

English in Japanese

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Abstract

Japanese people are known to be poor learners of English. One of the possible reasons would be the use of many English loanwords in Japanese. Some learners are unaware of phonological, semantic and/or pragmatic differences between original English words and loanwords. As a result, they may not be able to make themselves understood in English when they are simply using loanwords in communicating in English without paying attention to the differences. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of the differences between English words and their Japanese counterparts. I would like to present an overview of the use of English loanwords used in Japanese, with a detailed description of the English loanwords, followed by my own opinion about the influx of borrowed words into Japanese.

I. Introduction

An American friend who has never studied Japanese asked me, "What do you say when you order a hamburger and French fries in Japan?" I said, "hambaagaa to poteto onegaisimasu." He found my answer very interesting and asked me similar questions repeatedly whenever I met with him. Although he knows that English words are used as loanwords almost everywhere in the world, he was surprised with the sheer number of English loanwords in Japanese. That does not mean, however, that Japanese learners are in a better position to learn English, or that English speakers are in a better position to learn Japanese. In fact, foreign loanwords in Japanese are phonologically, semantically and/or pragmatically different from the original English words. In the following section, I would like to show the influences of the English language in education since the strong emphasis on English learning at school is one of the driving forces to encourage people to use English words even when they speak Japanese.

II. Overview of language context

Current Situation

Japanese is the dominant language in Japan. According to the World Factbook-Japan, the literacy rate, which shows the percentage of people who can read and write among the population aged 15 and older, is 99%. Ethnologue lists fifteen other native languages which are still spoken in Japan. They are all living languages. Although English is not on the list, the English language influences many aspects of Japanese life, especially education.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology regards English proficiency as an important asset to enhance the Japanese international presence and its further development. In order to improve Japanese students' English skills, English will soon be taught in public elementary schools. In addition, the government initiated the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme¹ (JET Programme) to bring native speakers from abroad. They are employed as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), Assistant Cultural Exchange Teachers (ACETs), and Sports Education Advisors (SEAs), mainly in junior high and high schools. Participants come from a total of about 40 countries. As of 2005, roughly 6,000 people a year were employed by the program. Of that number, about half are from the United States, with Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand making up most of the remainder.

The program has not been without its problems. Since participants are not required to have formal teaching experience or training, nor to have any Japanese speaking ability, many ALTs are poor candidates for assistant language teachers. The lack of guidance or support for new ALT results in some cultural conflicts. Participants also complain that they end up acting as 'human-tape recorders' without playing any independent role in teaching.

Although the government and the Japanese public recognize the importance of English learning in order to be more successful in the international arena, Japanese people are known to have an especially poor command of the English language. Nobody can pinpoint the specific reason for this failure. It may be because Japanese language education emphasizes reading literature and many Japanese English teachers follow the same method. Another problem could be that Japanese students are too shy to speak another language, and may be destined therefore, to fail at foreign language learning. In my opinion, the main reason would be that the people do not really understand why they learn the language. Or, it may also be because the Japanese language

¹ The program is written, "programme" because it was initially exclusively for British graduates.

uses many loanwords from English, which can cause confusion with English usage and pronunciation. In the next section, I would like to detail differences between original English words and their counterparts.

III. Detailed Description

1. Shortlist of English in Japanese

- English vowels replaced with five Japanese vowels, [i][e][a][u][o].
(e.g. "beesubooru"(baseball) , "bokkusu" (box))
- Vowel insertion in consonant clusters.
(e.g. "sutoriito" (street), "burashi" (brush))
- Shortening after vowel insertion.
(e.g. "makudo" (McDonald), "risutora" (restructuring))
- English consonants [f][v][θ][ð] replaced with [ϕ] [b] [s] [z] respectively.
(e.g. "sinkutanku" (think-tank), "furaido potato" (French fries))
- No function of inflectional ending -s or no ending added.
(e.g. "shuuzu" (a shoe or shoes), "buutsu" (a boot, or boots))
- Semantic changes.
(e.g. "rikuesuto" (request) -- in Japanese, it refers only to a song which is requested by radio listeners or karaoke audience.)
- Wasei-eigo (Japanese made English)
(e.g. "bakku miraa" (back mirror)-rear view mirror)

2. Spelling

"Katakana," which is one of the three writing systems in Japanese, is used for all loanwords except for those of Chinese origin. Katakana has forty-six characters (71 if diacritics, used for voicing, are also counted). Unlike Kanji, which are based on Chinese characters and are not phonetic, Katakana is a phonetic system (Nakayama p.399). The katakana transcription of an English word is based on its pronunciation rather than its spelling, and it depends on how the word is heard by Japanese speakers.

