

# Yokohama Pidgin

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# Yokohama Pidgin

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Commodore Perry's forced opening of Japan in 1854 set in motion one of the most radical and remarkable transformations in human history, the quick evolution of a non-European feudal society into a modern industrial state. One essential step along the way was the opening of Japan to foreign trade through a tiny number of ports. The Shogunate reluctantly recognized that opening up was necessary to modernization and to prevent colonization; thus the ports. But it was also struggling valiantly to maintain its control over the process; thus the limited number. Yokohama, the first and most important port, officially opened on June 2, 1859.

Yokohama had been nothing but a tiny fishing village south of Edo. It was chosen because it was accessible to Edo, but not *too* accessible. It represented, in other words, the central government's delicate struggle to both allow the freedom necessary for modernization and maintain the control necessary to its own grip on power. The Shogunate tried to tightly confine the foreign community and its trade, much as it had in Nagasaki's Dejima for hundreds of years. The explosive vitality of open trade, though, overwhelmed the system. Before long, the foreign community was venturing outside of its borders in Kannai while at the same time Japanese farmers and tradesmen from around the Kanto area were flowing into Yokohama in pursuit of wealth and a better life.

With a few rare exceptions, neither side spoke the language of the other. But, driven by the desire for business, trade, and profit, they developed a code of communication which I will call Yokohama Pidgin, hereafter, YP.

The mildly derogatory sounding word *pidgin* is, for linguists, a non-derogatory technical term. It is the name given to a language created spontaneously when two groups without a mutual language come into contact. Pidgins have arisen countless times throughout history, usually to facilitate trade. This was the case in Yokohama.

One elegantly concise definition of a pidgin is, *a language with no native speakers*. It has been created by and for adults. The grammar is more simplified and less regularized than that of “normal” languages. The vocabulary, like the grammar, is limited. Limited vocabulary and grammar are compensated by one word, phrase, or sentence having a wide range of possible meanings. Interpreting the intended meaning in a particular situation, therefore, requires a heavy reliance on context. For example, as we will see, the YP word “arimas” can mean, depending on context: be, wish to be, have, can have, has had, obtain, be at home, arrive, want, or Dummy Subject.

And how do we know what *arimas* meant in YP? So far as I have been able to ascertain, there are no detailed records of YP anywhere. With one exception. I recently found on the Internet an extraordinary publication, a 1953 reprint of “Exercises in the Yokohama Dialect.” This pamphlet, published originally in 1879, is apparently a revision of an earlier pamphlet. The author is not named anywhere in the pamphlet but others have apparently discovered him to be Hoffman Atkinson. A google search of that name finds a Civil War officer born in New York in 1839 who went to Japan following the war as a tea merchant and returned to the States in 1875. Sounds like our man. The pamphlet can be found in its entirety at this site:

[www.atrus.org/yokohama\\_dialect/scans/view\\_10.html](http://www.atrus.org/yokohama_dialect/scans/view_10.html)

An obituary of Hoffman Atkinson, which contains a photograph and very brief biography, can be found at:

<http://www.lindapages.com/wvcw/1wvc/1wvc-hatkinson.htm>

Atkinson was not a linguist. We can assume, though, from the content of the pamphlet, that he was intimately involved in Yokohama life and fluent in YP. He clearly revels in his knowledge of YP and the vibrant Yokohama culture, enough so that he has gone to the effort to produce this pamphlet. He dismisses the bookish and, he believes, rather useless Japanese of those foreigners who study the language formally. In the Preface he tells us, "It is easy to see the advantage of getting at the dialect actually used in Yokohama, rather than learning by laborious study the Samurai dialect (the one generally taught by professors and books) and which nobody understands beyond a few teachers." Like pidgin languages themselves, his attitude is the essence of practicality.

So what is this "dialect actually used in Yokohama"? I propose here to present some of its key features and items of vocabulary.

Though Atkinson may not know it, Yokohama Pidgin is clearly Japanese-based in both grammar and vocabulary, with a smattering of words derived from English, Chinese Pidgin, and other languages of the Pacific. This is typical of pidgins. They are generally based predominantly on one language with heavy influences from others.

