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## Diversity in writing numbers between countries

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# Diversity in writing numbers between countries

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## Preface

English has been widely used as a lingua franca across the world. In other words, English is now a common language among non-native English speakers, in addition to being a medium between native and non-native speakers. We learn English in classrooms and tend to think that we have a common understanding of words and the sentence structures that are used. However, when people from different cultural backgrounds communicate, misunderstanding or sometimes even embarrassment can occur. This awareness has accelerated the study of intercultural communication, and it helps us improve our behavior in a global environment. Despite paying attention to the cultural differences, we may still experience a strange feeling or unfamiliarity which comes from our preconceptions of English.

It is well known that there are a number of differences between British English and American English. Here are some examples of a couple of differences. Spelling distinctions include: "centre" vs. "center", "labour" vs. "labor", "traveller" vs. "traveler", "aluminium" vs. "aluminum"; Different terminology for identical things: "lift" vs. "elevator", "queue" vs. "line", or "tube" vs. "subway".

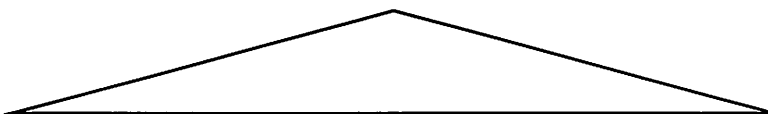
In addition to these differences, different ways of describing numbers have pulled the author's attention. While the term "number" is used commonly all over the world, there are variations on how to describe them, especially in writing. These differences are observed in countries where the "same" national language is used.

The author has worked at international business environments and the people he communicated with were from a wide range of nationalities. Communication in English was used not only with the parent company, but also with colleagues in other countries. Though this article is written based on his experiences and observations, it should be noted that the information here relies heavily on confirmation and input from friends and former colleagues outside of Japan.

## Floors of a Building

When looking at numerals, "1" (one) is assumed to be the first figure in a sequence like counting people, pages of books or priorities. However, there are remarkable differences as to how to describe floors in English. "G" on a lift button in the U.K. stands for the ground floor, which is the 1<sup>st</sup> floor in the U.S., but the 1<sup>st</sup> floor in the U.K. is the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, "2<sup>nd</sup> floor" in the U.K. stands for the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor in American system, and so on. It will easily lead to a situation of causing people go to a different floor, and they may miss an appointment if misunderstood. Actually, while

English is the national language in both Australia and New Zealand, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor in Australia indicates 3<sup>rd</sup> floor in New Zealand, though both have the same expression for the ground floor, using "G" in an elevator.



Japan	U.S.A., Canada, Russia, Korea, China	New Zealand, Singapore, Mongolia, Colombia	U.K., Germany, France, Italy, Canada (Québec), Australia, Morocco, Malaysia
4 階	4th floor	3rd floor	
3 階	3rd floor	2nd floor	
2 階	2nd floor	1st floor	
1 階	1st/Ground floor	Ground floor	

What are practices in other countries? The British system is also seen in other European countries, though the expression of ground floor is different by national language: E (Erdgeschoss) or 0 in Germany and Switzerland, and "piano terra" in Italy, "0" or "RC" in France which stands for "rez de chaussée", which is also used in Morocco. In Middle to South America, "p.b." is used in Mexico (abbreviation of "planta baja" means lower floor) or "pp" (primer piso) in Colombia, Argentina and Paraguay, and "terreo" in Brazil. In Canada, the American system is used except in Québec, where people speak French and use the European style. In Asian countries, American system is used in Korea and China, Mongolia, and Singapore as well as in Japan. Interestingly, the European style is used in Malaysia.

## Dates

When we write an address in Japanese, it goes from larger to smaller in all situations: First, the prefecture, then city, town, street, block number<sub>2</sub> and finally the name of the receiver. Even when writing the names of people, their last name comes before their given name. So it is when it comes to writing dates, i.e., from larger to smaller: year, month, and day. The same writing order is observed in Korea and China.

When arriving in a foreign country, the immigration officer stamps the arrival date and the permitted period of stay on the passport, though some countries have recently skipped this process. There are some varieties of how the dates are arranged. In Japan, for example, writing dates using the

Year-Month-Day order is normal practice, but the Day-Month-Year order is used on the immigration date stamp. Both Year-Month-Day and Month-Day-Year are used in China, while Korea is consistent for both normal practice and immigration stamp.

	Order in stamps	Actual stamps (See Appendix)
Korea:	Year-Month-Day	2007. NOV 28
U.S.A.:	Month-Day-Year	MAR 19 2019
Japan:	Day-Month-Year	19. MAR. 2019 for Japanese passport
Malaysia	Day-Month-Year	02 JUN 2007
Mexico	Day-Month-Year	29 JUL 16
EU:	Day-Month-Year	29.03.09
Australia:	Day-Month-Year	-5 MAR 2015 dash (-) instead of 0

For EU immigration stamps, the date appears only as with numbers. We notice that there are three ways: Year-Month-Day, Month-Day-Year and Day-Month-Year. The order of writing dates is neither common nor universal.