3. Phonology

English loanwords in Japanese undergo many phonological changes due to differences

between the English and Japanese phonology. Japanese exhibits five vowels: high front, high back, mid front, mid back and low central. When transcribing English words as loanwords in Japanese, both English vowels [i] and [ɪ] are transcribed as [i]. [e] and [ɛ] are transcribed as [e]. [æ] and [ɑ] are transcribed as [a]. [o] and [ɔ] are transcribed as [o]. [u] and [ʊ] are transcribed as [u].

Due to the lack of consonant clusters in the Japanese phonology, extra vowels are often inserted into English loanwords. "The value of the epenthetic vowel is determined by the phonetic quality of the preceding consonant (Lovins 1975), suggesting a tight relationship within the unit of CV: (i) /i/ is epenthesized after [tʃ] and [dʒ] (e.g. match-> [mattʃi], edge-> [eddʒi]) and marginally after /k/ (e.g. ink -> /inki/, strike "industrial action" -> /sutoraiki/); (ii) /o/ is epenthesized after /t/ and /d/ (e.g. pet -> /petto/, bed->/beddo/), and (iii) /u/ is epenthesized elsewhere (e.g. box ->/bokkusu/)" (Kubozono p.59).

Not only do vowels undergo changes when used in Japanese, but English consonants undergo changes as well. The consonants /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/ are replaced with [ɸ], [b], [s], [z] respectively (Tsujimura p.98), for example, "volleyball" is "bareebooru" and "bathroom" is "basuruumu."

4. Grammar

Not only do English words undergo phonological changes when they are borrowed into Japanese, but some words are shortened as well. When borrowed words become long as a result of the vowel epenthesis, for example, "demonstooresyon" for demonstration, such words are often shortened to the length of two to four moras, which are generally defined as a unit of duration in Japanese (Kubozono p.31). Shortened borrowings are called wasei-eigo (lit. "Made-in-Japan English"), which I will talk more about later.

English loanwords lose the function of the inflectional ending, the plural marker -s. "Surippa" and "sutokking" can be one or more slippers or stockings. "Buutsu" and "sokkusu," which came into Japanese in the plural form, are used for both the singular and plural (Gillian p.26).

5. Lexicon

English words in Japanese can be categorized into three types, according to the changes the words undergo when borrowed. The first type are words that are phonologically different from the original English words but semantically the same. (e.g. "beesubooru" for

baseball. raito for "light") The second type are words that are phonologically and semantically different from the original English words. An example of semantic restriction is "puropooshon" (proportion) which refers to the human figure. An example of metonymy is "furonto." It refers to a hotel reception desk, which is usually at the front of a hotel. The third type are words that are uniquely coined with the use of English words. Many Japanese believe that they are "real" English, but they are not in use in Anglophone countries, nor by English native speakers, but only by speakers of Japanese. (e.g. "bakku miraa" (back mirror) for rear view mirror, "furonto gurasu" (front glass) for windshield, and "mooningu kooru" (morning call) for wake-up call). There are more examples in Appendix 1.

Although there are no reliable sources available now, I believe that most recently borrowed English words have their origin in American English. This does not mean, however, that British English is not also a significant influence. For instance, we call a cloth worn around the neck a "mafuraa" (muffler), and a woman who has a good figure "sumaato" (smart) (Melcher and Shaw p.190).