**Grammar.** The typical verb-final SOV word order is the same as Japanese. The subject and pronoun are often unstated, as in Japanese. As is typical of pidgins, there is a dearth of function words. For example, YP has neither English-like articles or prepositions nor Japanese-like particles. There are no embedded clauses (as is generally true of pidgins) and few to no conjunctions or conditionals. Also, as is normal in pidgins, sentences are highly dependent on context; one sentence may have a number of different meanings. For example, Atkinson translates *tempo arimas* in various contexts as: *He has a penny*, *It is a penny*, and *It costs a penny*. Extreme reliance on context is made necessary by the lack of function words, the simplified grammar, and the restricted vocabulary. Still, it is obvious when perusing the pamphlet, that remarkably long and complex messages can be communicated in YP, messages incomprehensible to

Japanese and English speakers not proficient in YP. For example, here is one part of a conversation between a Japanese merchant and foreigner. The merchant says:

*Knee jew ban Hotel maro maro your-ah-shee.  
Sigh oh narrow dozo bynebai moh skoosh cow.*

Atkinson, who clearly had a lot of fun putting together this pamphlet, enjoys putting the entire meaning into his translations, including special nuances and underlying messages that are likely clear only if you are there and familiar with the Yokohama culture. For example, he renders the above bit, complete with cultural presuppositions by both sides, as:

*You had better send it up to the Grand Hotel.  
I am much obliged and have always held  
Europeans in the highest esteem, and hope  
you will favour me by further patronage.*

As a point of interest, notice that the Japanese merchant does not use "sigh oh narrow" (*sayonara*) to mean good-bye. Rather, he seems to be using *sayoo nara* in the older more literal meaning, indicating something like: *soo iu koto nara*.

**Pronunciation.** The vocabulary of YP is mostly Japanese but the pronunciation (as presented in the pamphlet) is English. Atkinson uses what he calls the "Ollendorf system," a spelling system which he claims is most useful to "English and Americans." (An internet search finds this system used in 1860 for the teaching of Sinhalese to English speakers.) In trying to read Atkinson's "Ollendorf" orthography, I stumbled only a few times. My main stumble may have been over his use of the letter 'e'. For example, *iro* (いゝろ) is *ell oh* and *inaka* (いなか) is *enakka*. I assume he intends the initial sounds of those to words to be pronounced not /e/ but

/i/.

Pronunciation is typically the Japanese of Edo as filtered through an English speaker's ears and sound system. The following features can be deduced from Atkinson's spelling.

1) Voiceless vowels (common in Japanese) are unheard to the English ear and therefore omitted in English renderings: arimas, tacksan, meeds (arimasu, takusan, mizu).

2) Initial /hi/ becomes /shi/ (typical of Edo and still common among older speakers in Tokyo): "sto" or "shto" for "hito" or person. (Notice also the omission of the voiceless /i/.)

3) Final /e/ becomes /i/, as it still does for Japanese (and other) loan words in English: sacky, motty koi, weedy (sake, motte koi, oide). Likewise, Atkinson's 'me' should be pronounced like the English pronoun with a final /i/ sound. For example, the 'me' of *ame* (あめ) and *moose me* (むすめ) were certainly pronounced as the English pronoun 'me'.

4) The /g/ sound is often nasalized: nang eye, kong-ee, tomango (nagai, kugi, tamago). As a side note, we can deduce from the English spellings that Edo-ites 150 years ago nasalized not only /ga/ but /gi/ and /go/.

5) Often, there is an extraneous /r/ sound, like that used in certain dialects of English (including those used by the sailors who might have frequented Yokohama?): watarkshee, kooromar, oh char, she buyer (watakushi, kuruma, ocha, shibai).

However, Atkinson goes a bit into the Chinese pronunciation of YP (more on this below), which, he explains, is different than the pronunciation he presents. This indicates that various groups likely modified the pronunciation of YP according to the pronunciation rules of their own language but understood the pronunciations of other groups. Did Japanese modify their YP away from the "correct" Japanese pronunciation in the direction of the pronunciation of English and Chinese speakers? It seems likely, since Atkinson gives no indication of any special Japanese

pronunciation.

