

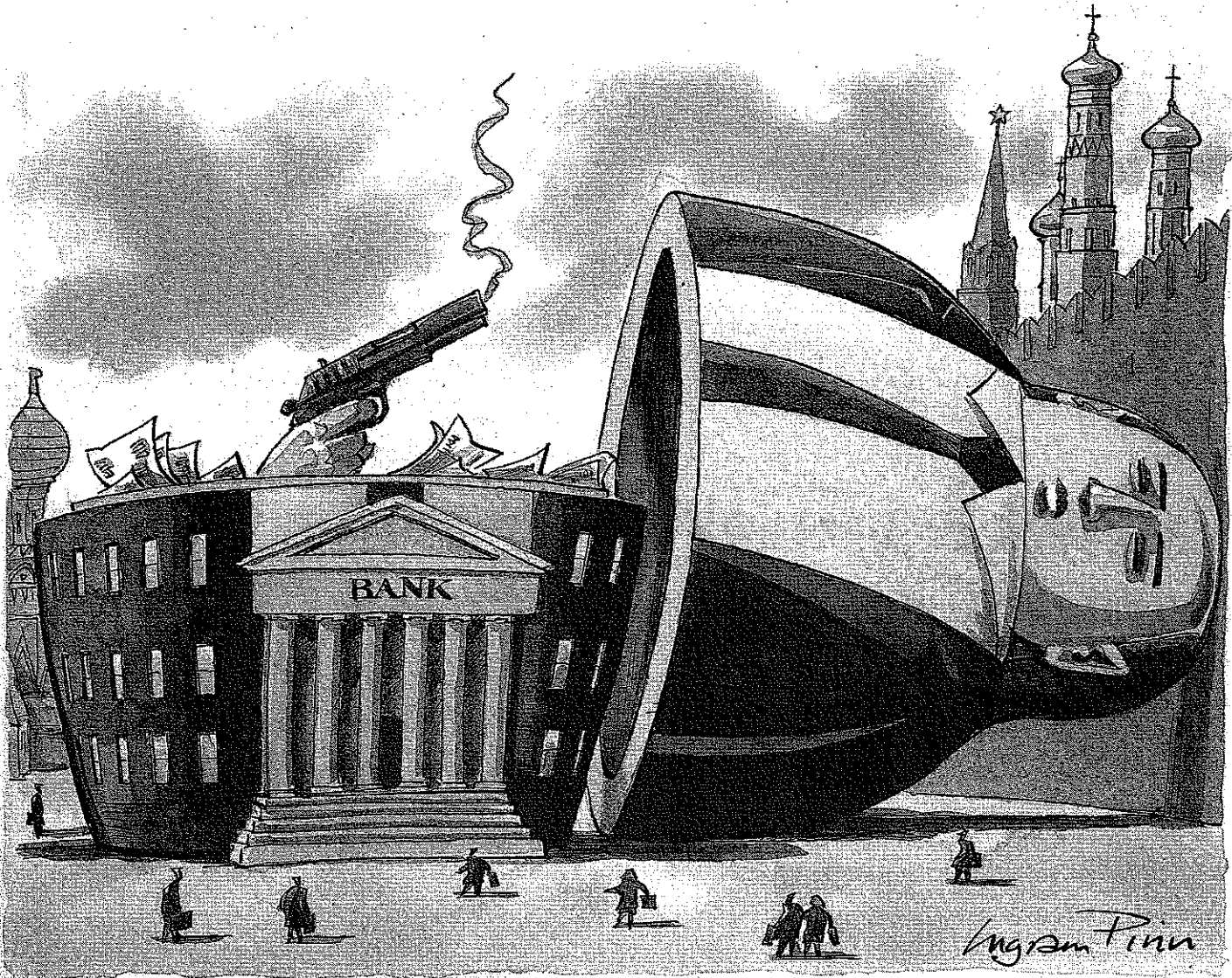
LEADERS & LETTERS

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RUSSIAN ROULETTE

Japanese need to learn English language mind-set

From Mr Kenji Kushida.
Sir, David Pilling's column "A Case for linguistic discernment" (FT Weekend, August 26/27) on why the Japanese have difficulty mastering spoken English despite their proven capacity to imitate, is not intended as a rigorous attempt at an explanation. Nonetheless, I would like to offer my reaction.
Having grown up immersed in both Japanese and American cultures, I would point to the significance of socio-cultural factors. Put simply, most Japanese rarely need to function outside their own socio-cultural fabric in their daily lives—virtually all cultural production such as literature and entertainment is available in Japanese, and even in companies that require English for company documents are comprised mostly of Japanese workers.
Thus, learning English, within a Japanese socio-cultural context, is

perceived as more of a technical matter than anything else—vocabulary and grammar. Entrance exams designed to measure the effort put into studying, attempting to control for differences in innate linguistic acquisition ability, compound this.
I argue that Japanese who are perceived to be the best communicators in English are those who do not necessarily have the greatest mastery of the technical aspects of English, but instead are in command of socio-cultural elements that facilitate communication with English-speakers. (For example, "Hi, I'm Kenichiro Kushida. Call me Ken," with a handshake and broad smile—rather than a deep bow and reserved smile, or an awkward diplomat-style double-handed handshake while trying to bow, accompanied by "Hello. My name is Kushida. Nice to meet you.")
The problem is that most Japanese,

while recognising their lack of English language communication skills comes from their education in "written" vocabulary and grammar, think that the solution is to learn English "speaking" grammar and vocabulary. (Note the gigantic market for *eikaiwa juku*, English conversation schools). The solution, I believe, is for Japanese to recognise the significance of socio-cultural factors in learning communicative English, and look to acquire skills enabling them to adapt to an English language mind-set.
English language acquisition as a technical pursuit of learning vocabulary and grammar needs to be augmented by English language acquisition as a social pursuit of learning socio-cultural aspects of communication.
Kenji Kushida,
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You just cannot 'manage' process to uncover the quirky

From Mr Andrew Campbell.
Sir, Jonathan Schwartz underlines the importance of innovation and offers some sensible sounding rules of thumb ("The five founding principles that drive innovation", September 13). Unfortunately, he does not demonstrate a deep understanding of the challenge.
Innovation, as Tom Peters used to like to explain, occurs at the wrong time, in the wrong place, led by the wrong people, in the wrong team, supported by the wrong part of the organisation. In other words, it is much more about chance than design. The reason for this lies in the very nature of innovation: it needs to be different, non-obvious, counter-intuitive or downright quirky. If not, it will have already been done.
So how do you "manage" a process of finding the counter-intuitive and quirky? You don't. It is a process more akin to looking for a rescue ship

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