	Writing Order	Example	Countries in same practice
Japan	Year/Month/Day	2019 年 12 月 20 日	Korea, China
U.S A.	Month/Day/Year <sub>3</sub>	December 20, 2019 Dec. 20, 2019 12/20/2019 (with slash)	Canada
U.K.	Day/Month/Year	20 December 2019 20 Dec. 2019 20/12/2019 (with slash) 20.12.2019 (with period)	Germany, France, Italy, Russia, Canada (Québec), Morocco (in French), Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Singapore, Mongolia, Mexico, Colombia, Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina

These are also reflected in writing in our daily life. The British system is widely used in European countries such as Germany, France and Italy. Russians also write the day first. This order is also common in Central and South America, Australia and New Zealand. In Canada, both ways exist because of the blend of North American and French cultures. In Asian countries, there are some variations. In Japan, Korea, and China, it is usually in the Year/Month/Day order, and Day/Month/Year, i.e., the British system is used in Indonesia, Singapore and Mongolia.

We are accustomed to write the date according to how we learned it in our own countries. The date and time an e-mail was sent are automatically inserted. However, on some occasions, we have to type or write the date in manually. Then, date with slash (/) in body context can have potential problems in international communication. 7/6, for instance as a due date, can be interpreted differently,

i.e., June 7 or July 6. If one number is larger than 12, that can be easily understood to indicate the day. But when both numbers are smaller than 12, it may be understood differently from the writer intended. Spelling out the month in alphabet can prevent potential confusion.

## Time

There are two time-systems: twelve-hour clock or twenty-four-hour clock. Some countries such as Switzerland, France, Brazil and Indonesia use only the twenty-four-hour clock. In many countries both clocks are used, and the twenty-four-hour clock is used for train and airline timetables and TV programming. There are also differences or variations in writing.

In the case of "ten past eight" or "eight ten", we write "8:10" using the colon ":" between the hour and minute in Japan. It is the same in the United States and many other countries such as Korea, China, Mongolia, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Argentina and Colombia. However, colon ":" is not always commonly used in British English, but with full stop "." or without any symbols instead<sup>4</sup>. In order to distinguish between morning and afternoon, some use "a.m." or "p.m."<sup>5</sup> for clarification. In conversations in Russia, they say "in the morning" or "in the evening" if necessary.

In the case of twenty-four-hour clock expressions, the writing is as follows, 14:00, 14.00 or 1400 (without full-stop and reading as fourteen hundred). Other countries may add the word "hours" after the time, e.g. 20.00 hours. In the case of minutes, it is written like 20h15m or 20h15. In Switzerland, the twenty-four-hour clock is always used and they never use "am or pm" unless they need to specify, such as 12 Uhr Mittags (12 o'clock lunch time).

	Writing		Remarks	Countries
Japan U.S.A.	10:30am	6:15pm 18:15	Colon (:) between hour and minute	Korea, China, Mongolia, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Canada, Argentina, Colombia
U.K.	10.30am 10.30 1030	6.15pm 18.15 1815	Period (.) between hour and minute No symbol between hour and minute	
France	10:30 10h30	18:15 18h15	Colon (:) between hour and minute. Insert "h" as hour	Canada (Québec), Morocco
Russia	10:30	18:15	Colon (:) between hour and minute. In conversation, 12 hour clock is used, but not use am or pm.	
Switzerland	10:30	18:15	24 hour clock	Brazil, Indonesia

## Numbers

Sometimes we may be required to write or type a large number. In Japan, the unit name of numbers from the last digit are: "ichi" (one : 一), "juu" (ten : 十), "hyaku" (hundred : 百), "sen" (thousand : 千), - up to which is the same as the Western system - then "man" (ten thousand : 万), and the unit name then changes every four-digits as a group, such as "oku" (hundred million : 億), and "cho" (trillion : 兆). Despite having unit names for every four-digits over a thousand, commas are used for every three digits these days. For example, the total population of Japan as of January 1, 2019 was estimated to be 126,320,000, which is written in Japanese as "1 億 2632 万人", and should be read as "ichi-oku (1 億) ni-sen roppyaku san-ju ni-man" (two thousand six hundred thirty-two man: 2632 万). The numbers when read out loud in Japanese do not match the digit separation, but the three-digit separation system in writing has become popular for price tags and many documents such as companies' annual reports.

