

[論説]

The importance of raising awareness of English loanwords in Japanese

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Abstract

In an era of globalization in which English language learners are striving to achieve 'comprehensible' English for the purpose of communicating with the world, how do the Japanese fare in terms of both productive and receptive English skills? This paper examines the loanword phenomenon that permeates the Japanese language and investigates the effects it has on learners' spoken ability. An outline of the introduction and historical changes of loanwords is presented. The various transformations that occur at the time of borrowing and the problems associated with them are also detailed. A summary of previous research findings followed by a discussion of the related negative implications for English communication is offered. Finally, a proposal is made to English language teachers to raise awareness in their students about the benefits and drawbacks of loanword usage so that they can more successfully interact with the world around them.

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Introduction

In an era of *guro-barize-shion* (globalization), the Japanese are *ri-da-su* (leaders) in *haiteku* (hitech) *purodukushion* (production) and *ma-keteingu* (marketing), but how well do they fare in the *intanashionaru* (international) *komyunitei-* (community) in terms of *komyunike-shion* (communication)? Medgyes (1994)¹⁾ indicates that the 'World Englishes' movement has highlighted the existence of various forms of English, not only the traditionally recognized British and American forms. The premise is that people throughout the world use English as either a first, second, and sometimes third or fourth, language to communicate with not only native speakers of English, but non-native speakers. Therefore, in striving to communicate with the world, the recent aim of ESL/EFL (English as a Second/Foreign Language) teaching is for learners to achieve 'comprehensible English', rather than 'native-like English'. The question for Japanese speakers of English then is, 'Is my English understandable to those listening?' Japanese is considered a leader in the field of foreign word borrowing. These loanwords, known as 'gairaigo'

in Japanese, permeate every aspect of Japanese, accounting for approximately ten percent (Shibatani, in Daulton, 1998)²⁾ of the language. Yet, despite the natural and convenient use of loanwords in Japanese, these same words are a source of trouble and despair for the Japanese learner of English. Loanwords are submitted to numerous changes when introduced to the Japanese language, so much so that they mutate into Japanese. McLaughlin (2006)³⁾ suggests that, "Japanese using loan words while speaking in English are essentially code-switching and using two languages". Therefore, if listeners are unfamiliar with the imported lexicons, the use of them may inhibit the speaker's capacity to achieve comprehensibility.

Historical changes

Recently, there has been much talk about the use and, in particular, the over-use of loanwords in various public domains in Japan, but borrowing words from other languages is not a new phenomenon. Borrowing began in the 5th century with the introduction and adaptation of Chinese words and the Chinese 'kanji' writing system. Initially, words borrowed from Chinese

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were translated and then written into native kanji script. However, at various stages in history, Japan opened its doors to different countries for trade, such as Portugal, Holland, Germany, France, and Italy. Through this exposure to other cultures, Japan began adopting Western products and concepts that had previously not existed in the culture. Eventually, a new writing system called 'katakana' was introduced as a way of orthographically representing loanwords. Kanji are ideograms which provide clues to the meaning of a word, whereas katakana are phonograms which convey only the sound of a word. Any foreign lexical import was given a katakana reading as close as phonetically possible to the original pronunciation.

Over time, the source of loan words, the reasons for borrowing and the way in which they are transformed have continuously changed. Most recently, the source of the majority of lexical imports has been English. Since the end of World War II American culture and lifestyle have provided the greatest influence of change within Japan, bringing a deluge of new words with which to express new concepts. While new products and technologies account for a large portion of loanwords, a change in attitudes and social needs has also created a demand for new and different terminology. Words like *sekuhara* – *sexual harassment*, *info-mudo consento* – *informed consent*, and *zero emisshion* – *zero emissions* represent the changing attitudes, and increased awareness of and openness to contemporary social issues in Japan.

Likewise, borrowing for aesthetic purposes such as advertising has led to an inundation of lexical items associated with beauty products and health regimes, among many others. Connected with advertising is the notion of Western qualities and their being associated with sophistication. Rebeck (2002)⁴⁾ suggests that despite there being an equivalent Japanese term, there is a tendency to use loanwords to convey an image of modern, Western life. He provides examples of *kicchin* for *daidokoro*, *hausukiipingu* for *kaji*, and *Mrs* instead of *okusan*, simply because they evoke a more desirable Western image.

A further attribute of more recent loans is their transient nature. Historically when a new term was

introduced it became part of mainstream language and was used by various people in diverse contexts. More recently, however, loanwords associated with specific industries are introduced and utilized by only those within that field. Thus, as trends and fads connected with these markets come and go, so too does the foreign jargon that is associated with them. For example, the term *famikon*, deriving from *family computer* but actually meaning a kind of computer game, is no longer used. As technology developed and new systems were introduced the term *famikon* was replaced by new words.

