

# Comparison of Japanese and Chinese Students Ability and Native Speakers Ability to Use Collocations

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## 1. Introduction

In three previous studies by this writer, (2001, 2002, 2004), it has been shown that native speakers of English cannot agree on what is the correct usage of verbs and their collocations. Many other studies have shown the same disagreement among native speakers on both the meanings and usage of vocabulary. Perhaps this is one of the major reasons that learners of English have so much trouble in using the terms that they have studied. In this paper the results of a survey of the usage of the verb repair and its synonyms mend, fix, remodel, and renew are examined. Five Japanese university students and five Chinese students studying at a Japanese university agreed to act as informants. All 10 of the students were studying at the same Japanese university located just outside Tokyo, Japan. The ages of the Japanese students ranged from 19 to 22 years old while those of the Chinese students ranged from 21 to 24 years old<sup>(1)</sup>.

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(1) This paper is partly based on two interim reports at the 37<sup>th</sup> JACET Convention (Sept. 13, 1998) and 12<sup>th</sup> AILA World Congress (Aug. 6, 1999), in which I took part as a member of JACET Special Interest Group: English Usage.

## **2. Purpose**

The purpose of the survey was to see how the Japanese and Chinese students compared with a previous survey conducted by the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET), (2000), about 10 Native Speakers of English, all of whom were teaching English at various Japanese universities. The JACET survey covered 23 verbs and up to five of their synonyms and asked the informants which of 20 or more collocations for each verb set they considered to be good English and which were not considered good English. As Table 2 shows, there was widespread disagreement about the correct usage of the verbs and their collocations. This writer wanted to see if the same results would appear in a survey given to the Japanese and Chinese students.

## **3. Perceptions of English Ability**

Although all of the Japanese and the Chinese learners of English who took part in the survey had studied English three years in middle school and three more years in high school and were in at least their second year of studying English in college and some had either started English study before middle school or had spent some time in an English speaking country, most of them responded when asked if they could speak English either "No, I can't" or "Just a little." Even some of the learners who did answer that they can speak English do not have very much confidence in their ability to produce good English sentences, in their choice of vocabulary, or in their pronunciation. Many of the Japanese and Chinese say they can understand written English and that they have a good knowledge of English grammar. But in general the former has been found to be true in many cases, but the latter is often not the

case. In fact, it has been observed (Elliott, 1998, 1999, 2000) in various conversation, composition, and research classes at the same university that just the opposite is true. Japanese students, more than Chinese students, are often weak at grammar and many learners do not even know how to use the basic grammar rules or if they do know them, are not careful enough, or aware of what they are saying or writing, to use them correctly. It is difficult to judge which the actual case is.

#### 4. **Synonymous Verbs**

This paper will concentrate on synonymous verbs and their collocations and the kinds of problems that they can cause nonnative speaking university students. What are some of the reasons for the difficulties in choosing which synonymous verb to use when given a choice of two or more verbs? The most obvious reason is not knowing and understanding the nuances of each individual word in the group. Another reason is not knowing situations in which the words can be used. A third reason is not knowing either the frequency of usage or the intensity of the words in each group. But the reason that might be the most difficult to master is what collocations can be used with each verb and what collocations cannot be used. Something that most people do not even consider is the fact that even native speakers of English cannot agree on which collocations are acceptable and which are not. But research glaringly points out the fact that this is true.

Two research projects were undertaken by JACET Special Interest Group (SIG): English Usage. The first was on the usage of synonymous adjectives and the second was concerned with synonymous verbs<sup>(2)</sup>. In both the book of

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(2) This writer did research on Set 6 (Change, Alter, Modify), Set 18 (Remember, Recollect, Recall), and Set 19 (Repair, Mend, Fix, Remodel, Renew) found in JACET Special Interest Group: English Usage (2000). *A Study of Synonymous Verbs in English—With Special Reference to Corresponding Japanese Synonyms*. The Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET).