6. Pragmatics and Discourse

Japanese has so many borrowed words from English that it is difficult to carry on a conversation in Japanese without using them. McArthur considers the mass of the English words adopted into Japanese to be comparable in scale to the shift of Latin words into English in the sixteenth century (p.16). Loanwords have an important function, especially for naming things introduced to Japan from other countries, such as "fooku" (fork) and "kaaten" (curtain), as shown in "The English in Japanese" by Gillian S. Kay. The number of borrowed words is so large that many older Japanese people have difficulty understanding modern Japanese. Although the National Institute of Japanese Language makes efforts to limit the use of loanwords that are not widely accepted by the Japanese people, we remain surrounded by many English words. I believe that this is not simply because we have imported so much new technology, fashion, and ideas for which Japanese does not have names. Japanese has countless loanwords or wasei-eigo because the majority of Japanese people have special feelings about the English language. Although more than half a century has passed since the end of World War II, and Japan now plays a major role in the world's economy and politics, many Japanese people still admire Western culture. Many Japanese people think that if they speak English they will become more successful. They respect those who speak English, and spend a great deal of time and money attempting to learn the language after

failing to learn English in six years of pre-college English education. According to Tsuda, Japanese people spend about three trillion yen annually on English language materials and language schools.

English loanwords can lend a certain "foreign appeal to commonplace things" (Gillian p.25). The English loanword for strawberries "sutoroberii" is used when referring to strawberry ice cream, cakes, or sundaes, which are foreign foods. On the other hand, the Japanese word for strawberries "ichigo" is used to refer to fresh strawberries because eating unprocessed strawberries is considered more traditional. Not only are loanwords used to distinguish between things which have Japanese and foreign forms, but advertisers use them to make consumers feel that there is something novel about their products. English is used in music, food packaging, stationery and marketing. Such English is best thought of as a "design element," because it is used to invoke a feeling, rather than as actual "language" per se. As such, advertisers do not bother to check spelling or grammar, which results in many English phrases that make little or no sense, and are sometimes humorous or even shocking to native speakers. One website called "Engrish.com" [sic] is dedicated to 'funny' English found on T-shirts, billboards, magazines and so on. The site defines "Engrish" [sic] as the humorous English mistakes that appear in Japanese advertising and product design. The name is coined from the way most Japanese people pronounce "English." For example, a package of candies called "Tino" has the line "Please have Tino candy as quickly as possible after opening since it is delicate"[sic] on its package. According to the website, English is widespread because the Japanese writing script (or scripts) limits their creativity. However, I believe that the overflow of loanwords can be ascribed to an unconscious fascination with Western culture.

Before stating my view of English in Japan, I would like to introduce the results of a survey about the use of loanwords in Japanese which was conducted by the Japanese computer software company, ATOK. The company collected opinions from 2702 males (74.3%) and 935 females (25.7%). These results may not accurately reflect the opinions of the general Japanese population because the participants were all subscribers to an internet mailing list to solicit participation in the study, and the company did not control over the distribution in terms of gender or age. One of the most interesting questions was "Do you consider it favorable to use loanwords or foreign words when you use Japanese in your daily life?" About 80% of participants over the age of seventy and older answered "unfavorable," while about 30% of teens answered "favorable" and 50% said "do not find good or bad." (Appendix 2) The researcher, Professor Ogino of Nihon

University, predicts that there will be an increasing number of loanwords used in Japanese based on these results.

The survey also looked at the same data in a different way. When the answers were classified according to the degree of interest in language², many of those who were considered interested in languages answered "unfavorable," while many of those who were not interested selected "do not find good or bad." (Appendix 3) This may imply that the use of loanwords is not deliberately conducted, and may be just a fad.

I would certainly be considered to be someone who is "interested in languages." I myself consider the use of loanwords unfavorable. As I stated, some loanwords are necessary to express foreign items and ideas, or to identify foreign objects, but I believe that Japanese people should be aware that their use of loanwords is often incorrect, and may inhibit their ability to learn English. I may be rather 'conservative,' because I "emphasize that it is valuable for members of less powerful groups to gain respect and credibility by assimilating to more powerful groups³" (Melchers and Shaw p. 30), although I need to modify the qualification. My reason for appreciating English as a language rather than as a "design element" is not that I consider English to be more powerful than Japanese in Japan, but that I feel that using English improperly is disrespectful to the English language. English in Japan is still just a fashion, without almost real function in daily lives. I hope that Japanese people seriously learn English as a language instead of borrowing superficial aspects of English, so that they will be able to use it as a tool for communication and educate themselves by learning and respecting other cultures.