**Vocabulary.** Often the range of meaning for a word looks more like the Japanese range. For example, *cad gee* (かじ) is translated as “conflagration.” This translation indicates Atkinson’s awareness of a semantic range more narrow than that of English *fire*. In fact, it is similar to that of かじ. Likewise, *kaberra* (かぶる) is used for “wear/put on head” but not for “wear/put on body, arms, or legs.” Unlike Japanese, English does not have a separate word for ‘hot water.’ That word, with its semantic range equivalent to no single English word, was important enough in the YP environment that it was used by foreigners as well as Japanese. In the pamphlet we find *oh you* (おゆ) but not *atsie meeds* (あつい みず).

There are exceptions, though, to the rule that words tend towards a Japanese-like semantic range. For example, the semantic range of “serampan” (break) is similar to English rather than Japanese. *Serampan* can mean that something no longer works (boto serampan) and is also used to mean ‘break a horse,’ i.e. ‘tame a horse’ (mar serampan). This particular word, though, would seem not to be a Japanese-derived word, indicating the possibility that it is adopted from another language or English-based pidgin and therefore includes the original English-like semantic range.

Pidgins often solve the problem of limited vocabulary by having a single word doing double duty, as it were. This is a case of semantic range being extended to compensate for paucity of basic words. For example, *abooneye* (abunai) means not only danger but “take care of” and “be careful.” Another technique for solving problems of limited vocabulary is to use a phrase where a single word would normally do. Names of professions are often handled this way in YP: *coots pom pom otoko* means “bootmaker.” Another example is the phrase meaning earthquake: *okee abooneye pon pon*. Though the spelling is different, both the YP for *bootmaker* and *earthquake* would seem to use the Japanese ポンポン. As seen here, use of the rich system of Japanese onomatopoeia is common in

YP. This is not surprising. Grasping for onomatopoetic words seems to be a natural reaction when trying to communicate in a foreign language. Japanese learners of English, in the heat of rapid conversation, often resort to onomatopoeia when stuck for a word.

A number of English loan words still current in Japanese (ボート) or semi-current (ボーイ) were used in YP, indicating that YP may have been the source of those words. At least one YP word may have gone the opposite direction. Strangely, the modern English word *hibachi* means a portable barbeque set, sometimes of quite intricate design (check 'hibachi' at amazon.com for examples). In my youth, hibachis had not yet evolved to that point. Then, they were small heavy cast iron one-piece barbeques that you could throw in the trunk and take with you on a picnic to cook hamburgers and hot dogs on. Anyway, the idea of hibachi as small stove may have come from YP. Atkinson tells us that "heebatchey" meant stove.

The great majority of words in YP are from Japanese but some are clearly from other languages, most often English or, according to the Atkinson, Chinese Pidgin. Here are a few examples of words categorized according to language of origin.

#### From Japanese

tempo てんぽうつうほ	penny
eemo いも	potato
kuroy くろい	black
start here したてや	tailor
tack eye たかい	expensive
moods cashey むつかしい	difficult
tokay とけい	time (also clock?)

#### From English (or Eng-based pidgins)

baby-san	child, baby
so so	sew



sick-sick	sick, illness
boy	servant
boto	boat
house	house
bynebai	by and by, soon
<i>(bynebai is common in a number of Pacific pidgins)</i>	

From Chinese-based pidgin (according Atkinson)

chobber chobber	food
bobbery	disturbance, noise

#### OTHER

chapeau (French)	hat
pumpgutz (?)	punishment
serampan (?)	break, broken
sinjoe (?)	give, deliver
come here (?)	dog

(Aya Inoue, University of Hawaii-Manoa, 2006, theorizes that Japanese heard English speakers saying “come here” to dogs and therefore used the word to mean ‘dog’. This sounds plausible. Pidgin speakers use whatever works.)

One interesting all purpose YP word is *num wun*. Clearly this is derived from English *Number One* (probably by way of Chinese Pidgin?) but has a semantic range closer to that of Japanese *ichiban*. *Ichiban* itself comes from Chinese lexical elements. Possibly, then, the original Chinese equivalent is the source of both *num wun* and *ichiban*, thus the similar semantic range. *Num wun* means *best, most, superior*.

num wun sto	the best person
num wun sindoe	the captain
num wun aboorah	the best butter/oil/kerosene/grease

MAJOR PARTS OF SPEECH

Though pidgin grammars are highly simplified, they are, of course, not without grammatical categories. Here are the main ones used in YP. I illustrate their usage with phrases/sentences from the pamphlet along with Atkinson’s translations. The first few appearances of a Japanese-based YP word whose original might not be clear are glossed with hiragana.