synonymous adjectives (JACET, 1995) and the book of synonymous verbs (JACET, 2000), the research shows clearly the big differences of opinions among us native speakers. In both projects concerning synonymous adjectives and synonymous verbs, research was undertaken by means of a survey among ten native speakers of English, representing four countries, who were asked to give their opinions as to the acceptability of several collocations of adjective-noun and noun-verb combinations<sup>(3)</sup>. In the second project, the ten informants were asked to look at lists of synonymous verbs plus noun and/or phrasal collocations and to mark each with an "O" if they thought it was acceptable, mark it with an "X" if they thought it was not acceptable, mark it with a "?" if they were doubtful of the acceptability, and mark it with an "#" if they thought the collocation needed more clarification.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of how each of the ten informants individually answered regarding the acceptability of the verb and noun collocations. It is shown that there are many more combinations that the informants disagree on than they agree on. Some of the collocations that were approved by some of the native speakers were eye-opening to this writer, who had considered some of them as completely unacceptable. On the other hand, this writer thought some of the collocations were acceptable, but surprisingly, some of the other native speakers did not.

The present writer has often been in conversations with other native speakers discussing vocabulary and word usage. One person will say that he or she would never use a certain word in a particular context. But then someone else will say that the word is okay because he or she uses it in that context. Still another person will say that the word might be okay in American English, but

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(3) The survey for the synonymous verbs and their collocations was conducted with the following native speakers of English: Warren Elliott, Elliot Taback, Barbara Wells, Richard Cure (Americans), Michael James Farquharson (Canadian), Andrew Porter, Roger McCormick, Lesley Ann Taylor (British), and Kieran Mundy, Anne Murray Conduit (Australians).

never, or rarely, in British English. Then someone else will say that it can be used in formal writing, but it would sound strange in informal spoken English. Therefore it is understandable why it is very difficult for not only learners of English, but also for their nonnative English speaking teachers of English to know which verb/collocation combination is the correct one to use or not.

Other recent research also confirms this disagreement among native speakers of English on usage of other synonymous words. Yamazaki in two studies (1997, 1998), has conducted research showing not only native speaker intuition disagreement in the usage of *contagious* and *infectious*, but also that several major dictionaries disagree on the correct usage and the correct definitions of each. It was especially shown that native speakers could not agree on which word to use in certain situations given in his surveys. Takagi (1997, 1999) has shown through research conducted with 100 native speaker informants, including such honorary members of JACET as Drs. Sir R. Quirk, J. B. Carrol, D. Crystal, and W. Rivers, that there is some difference in opinion even among the responders in a questionnaire on the usage of the prepositions *for* and *at* in several different examples of “for a certain price” and “at a certain price.”

Elliott (1998) conducted a survey using questionnaires to both Japanese university students and seventeen native speakers of English, all of whom were teaching English at Japanese colleges or universities. The survey asked both groups to give appropriate responses to several compliments paid them by native English speakers. The responses by both groups were given in English and were given in two different forms; i.e. giving what they themselves thought were appropriate responses and choosing what they thought was the best response from five choices given by the researcher. The choices of answer and also choices of vocabulary were widespread and varied in both groups.

Bergman and Kasper (1993) found the same general results of disagreement in checking performance of native and nonnative apologies and Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) found similar data in an earlier paper on expressions of

gratitude by native and nonnative speakers of American English. Yamazaki (1999) showed the differences in usage of the word esteem by both native speakers of English and dictionary definitions. He was able to show that native speakers do not agree on how or in what contexts the word esteem should be used. In another work, Yamazaki (2000) researched the different usages of bear, endure, and stand, and got a wide difference of opinion among both dictionary makers and native speakers, who could not only not agree on definitions but also could not agree on either usage or nuances of the three synonymous verbs. This was also observed in research done by Elliott (2001, 2002, 2004) covering three other groups of synonymous verbs.

Bishop (1975) has the following to say: "The principles of descriptive linguistics have been thus simply put: (1) Language changes constantly; (2) Change is normal; (3) Spoken language is the language; (4) Correctness rests upon usage; (5) All usage is relative." One way of interpreting this is that even native speakers of English will disagree on word usage because it is always changing and some people are ahead of the times and some people lag behind in adopting new usages.

## 5. Dictionary Definitions

A comparison of dictionary definitions of repair, mend, fix, remodel, and renew will be made to show any general agreement or disagreement among dictionary publishers.