A final point regarding the historical change of loanwords concerns the various processes of transliteration. Integration of Western lexicon was initially confined to a phonetic change; however, nowadays, imported lexemes undergo various kinds of transformations with some highly novel processes leading to often quite eccentric changes. These processes will be explained in depth below. Although the sources, motives and patterns of adopting words have continually changed over the centuries, Japan remains a zealous borrower of foreign words and with the pace of borrowing continuing to gain momentum, this seems unlikely to change in the future.

Processes of transliteration

The 2000 edition of Sanseido's Concise Dictionary of Foreign Words listed over 45,000 loanwords in Japanese. With approximately ninety percent originating from English (Shinnouchi, in Rebeck, 2002)⁴⁾, one would expect that Japanese people could communicate to some extent with not only native speakers, but all speakers of English as well, especially in the fields of technology, health and beauty, and sport. However, this is not the case. Confusion and frustration pervade communication when a Japanese native speaker tries to ask for directions to the '*sutajiam*' (stadium), or when a native English speaker asks a Japanese hairdresser for a *perm* (pa-ma). The cause of all of this chaos stems from the many transformations that words sustain when borrowed. Quackenbush⁵⁾ examined these in depth in her 1977 paper, while in more recent years Daulton (1998²⁾, 1999⁶⁾, 2004⁷⁾, and Rebeck (2002)⁴⁾ have provided us with clear, analytic descriptions of the various conversions that exist.

The most basic alteration is rephonolisation. Although words are generally given a reading as close as phonetically possible to the original word, they uniformly take on a katakana pronunciation. Japanese has far fewer combinations of sounds than English, thus making exact transliteration impossible. Moreover, in some instances, the most optimal phonetic symbol is not adopted. For example, *team* is most commonly pronounced *chi-mu* (チ - ム) even when the more appropriate *ti-mu* (ティ - ム) is available. Mostly responsible for the confusion are differing patterns in each sound system. Japanese customarily maintains a constant consonant-vowel (CV) pattern, whereas English allows for much greater variation including, but not exclusively, CV, CVC, VC, CC, CCC. When words are introduced to Japanese they are rephonolised to conform to the permissible Japanese syllables which results in English words being lengthened to an extent where they are no longer recognizable. Daulton (1998²⁾ provides us with the quintessential example in *McDonalds*, which becomes *Makudonarudo* once a vowel has been inserted after each consonant. Even words as simple as *get* become *geto*, or *drinks* transforms to *dorinkusu*. A recent buzzword is *puburikku inborubument* which when compressed becomes *public involvement*. A combination of changed patterns and substitute phonemes causes further deviation from the original word. Examples include *biniiru - vinyl*, *sa-do - third*, and *soro- - throw or slow*.

A second method used to convert loanwords is truncation. Many words are abbreviated making comprehension even more difficult. Some examples include: *katsu - cutlet*, *apa-to - apartment*, *terebi - television*, *ope - operation*, and *biru - building*. In addition, portmanteau words, in which two truncated words are combined to create a new word, such as *hansuto - hunger strike*, *rimokon - remote control*, *geisen - game center* and *famiresu - family restaurant*, create even more confusion.

The function of words is also sometimes modified. Various reformations exist but the most characteristic form of speech part modification occurs when the Japanese verb '*suru*', meaning *to do*, is added to the end of an English word to create a verb. A well-known example derives from '*makeup*' which is clipped to

'*make*', rephonolised to '*meiku*' and then converted to '*meiku suru*' which conveys '*to put on makeup*'. In order for Japanese speakers to make themselves comprehensible to English-speaking listeners, speakers must be able to reverse this process to obtain the original lexeme, but even then, they are merely left with the noun '*makeup*' which alone does not in itself express the action they wish to communicate to the listener.

Semantic narrowing or a complete change in meaning can also occur. The word *smart* in English refers to two different concepts: looking clean, neat and well-dressed; or intelligent. On the other hand, Japanese use the term '*suma-to*' to refer exclusively to a person's slim figure. Therefore, if an English speaker comments, 'You are very smart', the Japanese listener will interpret this as meaning the speaker thinks they have a nice, slim figure, when in fact the speaker is referring to the person's intelligence. Another case is the English word *mansion*, which conjures up images of a large, impressive house. In Japanese, however, *manshion* describes high-rise apartment buildings similar to what Americans would call condominiums. These examples of semantic narrowing highlight the potential for miscommunication.