In English, on the other hand, a unit name is given to every three-digits like thousand, million, billion and trillion, which matches both reading and writing systems. While the unit group for every three-digit is common in writing, how it is written is unique from country to country. Here are some examples:

	Writing	Mark for every three-digit	Countries in same practice
Japan	4,216,000	Comma (,) for every three-digits	Korea, China, New Zealand
U.K. U.S.A.	4,216,000 4 216 000	Comma, or a single space	Canada, Paraguay
Germany	4.216.000	A full-stop (.) instead of comma No symbol but a single space	Italy, Russia
France, Spain	4 216 000		Canada (Québec)
Switzerland	4'216'000	Apostrophe (') instead of comma or full stop	

Also there are differences on how the decimal point is shown as follows:

	Writing	Remarks	Countries in same practice
Japan	22,258.03	A full-stop (.) for below 1 (one)	Korea, China
U.K. U.S.A.	22,258.03	A full-stop (.) for below 1 (one)	Canada, New Zealand, Mexico, Paraguay
Germany France, Spain	22.258,03 22 258,03	Comma for decimal point, not a full-stop	Canada (Québec), Russia, Morocco, Mongolia, Colombia
Switzerland	22'258.03	A full-stop (.) for decimal point. In case of zero after the decimal point, dash (-) I used like 22'258.--. Never mix dash and number.	

In Russia, a period or space is used for three-digits like in Germany and France, and a comma is used for a decimal point.

The same rule applies to percentage writing with a decimal point. 20,3% is the appropriate writing style in South America and European countries except in the U.K. While the national language in Mexico is Spanish, they use commas and periods in the same manner as in the U.S., which is different from Spain. However, Desigual, one of the leading Spanish apparel fashion brands, uses apostrophe for the decimal point such as 69'95€, or CHF69'95 (Swiss franc) on their price tags.

In documents from other countries, for instance, we often see figures like EUR300.000,00. It sometimes makes Japanese recipients confused because it is not common to use a full stop for three-digit units and a comma as a decimal point in Japan. In order to clarify the meaning, spelling out of the amount as well as currency is appropriate such as "Three hundred thousand Euro (€300.000,00)", or "One thousand nine hundred seventy-six francs and two cents (CHF1'976.02)" in the case of Swiss currency.

The symbols of currency such as ¥, \$ or € are quite well-known. However, the \$ symbol is used not only in the U.S., but also in Canada, Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and other countries. In daily life, it is obvious that there is only one valid currency in one country. However, in an international correspondence, if the symbol is not particularly specified, it may cause confusion. To avoid it, the currency needs to be further defined like USD for American dollar, SGD for Singapore dollar, AUS for Australian dollar, or CAN for Canadian dollar.

Mexico is close to the United States, and while the currency in Mexico is "pesos", many people use \$ symbol for pesos. Some say that the Mexican pesos mark should have two vertical lines, but the single-lined \$ is widely used, including on official bank statements. So, in the case of Mexican pesos, the country's currency needs to be clearly stated such as "One hundred thousand Mexican Pesos" (MEX\$100,000.00, or \$100,000.00 Mexican Pesos).

## **Conclusion**

Even though we use English as a lingua franca, we follow our own country's practice to write numbers. We normally do not pay much attention or doubt how to write numbers in other countries, since there is no differing interpretation within the same country. When we write something in English, we assume that everyone would have the same understanding because English is widely recognized as the common language, and especially more so with numerals which are thought to be universal. However, as shown above, there are variations in writing numbers, and we need to realize the differences from country to country. In order to minimize unpleasant situations, spelling numbers out is a very effective approach. Even though numbers may be universal, it would be prudent to be aware

of the cultural differences when writing them. We need to accept and live with such differences when it comes to global communication.

## APPENDIX

### Immigration Stamps



Korea



People's Republic of China



Taiwan



Malaysia



Thailand



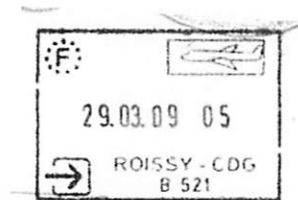
Singapore



U.S.A.



Mexico



E.U.



Australia



Japan for Japanese



1. Swan, Michael (2016), *Practical English Usage*, Fourth Edition, Oxford University Press, 322-8 numbers - floors
2. Emily Post's Etiquette says, "in some European countries, the number may follow the street name and the zip code may precede the city." Post, Peggy; Post, Ana; Post, Lizzie; Senning, Dannel Post (2011), *Emily Post's Etiquette*, 18<sup>th</sup> Edition, William Morrow HarperCollins Publishers, 2011, p.203
3. Swan (2016), 324 dates and 289-3 correspondence: letters; Thomson, A.J. and Martinet, A.V. (1986), *A Practical English Grammar*, Fourth Edition, 352 Dates, Oxford University Press
4. Swan, Michael (2016), 325 telling the time
5. Swan, Michael (2016), 325-3 the twenty-four hour clock
6. Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Statistics Bureau, *Population Estimation Report*, January 21, 2019 <https://www.stat.go.jp/data/jinsui/pdf/201901.pdf> accessed on June 1, 2019
7. Swan said, "we generally use commas (,) to divide large numbers into groups of three figures, by separating off the thousands and the millions. Full stops (.) are not used in this way. 3,127 (NOT 3.127)" Swan, Michael (2016), 322-9 and: punctuation