5.1 *American Heritage Dictionary* lists the following definitions:

repair: 1. To restore to sound condition after damage or injury; fix. 2. To set right; remedy. 3. To renew or refresh. 4. To make up for or compensate for (a loss or wrong, for example).

mend: 1. To make right or correct; repair. 2. To reform or improve. Used

chiefly in the phrase *mend one's ways*.

fix: 6. To rectify; adjust. 7. To restore to proper condition or functioning; set right; repair.

remodel: 1. To model again. 2. To remake with a new structure, reconstruct; renovate

renew: To make new or as if new again; to restore.

According to Bishop (1975), the approximately 100 members of the usage panel of American Heritage Dictionary disagreed more than they agreed. In only one case of all entries in the dictionary did they agree 100 per cent—in opposition to the use of simultaneous as an adverb.

**5.2** Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary lists the following definitions:

repair: 1. to mend sth that is broken or damaged. 2. to put sth right or compensate for sth.

mend: 1(a). to spend time working on sth that is broken, damaged, or torn so that it can be used, worn, etc again; to repair. (b) to make sth better, to improve sth. 2. to return to health; to heal.

fix: 7. to repair or mend sth. 8. to put sth in order, to adjust sth.

remodel: to change the structure or shape of sth.

renew: 1(a) to begin sth again, eg after a pause or interruption. (b) to make or form sth again after a period of time. (c) to say or state again. 2. to make sth valid for a further period of time. 3. to replace sth with sth of the same kind. 4. to give new strength or energy to.

**5.3** Cambridge International Dictionary gives the following meanings:

Repair— “to put (something damaged, broken or not working correctly) back into good condition or make it work again; mend.”

Mend— “to repair (something that is broken or damaged).”

Fix— “to repair (something).”

Remodel— “to give a new shape or form to.”

Renew— “to increase the life of or replace (something old).”

**5.4** Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English gives the following meanings:

Repair— “to fix something that is damaged, broken, or not working properly.”

Mend— “1. a. to repair a tear or hole in a piece of clothing. 1. b. *BrE* to repair something that is broken or not working; fix.”

Fix— “to repair something that is broken or not working properly; mend.”

Remodel— “to change the shape or appearance of something”

Renew— “1. to arrange for a contract, membership of a club etc to continue.  
2. to replace something that is old or broken with something new.”

**5.5** Checking The American Heritage Dictionary shows that the English word *renew* means to make new or as if new again, to restore, or to continue something. This is used with licenses, such as a driver’s license, magazine subscriptions, acquaintances, etc. Japanese use this as a katakana word with the meaning of the English verb *remodel*: to remake with a new structure, reconstruct, or renovate. The English word *renew* does not have this meaning.

Students will sometimes say, “We’re going to renew our house.” The first time I heard this, I thought that the speaker meant he (or his father) was taking out a second mortgage on their home bank loan. Later I found out that he had meant that they were remodeling their home by adding on another bedroom. The Japanese katakana word *renew* and the English word *renew* have completely different meanings. Japanese students must be made aware of this.

Mend and repair in this group also cause problems. Sometimes people will say, “I’m going to mend my watch.” Looking at the definition in the dictionary, a person would be apt to think that this sentence is correct. The dictionary does not point it out, but mend is commonly used with soft, pliable objects and

repair usually refers to hard objects, including machines. If the watchband was made of leather or cloth (or even soft plastic), we would say, "I'm going to mend my watchband," but we would never use the word mend for a watch. A watch is hard and a kind of machine, so we would say, "I'm going to repair (or fix) my watch." The word fix can be used in all situations without fear of misuse. We can say both, "I'm going to fix my watchband" and "I'm going to fix my watch."

## 6. Results

6.1 Table 1 shows the results of the Japanese and Chinese opinions about the use of collocations of the verbs repair, mend, fix, remodel, and renew. The five marks on each of the top lines represent Japanese university students and the marks on each of the bottom lines represent Chinese students studying at a Japanese university<sup>(4)</sup>.

Looking at the results of their opinions about repair and its collocations, we see that all ten of them agreed either positively or negatively about four collocations and on one other just one student had a question about usage. On three other collocations nine of the ten students agreed, while on four, eight of them agreed or had a question. Thus on 12 of the 28 collocations there was general agreement.

The students were split 5-5 on five of the collocations and either six-four or five-four-question positively or negatively on six others. So there was confusion on these eleven collocations plus the remaining five that had seven students agreeing one way or the other.

