance sounds more like hospitarity. The character is very much

understandable. And understandability seems to be essential in the production and communication of either character (Germany or Japan) no matter the extent of the phonological variance. As seen with Germany, his dialect was not as thick as it could not be understood by a broad audience. The same holds true for Japan's dialectal representation as well. It is not so thick that it cannot be understood. It is merely exaggerated into a caricature of the English of native Japanese speakers. This building of a linguistic caricature serves a specific rhetorical purpose: to communicate an English stereotype, a variety of English—World Englishes. And these phonologic variances are very much recognized by the fandom. More on that particular subject later.

Germany and Japan Loanword Usage

With a total of 13 loanwords, Germany has the most code-switches of any other character in the film. The words take place in different contexts and situations throughout. Exclamations (i.e. wunderbar, nein, and Scheiße) account for 5 of the 13 (26%) instances of code-switching. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these occurrences is the fact that each word can be easily understood by a general audience. To use the above listed exclamations as examples, the word Scheiße (roughly pronounced shai-za) might not be well-known to a broad number of the audience. It is a German curse equaling the English “shit.” From observation of the context clues, it can be inferred by a viewer what Scheiße means. The angry tonality and the rapidly deteriorating situation within the plot leads the audience to an understanding of what is the least contextualized word, as this particular usage of a loanword is the only one to be outside of a sentence. The remaining twelve loanwords were in the context of sentences and are also words that a general audience would be aware of and familiar with. For example, ja (yes) and nein (no) were used a total of four times (two times each) in the text. Both would be fairly easy for an

audience to understand. This is also the case with the usage of the grammatical conjunction *und*, which is used in place of every instance in which an English *and* would be used (totaling four usages). Then, there were phrases such as when Germany praises the titular character for his good reaction to a terrible situation. He states, “You did wunderbar.” The audience is able to infer that the English equivalent would be a word that sounds quite similar, “wonderful.” This shows the reliance on the audience’s knowledge of both German and context clues.

This sort of reliance on context and audience awareness is also prevalent in Japan’s loanword usage. At six loanwords instances, Japan ranks third in the characters who code-switch most often, after France’s nine usages. His words are a bit more simplistic and context driven. The six instances are: *noppera-bō*, *hai* (repeated twice), *konnichiwa*, *Bon*, and *Hetalia*. Each of these instances is settled very much in the context of the scripting and each take into account the audience to which this particular film will be marketed to. As *Hetalia: Paint It White* is an anime film, it can be assumed that a large majority of the audience is somehow connected to the anime medium. Whether that connection is as a passive fan or a diehard member of the *Hetalia* fandom, the audience has likely watched anime in Japanese and has some basic knowledge of the language through association. With this in mind, simple words such as *konnichiwa* and *hai* are dependent on audience knowledge of the native language. If words are likely to be less-known by the audience, they are then explicated in the text. An example of this particular approach is the usage of the words *Bon* and *noppera-bō*. *Bon* is described as a type of dancing set to drum music and as a festival that celebrates togetherness. Meanwhile, *noppera-bō* is clarified by Japan within the first few lines of the film to be a “Japanese monster without a nose, eyes, or a mouth.”

It is said that “the use of loanwords is a relatively provocative way to confront the reader [viewer, in this case] with the foreignness or otherness of a text, translators should always decide

on the level of acquaintance with foreign elements they can expect from their audience and on the level of openness of the target culture” (Van Poucke 104). In the above listed examples of loanword employment, it is clear that the audience and target culture are taken into account. It is a “deliberate choice, not an unconscious influence of undesired interference” (Van Poucke 105). To sum it up: it is a stylistic choice that has been made in the communication of the characters—to use loanwords (as well as phonological features) to solidify the dialectal English representation of Germany and Japan. Now, we must wonder if this sort of awareness of World English varieties exists within the fandom of *Hetalia* and whether these features have been adopted into the fanon.