PRONOUNS

watarkshee	わたくし	I / mine / ours
watarkoosh	("used by millionaires and coal mine owners")	
watarkoosh	domo	mine / ours
わたくし	ども	
oh my	おまえ	you / yours
acheera	sto あちら	ひと he/she/his/hers/they/theirs

wartarkshee	mar	my horse
wartarkshee	boto	our boat
acheera	sto kaberra	mono his hat
あちら	ひと	かぶる もの
oh my	tempo	your penny
oh my oh	char おまえ	おちゃ your tea

QUESTION WORDS

dalley	だれ	who
nany	なに	what
doko	どこ	where
ickoorah	いく)	how much

Nanny tokay arimas?      What time is it?

Dally house arimas? Whose house is this?  
 Aboorah ickoorah? How much is the butter?  
 Num wun sindoe doko? Where is the captain?

## VERBS

*Arimas* would seem to be the basic all-purpose verb in YP. Typical of pidgins, the range of possible meanings is great, with specific meaning highly dependent on context. I have added “dummy subject” to the list of meanings given by Atkinson.

arimas あります	be, wish to be
	have, can have, has had
	obtain
	be at home
	arrive
	want
	Dummy Subj (It's, There are)

Mar arimas? Do you have a horse?  
 Mar arimas? Has the horse arrived?  
 Mar arimas. It was a horse.  
 Oh my mar nanny ell oh arimas?  
 What color is your horse?  
 (mar=Chinese *ma*? Eng *mare*? Blend of ま and Jpn うま?)  
 Tempo arimas. He has a penny.  
 Tempo arimas. This is a penny.  
 Tempo arimas. It costs a penny.  
 Jones-san arimas? Is Mr. Jones at home?  
 Watarkshee kaberra mono arimas.  
 わたくし かぶる もの あります  
 My hat is here.  
 Oh char arimas? Do you have any tea?

Oh char arimas.                      He's had his tea.  
Watarkoosh' nang eye chapeau arimas.  
わたくし   ながい   シャポー   あります。  
I want my long white hat.

motty koi (もってこい)	bring
-------------------	-------

Aboorah motty koi.                      Bring me the oil/kerosene/grease/butter.  
Meeds motty koi.                      Bring me some water.  
みず   もってこい

piggy	remove take away, carry off clear the table get out of the road
-------	--

(\*Research done by Saori Tamiya, student in the G. I. S Department at Hosei University, finds two likely sources for *piggy*: *buke* from Chinese and *pergi* from Malaysian. Both were apparently used in Asian port city pidgins. *Buke* was used in the silk trade in Yokohama to mean “not good.” *Pergi* means *go* or *go away* in Malaysian. Looking at both the pronunciation and usage of *piggy*, the Malaysian-as-source theory seems stronger.)

Piggy arimas.                      He has gone out.  
Jones-san piggy arimas?      Has Mr. Jones left town?  
Mar piggy.                      Take the horse away.  
Caberra mono piggy.              Remove your hat.  
Boto piggy.                      Push off the boat.  
Nanny sto hanash, watarkshee boto piggy.  
なに   ひと   はなす   わたくし   ボート...  
If anyone asks, I've gone out in the boat.

maro maro (まいる?)	pass
	walk
	not be at home

Sacky maro maro. Pass around the wine.

さけ...

Mar maro maro. Cause the horse to trot.

Kommisan maro maro. The lady is not at home.

かみさん...

Enakka maro maro. I'm going for a trip to the country.

いなか...

Doko maro maro? Where has she gone?

Start here hanash meonitchi maro maro tacksan so so arimas.

したてや はなす みょうにち...

Tell the tailor to come tomorrow; I have lots of work.

jiggy jig (じき?)	hurry (soon, fast)
-----------------	--------------------

Boto jiggy jig. Get me a boat quickly.

Mar jiggy jig arimas? Is the horse fast?

Jiggy jig arimas? Will she return shortly?

high ken (はいけん) arimas	see
------------------------	-----

Nang eye boto high ken arimas. I see a long boat.

ながい ボート...

sinjoe (Chn Pid?)	give
-------------------	------

Mar key tobacco sinjoe. Give me a cigar.