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(4) The survey for the synonymous verbs and their collocations was conducted with the following Japanese students of English: Kazuaki Kawamura, Keisuke Asano, Takuya Yamanoi, Shintaro Matsumoto, and Tomomi Masada; and the following Chinese students studying English at a Japanese university: Jan Yao, Hou Min, Yan Xue, Chen Jia, and Chen Ning.

Comparing the opinions of the Japanese students with those of the Chinese students shows that in only five cases, *a building, a criminal, one's ways, a habit, and an idea*, that there was a major difference. All of the other 23 instances showed similar results about the use of repair and its collocations.

All ten of the native speakers agreed on the usage of repair and its collocations in 14 cases, either positively or negatively. There were three cases where nine agreed and seven cases where at least eight agreed. There were only two cases, *a reputation* and *the economy*, in which the opinion was either 6-4 or 5-5. These results show that Japanese and Chinese students need more help in learning collocations of verbs.

**6.2** Looking at the results of their opinions about mend and its collocations, we see that all ten of them agreed on none of the collocations. On only three did nine of the students agree and there were no cases when eight of them agreed. There were 17 instances where five or six agreed and one other where six agreed and one person had a question. So looking at the results concerning mend, we find there is a lot of confusion about which collocations are possible and which are not.

Comparing the opinions of the Japanese students with those of the Chinese students about the use of mend and its collocations shows that, here too, in only five cases, *one's pants, a broken doll, a soft watchband, a wall, and the economy*, that there was a major difference. All of the other 23 instances showed similar results.

Twelve of the native speakers agreed on the verb mend and its collocations with nine of them agreeing in seven cases and eight more in three cases. There were only three cases in which it was 6-4 or 5-5. This also shows that the nonnative speakers are rather weak in their understanding of what is acceptable and what is not in usage of verbs and collocations when compared to native speakers.

**6.3** Looking at the results of their opinions about *fix* and its collocations, we see that here too that the ten students could not agree completely on any of the sets and in only one case, *a license*, did nine of them agree. There were eight instances where eight of the students did agree. There were 10 cases where five or six people agreed and two more where it was 6-3 with the other person having a question. Thus, although this shows a lot of confusion on the use of *fix* and its collocations, there seems to be more agreement than on the use of *mend*.

Comparing the opinions of the Japanese students with those of the Chinese students about the use of *fix* and its collocations shows that in as many as 11 of the 28 sets there was a major difference.

Fourteen of the native speakers agreed on the verb *fix* and its collocations with nine of them agreeing in six cases and eight more in two cases. There were only four cases in which it was 6-4 or 5-5. This also shows that the non-native speakers are rather weak in their understanding of what is acceptable and what is not in usage of verbs and collocations when compared to native speakers.

**6.4** Looking at the results of their opinions about *remodel* and its collocations, we see that there were four cases where all 10 of the informants agreed, two cases where nine agreed, and two others where eight agreed. There were 11 cases where five or six agreed and two others where six agreed and one of the ten people had a question. Therefore, from these results, it appears that the 10 students agree more on the usage of *remodel* than they do on *repair*, *mend*, and *fix*.

Comparing the opinions of the Japanese students with those of the Chinese students about the use of *remodel* and its collocations shows that in only four cases, *a soft watchband*, *a fence*, *a second draft*, and *a habit*, that there was a major difference. This seems to agree with results stated in the previous

paragraph.

Twenty of the native speakers agreed on the verb remodel and its collocations with nineteen of them saying that collocations were not possible. Another nine agreed negatively in three cases. There were only three cases in which it was 6-4. This shows that the nonnative speakers are very weak in their understanding of what is acceptable and what is not in usage of verbs and collocations as compared to native speakers.

**6.5** Looking at the results of their opinions about renew and its collocations, we see that there is only one case, *a visa*, where all 10 informants agreed, three where nine agreed, and only one, *a hurt dog*, where eight of them agreed. Thus, at least three people disagreed on the remaining 25 collocations. The reason for this confusion is not known by the author, but as speculation, the confusion may have arisen because of the use of the word renew in Japanese with its slightly different meaning from the English meaning.

Comparisons of the opinions of the Japanese students with those of the Chinese students about the use of renew and its collocations show that in eight cases there was a major difference. Could this be due to the different meanings of renew in Japanese and English that maybe the Chinese students were not aware of?