Within Fan Fiction and the Fandom

Fan fiction is inherently centered on language. It is the purest form of imitation—as if the call is the source text and the response is the fan fiction. As Molly Wright argues, “It is the epitome of participatory literature because anyone can be a fan of the source material, an author of fan fiction and a critic of the fan fiction of others which then produces a creative and social community” (12). As I wanted to observe the fandom’s interaction with the source text, I needed a means of witnessing such interaction. Therefore, fan fiction was chosen as representative of the linguistic behaviors of the fandom. As fandoms can be separated into different sections that hold particular interests, the findings within the fan fiction groups will then be related to, but not necessarily indicative of, other sections of the fandom—such as bloggers, roleplayers, and cosplayers. And fan fiction does make up an enormous number of the fandom. With over eight-nine thousand fictions (at last count), *Hetalia* has the third largest representation on fanfiction.net just after *Naruto* and *InuYasha*, providing a huge corpus of text that could be examined.

Germany's code-switching and Japan's phonological representation have been noted and embraced by the *Hetalia* fandom. Along with various other characters' linguistic traits—representing a myriad of World Englishes—Germany and Japan's phonologic and loanword usage discussed earlier in this article can be found in many fan fictions. And it is not uncommon within the community of fan fiction writers to employ various languages and dialects into an adapted text. While a majority of the fictional works on large sites such as fanfiction.net is written primarily in English by writers from primarily English-speaking countries, there is a good deal of incorporation of other languages and culture—this is particularly so in the *Hetalia* fandom. Whole sites and blogs are devoted to proper translation of languages ranging from Lithuanian to Spanish to Chinese. What is most interesting is the rhetorical and linguistic way fan writers employ and represent the English varieties in their writings and how this can be translated to other parts of the community.

It has been said that, “We acquire and design our own voices via echoing, responding and reforming the voices of others. From this perspective, our voices—talk and text, fan fiction being no exception—are simultaneously new and old; innovative and conservative. In all its particularity, fan fiction is thus one variation of this age-old dialectics according to which human languages/s, uses of language/s, and textuality have always developed and renewed themselves” (Leppanen 16). If we consider it in this fashion, it would seem that language acquisition, variation, conservation, innovation, and awareness are all integral and characteristic aspects of fan fiction—and this cannot be denied of the *Hetalia* fan writers themselves. In response to an inquiry video I posted on YouTube, one *Hetalia* fan fiction writer stated that “language plays a large role in general characterization, the development of specific stereotypes, and in the differentiation between character voices.” Essentially, language—particularly the employment of

dialect and accent within written texts—is a stylistic and overall rhetorical maneuver, meant to interact and persuade the audience. Many authors take the time to consider various aspects of how they perceive the Englishes involved in the *Hetalia* series and then consider how to adapt those Englishes—such as the usages of loanwords and phonological traits exhibited by Germany and Japan.

Through my observation, I have come to find that there are two major ways that the dialects and accents of the source text are utilized in *Hetalia* fan fictions. The first tactic is by way of code-switching or the use of loanwords—mirroring the way loanwords are portrayed in the source text. In many cases, a fan fiction author will take a word or phrase from the represented country’s national language and insert it into the English dialogue or text. You could call it a sort of linguistic appropriation. For example, in many fan fictions, instead of yes and no answers, the national representations will instead respond with the other language equivalent (such as ja or hai). It is said that “the use of loanwords is a relatively provocative way to confront the reader [viewer, in this case] with the foreignness or otherness of a text, translators should always decide on the level of acquaintance with foreign elements they can expect from their audience and on the level of openness of the target culture” (Van Poucke104). One roleplaying blog pair (rememberthesparklepartybro) explained to me through a YouTube video that they choose their foreign words based on how much they feel their audience can understand and whether or not it fits the character or situation. This is the case in their roleplaying and their fan fictions. It is with this in mind (either consciously or unconsciously) that the fan writers mirror the usage of loanwords within the primary text.