Watarkshee house sinjoe. Send (the purchase) to my house.

ah boon eye (あふない?)	take care
---------------------	-----------

Mar ah boon eye.	Take care of the horse.
Baby-san ah boon eye.	Take care of the child.
Mind your helm.	Boto ah boon eye.

cow (かう)	buy
katchimas (かちます)	profit from a transaction
serampan (?)	break, broken
chanpone (チャンポン)	mix
so so (sew)	sew

FORMING THE NEGATIVE

Typical of pidgins, negativization is highly simplified in YP. Atkinson explains YP negativization thusly, not realizing he’s explaining a difference between polite and casual usage: “The student will note the formation of the negative by the addition of “en” or “ing” to verbs ending in “mas.” All others form the negative by adding the termination “nigh.”

Arimasen.	Not to have.
Arimasen.	To be out.
Walk-arimasen.	Not to understand.
Piggy nigh.	Not to remove.

CHINESE YP and ENGLISH YP

Atkinson goes into some detail comparing what he calls “foreigners-Japanese” with “nankinized-Nippon.” The fact that the Chinese version exists and that Atkinson readily understands it reflects the important presence of Chinese merchants in early Yokohama.

Atkinson tells us that for “the better class of Chinese” the verb arimas is “transposed and somewhat shortened into the soft Italian sounding syllabic of alloo.” Apparently unknown to Atkinson, this Chinese version is clearly based on ある while the English version is based on あります. Could this be a reflection, on the part of Japanese speakers of YP, of the perceived status of different nationalities? Possibly Japanese used the more casual form with Chinese and the more polite form with Europeans. Chinese and Europeans would then incorporate the version they heard into their own brand of YP.

Atkinson gives us a chart of basic numbers which compares “foreigners-Japanese” (FJ below) with “nankinized-Nippon” (NN below). Notice also that FJ and NN are occasionally based on different versions of the numbers (むつ／ろく etc.)

	FJ	NN
One	Stoats	Shtots'hi
Two	Stats	Fu'tarchi
Three	Meats	Meachi
Four	Yotes	Yoh-tchi
Five	It suits	Itsuitchi
Six	Moots	Moottchi / Loku
Seven	Nannats	Sitchi
Eight	Yachts	Yartchi
Nine	Cocoanuts	Kokarnotchi
Ten	Toe	Toe / Jew
Twenty	Knee jew	Knee jew

DICTIONARY

Many of the YP words from the pamphlet, along with the original translations, follow. Remember, one word and especially one phrase or sentence can have a wide range of possible meanings, with the intended

meaning made clear by context. Atkinson gives only one meaning, the one, apparently, that applied when he was (we may presume) wandering the streets of Yokohama collecting examples.

Many of the words important at the time but largely unknown now, such as the extensive vocabulary related to the riding and care of horses, are not included. Neither are the plethora of official jobs, of which I've included only a few. My two favorites job titles (see entry below) are: *tacksan hanash bosan* and *yakkamash shto*. I have alphabetized this word list according to Atkinson's spelling.

aboorah	oil, kerosene, grease, butter, pomade
ah boon eye あぶない	danger, take care
ah me あめ	rain
ah kye あかい	red
ah kye kimmono sto	soldier
ah kye sacky あかい さけ	claret
akindoe (from あきなう)	merchant
arimas	wish, wish to be, have, can have, has had, obtain, can have, has had, be at home, arrive, want etc.
a row あらう	wash
atsie あつい	hot
baby-san	child, baby
baby-san bashaw	perambulator
back harry ばかり	only
bakar ばか	a slow servant
bashaw ばしゃ	carriage
(*also kooromar)	
bates べつ	other
beer sacky ビールさけ	beer
boatman	stoats sindoe



bobbery (Chn Pid)	disturbance, noise
bosan ぼうさん	clergyman
boto	boat
boy	servant
bricky chee chee	canned milk
ブリキ ちち	
bynebai	by and by
(bynebai is common in a number of Pacific pidgins)	
cad gee かじ	conflagration
cassie かぜ	the wind
chanpone チャンポン	mix
chanpone ooshee	hash
チャンポン うし	
coachy こっち	here
coachy weedy	come here
こっち おいで	
chobber chobber (Chn Pid)	food
come here	dog
coots くつ	shoes, boots
coots pom pom otoko	bootmaker
くつ ポンポン おとこ	
cow かう	buy
dam your eye sto	sailor
die だい	table
die job だいじょうぶ	unmistakably, without fail, strong, well
eemo いも	potato
ell oh いろ	color
ero-ero いろいろ	great variety
heebatchey ひばち	stove
high ken arimas	see
hontoe ほんとう	really
house	house