Twelve of the native speakers agreed on the verb renew and its collocations with nine of them agreeing in six cases and eight more in four cases. There were only five cases in which it was 6-4 or 5-5. This also shows that the nonnative speakers are rather weak in their understanding of what is acceptable and what is not in usage of verbs and collocations as compared to native speakers.

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Table 1

Selected Collocations of Synonymous Verbs Set 19 with the Keyword of Repair—Cf. JACET Special Interest Group: English Usage (2000). *A Study of Synonymous Verbs in English—With Special Reference to Corresponding Japanese Synonyms*, Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET), pp. 72-73.

	Repair	Mend	Fix	Remodel	Renew
One's pants	OOXXO OOXO	OO?XX OXOO	XOOOX XXXXX	OO?XO XOXXO	XX?OO OOOOX
A broken doll	OOOOO OOOOO	OOXOO OXXXX	XOOOO OOOOX	XOOOX ?XOXO	XXXXO OOXXX
A model car	XOOOO OOXOO	XOOOO OOXOO	XOOOO OXOOO	XOOOO OOOXO	OOOOO XOXXO
A watch	OOOOO OOOOO	OOXOO OXOXO	OOOOO O#XOO	XXXOO XXXXO	XXXOO XXOXO
A soft watchband	OOOOO O?OOO	OOXOO OXXXX	XOXOO OOXOX	XOXXO OXOOO	XOXOO XOXXO
A building	OXXOO XXOXX	XXOOO OOOXX	XXOOO OOOXX	OOXOO OOOOO	OOX#O XXXXO
A wall	OOOOO XOOOO	XOOOO OXOXX	XXOOO OOXOX	OXOOO OOXOO	OXO#O XOXOO
A fence	OOOOO OOOOO	XOXOO OXOXO	XOOXO OOOOO	OXXOO XOXXX	OXO#O XXXXO
A second draft	?XOOX OXOXX	?XXOO OXOXX	?XOOO XXXXO	?OXOO XXOXX	?OXOO OOXXO
A license	XXXOX XXXXX	XXXXO XXXXX	XXXXO XXXXX	XXXXO XOXXX	OOOOO OOXOO
A visa	XXXXX XXXXX	XXXXO XXXXX	XXXXO XXXXO	XXXXO XOXXX	OOOOO OOOOO
A hair style	XXXOX OXOXX	XXOXO OXXXX	OXXOX XXXOX	XO?OO XOXXO	XXOXO OOXOO
A criminal	OXOXX XXXXX	OXXXO OOXXX	OXXXX XXOOO	XOXOX X?XOX	XXXXO XXXXX
A hurt dog	XXOXX XOXXX	OXXXO XXXOX	XXXXX XXOX#	XXXXX XXXXX	XXXXO XOXXX
One's cut finger	OXOXX OOXXX	OXXXO OXXXO	OXXXX XXOO#	XXXXX XXXXX	OXXOO XOXOX
One's broken leg	OXOXX OOXXX	OXXXO OXXXO	OXXXX XXOO#	XXXXX XXXXX	OXXOO XOXOX
One's skin	OXOXX OXXXO	OXXXO OXXXX	OXOXX XXOXX	XXXXX XXXXX	OXOOO XOXOX
One's heart	XOOOX OXXXO	OXXO OXXOO	OOOXX XXOXX	XOXOX XOXXX	OXOOO XOXOO
One's thinking	XX?OX XXXOX	OXXXO OXXOO	OXXOX XOOOO	XO?OX XOXXO	OXOOO OXXXO
One's ways	XOOOX OXXXX	OOXOO OXOXX	OOXOX XXXXO	XOXOX XOXXO	OOOOO OOXOO
A habit	XOXOX XXXXX	OXXO XXXOO	OOOXX XXOOO	XXXOX OOOXO	XXOOO XXXXO
An idea	XOOOX XXXXX	OOXO OXXXO	OOOXX XOOOO	XOXOX XOXXO	XOOOO OXOXO
Confidence	XXOXX OXOXX	OXXO XXOXO	OXOXX XXOOO	XXXXX XOXXX	XOOOO X?OXX
Friendship	XOXOX OXOXX	OOOXO OOOOO	OOOXX X?OOO	XOXXX XOXXO	XXXXO ?XOOO
The trouble	XXOXX OXOXX	OXXO OXXXX	OXOXX XXXXX	XOXXX X?OXX	XOXXO X?XXX
A career	XXXXX OXXXX	OXXO ?XOOO	OX?XX XXOXO	XOXXX XOXXO	XOXOO XXOOO
A reputation	XXXOX OXXX?	OXXO ?XOOO	OXOXX XXXXX	XOXOX XXOXO	XOOOO XXXXO
The economy	XOOOX ?XXO?	OOXOO OXXXO	XOOOX XXXOX	XOXOX OOOXX	XOO?O ?XXOX