Of course, there exist arguments against each of the two major approaches, this particular idea of code-switching within *Hetalia* fan fiction has been met with some resistance among fan

fiction audiences AND writers. Some argue that writers should not “insert random foreign languages into their stories,” as quoted from a blog on the subject of *Hetalia* fan fiction OC (original character) writing. Indeed, some level of competence is required when loaning one language into another. It has been observed that writers must show a direct sensitivity to the audience’s awareness (or lack thereof) of other languages. For instance, a usage ja when writing Germany’s dialogue would likely not be met with much resistance as there are some context clues and general awareness of what this particular word might mean within a sentence. That is not to mention the fact that ja is used quite often in the English dub. However, it is when whole sentences are written in German, or really any other language that trouble often arises for fan fiction authors. Without a direct translation later listed in the text, the sentence would likely go unheeded and would provide the audience some resistance in the ease of reading. This is even more likely if the sentence is in the symbols of that quote-unquote foreign language, such as Chinese or Japanese characters, Arabic script, or even the Cyrillic alphabet. For those readers who have no knowledge of these systems, this can be quite jarring and confusing. Ultimately, this sort of large scale code-switching leads to several disagreements over the vitality of the idea of other languages within primarily English fan texts.

Another approach used by *Hetalia* fan fiction authors is the literary phonological representation of accents and dialects in written form. An example of this would be replacing the [l] with [r] in text when representing Japan’s speech, or similarly by replacing [w] with [v] in Germany’s written voice. It is this particular approach that raises the most ire within the fandom. In fact, on a blog entitled “*Hetalia* Fan Fiction Pet Peeves,” the one of the most popular pet peeves is Number Seventeen: “writing out accents.” It is a method that seems to drive thousands of fans up the metaphorical wall. It is sometimes perceived as negative and stereotypical and that

such practice cheapens the dimensions of the national linguistic identity of the character. That it—waters down the identity of any nationality to stereotypical representation. Often, these characteristics are pulled directly from the stylistic phonological representations presented within the anime dub—stereotype is a huge, unforgettable aspect of the show. So, why do people react so badly to written representations like this? Generally, the main difference is the written aspect—the phonology becomes visual. In over three hundred observed fan fictions, over sixty percent used phonologic approximation—that is, Japan’s /l/-/r/ replacement or Germany’s /w/-/v/ substitution. And the approximation does not end there. America will often drop the ‘g’ off of ‘—ing’ words. Sweden will swallow his vowels so much that they disappear entirely, sparking fan ire. Prussia will replace a ‘th’ sound with a ‘z or s.’ That becomes zat. And with each new character, a new written phonological formula is established within the fan fiction realm of the fandom.

One *Hetalia* fan told me through a YouTube comment that “*Hetalia* characters have the stereotypical personality of the countries they embody [it’s the whole premise of the franchise] and this is always reflected in the language [that they use]. Who better than France himself to say “Oh la lá!”, right?” At the most base level, *Hetalia* is a show that is based on culture and national identity—language is an integral part of both. With the English dub, the fan community has grown larger and larger and the fan works and activities have become broader and broader—not just language, but the plurality of Englishes has been embraced. From our overview examination of the habits in the fan fiction realm of the *Hetalia* fandom, we can extend this awareness of language—of the varieties of English shown in the *Hetalia* dub—both dialect and accent—to other parts of the fandom as well. Roleplayers and cosplayers adopt the accents and dialects of the nations they represent. Germany cosplayers will often show a command of the /w-v/

replacement. Japan roleplayers will replace /l/ with /r/ at nearly every instance. All this in an effort to remain true to the Englishes portrayed in the English dub.

One thing can be said for certain, language and the way it is used plays a large role in the *Hetalia* fandom. It is a way for fans to connect with their love that much more intimately. And with the English dub of the series, it allows for a new world of Englishes to be explored perhaps by those who knew little of those varieties before watching the show, or perhaps it gives them a drive to understand the languages they are interacting with. Maybe it inspires them to understand and learn why their favorite cosplayer or roleplayer is writing or speaking in a particular fashion. Why their favorite fan fiction possesses such a variety of voices. It could simply bring them joy. Whatever the case, *Hetalia* and language—Englishes—are intrinsically related. The fandom, in a romantic sense of collective thought, often seeks to connect it all, to find meaning in it, to draw a circle and connect these represented nationalities, creeds, and cultures, languages, and Englishes together. These Englishes of the world might have been drawn with a single brush, but they bring various colors across the canvas and draw together a diverse group of people into something we call a fandom, a community, or a world.

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