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² The researcher asked five questions to determine if the subject was interested in languages. According to the answers, points were given to decide the degree of interest in languages. The questions were: "Do you consult a dictionary when you use loanwords or foreign words?" "Do you consider yourself a person who knows a lot about Japanese?" "Do you know about foreign languages other than English?" "Have you ever learned French?" and "Have you ever learned Russian?"

³ I have not met anyone who has 'liberal' or 'radical' opinions about English in Japan. This may be because those who express opinions about language use have a background similar to mine and are respectful of any language.

Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities."

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Appendix 1

Wasei Eigo

Left words-wasei eigo--- Right words-English correspondence

back mirror-rear view mirror

engage ring-engagement ring

bed town-suburb

front glass-windshield

handle-steering wheel

morning call-wake-up call

paper test-written test

sharp pencil-mechanical pencil

trump-playing cards
 depart-department store
 apart-apartment house
 classic-classical music
 consent-outlet, wall socket
 cunning-cheating
 golden hour-prime time

[The source is <http://www.nsknet.or.jp/~hide0508/student/vocabulary/japanese.html>.]

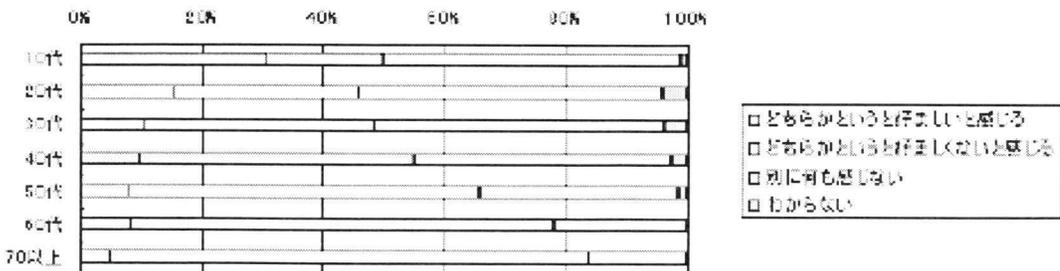
 Baseball terms

dead-ball--hit by a pitch
 top batter--lead-off batter
 four-ball--walk
 nighter--night game
 three bunt-- two-strike bunt
 low-ball--low pitch
 straight--(straight) fastball, straight pitch
 one-point relief--spot reliever
 under-throw-- underhand pitch
 and-run--hit and run

[The source is www.eigotown.com]

Appendix 2

Opinions about use of loanwords in Japanese (classified according to the age)



10代= in their teens 20代= in their twenties

The first horizontal bar from the left=favorable

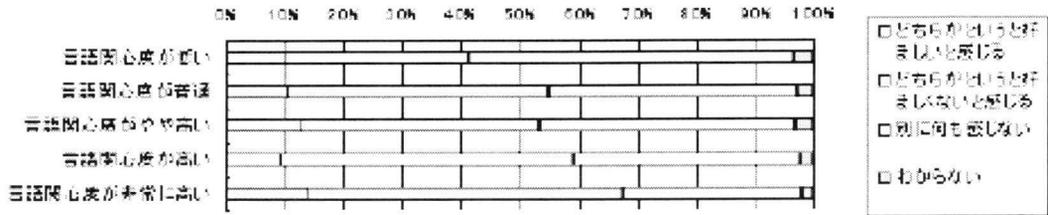
The second bar from the left=unfavorable

The third bar from the left= do not find good or bad

The first bar from the right=don't know

Appendix 3

Opinions about use of loanwords in Japanese (classified according to the interests in languages)



言語関心度が低い= little interest in languages

言語関心度が普通= more or less interested in languages

言語関心度がやや高い= rather interested in languages

言語関心度が高い= interested in languages

言語関心度が非常に高い= very interested in languages

[The source of appendices 2 & 3 is <http://www.justsystem.co.jp/atok/nihongo4/result-p3.html>]