Explanation: The horizontal row of words are the synonymous words in this group. The vertical row of words are the noun collocations. "O" stands for "Correct," "X" for "Incorrect," "?" for "Doubtful," and "#" for "Needs more clarification." Each symbol represents the answer of five Japanese university students on the top row and the five Chinese students studying at a Japanese university on the bottom row.

Table 2

Selected Collocations of Synonymous Verbs Set 19 with the Keyword of Repair—Cf. JACET Special Interest Group: English Usage (2000). *A Study of Synonymous Verbs in English—With Special Reference to Corresponding Japanese Synonyms*, Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET), pp. 72-73.

	REPAIR	MROND	FIX	REMOFOEL	RENEW
a building	OO?OO OXOOO	XXXXX XXXXX	OXXO OXXXO	O0000 O0000	XXXXO XOXXX
one's broken leg	OXXXX XOXXX	O0000 OXXO?	O0X00 OXX00	XXXXX XXXXX	XXXXX XXXXX
one's ways	XXXXX XXXXX	O0X00 O000X	X0X00 O000X	XXXXX XXXXX	XXXXX XXXXX
an idea	XXXXX XXXXX	XXXXX XXXXX	XXXXX XXXXX	XXXXX XXXXX	OX?OX XXOXO
friendship	XXXXO OXOXX	OXXXX OXOXO	XXXXX OXOXX	XXXXX XXXXX	O0000 O0X00
the trouble	OO?XX XXXXX	OO?XX XOXXX	O0OXX O0XXO	XXXXX XXXXX	XXXXX X?XXX
a career	OXXXO XXXXX	X?XXO XXXXX	X?XXO XXXXX	XXXXX XXXXX	OO?OO XOXXX
a reputation	O0X00 O0XXX	O0X00 O0XXX	X0X00 O0XXX	XXXXX XXXXX	XXXXX O0XXX
the economy	X0X00 O0XXX	X0X0? O00XO	O0000 O00XO	O0XXX XXXXX	XX000 O0XXX

Explanation: The horizontal row of words are the synonymous words in this group. The vertical row of words are the noun collocations. "O" stands for "Correct," "X" for "Incorrect," "?" for "Doubtful," and "#" for "Needs more clarification." Each symbol represents the answer of one of the native speaker informants with the four Americans and one Canadian on the top row and the three British and two Australians on the bottom row.

## Afterword:

With few exceptions, all of the five words in this group seem to have distinct cases when they are either accepted or not by native speakers.

1. *Repair*—this word is okay for physical things, but not for people, mental, or other intangible things. North American and British usage is consistent.

2. *Mend*—with the exception of *one's ways*, *friendship*, and *the economy*, this word is not acceptable for people, mental, or other intangible things. North American and British usage is consistent. It is used more with soft physical things than with hard things. There was an even split about the collocations *friendship* and *a reputation* among native speakers.

3. *Fix*—along with the word *repair*, this word is okay for physical things, but not for people, mental, or other intangible things, exceptions being *one's broken leg*, *one's ways*, *the economy*, and evenly split by native speaking informants was *a reputation*. North American and British usage is consistent.

4. *Remodel*—except for *a model car*, *a building*, *a wall*, *a fence*, and possibly *the economy*, this word is not generally used by native speakers.

5. *Renew*—this word must be used carefully as it does not have the same meaning in English as it does in *Katakana* Japanese. In no case was it used by all ten native speaking informants, but was generally okay in the cases of *a license*, *a visa*, *confidence*, *friendship*, and *a career*. In addition, it was accepted by some in *one's thinking*, *a habit*, *an idea*, and *the economy*. This word should be use with care in English by nonnative speakers.