kammy かみ	paper
kashy かし	cakes
katchimas かちます	profit from a transaction
kireen	clean
koong-ee くぎ (Edo pro)	nail
kooksan	cook
kooromar くるま (*also bashaw)	carriage
kurah くら	a "go down" (for storage)
kuroy くろい	black
mado まど	window
mar key tobacco	cigar
maro maro (まいる?)	pass (the wine), walk, not be at home
matty, skosh matty	wait!
まって, すこし まって	
motty koi (もってこい)	bring
minner minner みんな	all
meeds みず	water
moods cashey むづかしい	difficult
moose me むすめ	woman
nammai なまえ	name
nammai kammy	calling card
なまえ かみ	
nang eye	long
ながい (Edo pronunciation)	
neigh dan ねだん	price
num wun	the best, most
num wun sindoe	captain
ohio おはよう	Good morning /day/ evening
oh kashy おかしい	ridiculous, laughable
oh you おゆ	hot water

oh terror おてら	church
okee abooneye pon pon	earthquake
おおきい あぶない ポンポン	
ooshee うし	beef
ooshee chee chee	fresh milk
うし ちち	
ooshee oh char	beef tea
うし おちゃ	
pan パン	bread
para para パラパラ	boil
piggy	remove, take away, clear the table, get out of the road
pom pom ポンポン	hammer
pumpgutz (?)	punishment
sammy さむい	cold
sarah さら	plate
serampan (?)	break, broken
shabone シャボン	soap
she buyer しばい	theatre
shiroy しろい	white
shiroy mono	starch
sick-sick	sick, illness
sinjoe (?)	give, send (sailor?)
sin turkey せんたく	laundryman
skoshe すこし	a little bit
so so	sew
start here したてや	tailor
sto / shto	man, person
ひと (Edo pronunciation)	
tack eye たかい	dear (expensive)
tacksan hanash bosan	officiating priest
たくさん はなす ぼうさん	

tempou	penny
toe と	door
tokay とけい	time (also clock?)
tomango	egg
たまご (Edo pronunciation)	
tory とり	chicken
yakkamash shto	ambassador
やかましいひと	
your a shee baby-san	a good child
よろしい ベービーさん	

I will end this look at Yokohama Pidgin with a selection of sample sentences taken from the pamphlet that give a feel for how YP was used in real life. Some knowledge of modern Japanese combined with the explanations and dictionary above ought to make them comprehensible. (\*Atkinson also gives numerous exercises in translation of quite complicated sentences from English into YP. He optimistically expects the reader to be able to do them but I could not, and I am fairly certain no reader of this article or the pamphlet would be able to, so none of those examples are included. Those interested, check out the pamphlet itself at the web address above.)

Tokio ohkee kad gee arimas. There is a big fire in Tokyo.

とうきょう おおきい かじ あります.

Onadge kotoe arimas. These are the same.

おなじ こと あります.

Bates arimasen? Don't you have others?

べつ ありません?

Tomango yotes para para. Boil four eggs.

たまご よつ パラパラ.

Meeds cheese eye arimas. The water is shallow here.

みず ちいさい あります.

Stoats sindoe skoshi matty.      Let the boatman wait.

Mar chobber chobber sinjoe.      Give the horse some feed.

Mar die job kireen.                  Groom the horse well.

Mar だいじょうぶ clean.

Sin turkey hanash kimmono a row. Cheese eye shiroi mono arimas.

せんたく はなし きもの あらう ちいさい しろいもの あります.

Tell the laundryman to wash the clothes; tell him to use more starch.

Oh my pom pom bobbery watarkshee pumgutz.

おまえ ポンポン bobbery わたくし pumgutz.

You must make less noise driving nails or I shall be obliged to punish  
you.

(英語教育／市ヶ谷リベラルアーツセンター兼任講師)