A further transformation that virtually guarantees misunderstanding is that of pseudo-loan words, or 'made-in-Japan' words as Quakenbush (1977)⁵ referred to them, also known as *wasei-eigo* in Japanese. This style occurs when Japanese generate original words based usually on English words. For example, *en suto* (engine stop, based on an engine stall), *Y-shatsu* (white shirt, originating from dress shirt), *geisen* (game centre, meaning video arcade), and *sutajiamu jannpa* (stadium jumper, which means a jacket with the team's logo). Arnold (2004)⁸ offers examples of what he describes as code-mixing, in which a word is generated from both English and Japanese, such as *denshi-renji*, *denshi* meaning *atom* in Japanese and *renji* stemming from *range*, as in *oven range*, in English meaning microwave oven. *Me-rutomo* is another instance where a mix occurs. *Me-ru* originates from *mail* and *tomo* is the truncation of *tomodachi*, meaning friend. Thus, *me-rutomo* means *e-friend*.

When a word is borrowed it undergoes at least one of these alterations, if only rephonolisation, but many times it is subject to more than one change resulting in a metamorphosis from English to Japanese. McLaughlin (2006)³⁾ suggests that the conversion of English cognates to loanwords in Japanese is unlike that of other languages. While the National Institute for Japanese language produces a list of recommended Japanese substitutes for loanwords, there seems to be no formal body controlling the processes of transliteration. Consequently, words tend to be converted naturally by the people who initially introduce them. These natural processes tend to follow similar patterns, as outlined above, but it cannot be said that there are any specific rules that must be followed when a word is borrowed. Furthermore, despite transliteration tending to follow already established patterns, new patterns continue to emerge all the time. The result of numerous alterations and changing patterns is communication problems.

Communication Problems

This extreme deviation from the original lexeme generates a significant obstacle for the Japanese learner of English in achieving comprehensible communication. Although the use of borrowed words in a Japanese context can help people to communicate about new ideologies or technologies, loan words can cause serious problems for those who try to use them in an English-speaking context. Often learners are not aware of the significant modifications that occur when words are borrowed and therefore naturally assume that the words will be comprehensible to an English speaker. Furthermore, students are often unaware of the origin of words and there is a common tendency to assume that all words are derived from English. This poses problems because speakers believe they are using an English term but in fact the word may have its roots in German, Portuguese or another language; naturally, a native English speaker is unable to understand. Additionally, despite the process of adaptation of English words tending to follow certain general patterns (see Quackenbush, 1977⁵⁾ for a detailed listing), there is also a significant number of loanwords which do not correspond with these patterns due to: attitude at the time of borrowing, the medium used (oral or written), and whether the import was based on American or British English (Quackenbush, 1977⁵⁾.

Simon-Maeda (1995)⁹⁾ reveals that students often express surprise when they discover that a word is not understood because of phonetic differences, or realize that a word has a different meaning in Japanese. Given that loanwords are subject to such varying modifications, it is possible to conclude that the usage of loanwords in English conversation is bound to cause miscommunication and misunderstanding for the both the listener and speaker.

Research Findings

There are conflicting beliefs on whether the presence of loanwords can act to improve the acquisition of English or act as a hindrance (Lightbown & Libben, 1984)¹⁰⁾. Studies by Daulton (1998²⁾, 2003¹¹⁾, 2004⁷⁾, Brown & Williams (1985)¹²⁾ Brown (1995)¹³⁾, and Kimura (1989)¹⁴⁾ concluded that loanwords are a useful source of latent vocabulary in terms of listening comprehension, spelling and written recall, and vocabulary acquisition. Combined, their studies suggest that loanwords are a beneficial tool in English language teaching and learning in the EFL classroom. Daulton (2004)⁷⁾ found that as many as 45.5% of the 3000 most-frequent word families in English were found to have correspondences with common Japanese loanwords. Brown & Williams' 1985¹²⁾ examination of loanwords presented parallel findings. They concluded that, within the 2000 word level in English, students will probably understand borrowed words more than non-borrowed words. In a fill-in-the-blank experiment, Brown (1995)¹³⁾ claims to demonstrate unquestionably that students feel more comfortable using borrowed words than non-borrowed words.

The studies provide quantitative evidence that loanwords constitute a latent vocabulary base, so by taking advantage of this potential resource teachers and students can develop strategies to increase vocabulary at a faster rate. However, these studies overwhelmingly represent learners' passive recognition (listening, reading) of vocabulary items. Most studies were conducted to test learners' listening, reading and writing skills by utilizing cloze exercises, multiple-choice exercises, words lists and written translations. What they fail to clarify is students' active, communicative production and the resultant effects on real communication. Future studies should seek to

identify the true effect of loanwords on the ability to speak comprehensibly so that EFL instructors have a clear understanding of what aspects need attention in order to take full advantage of the ever-expanding latent vocabulary available in loan words.

Loanwords and the Language Teacher

The possibility of accessing the extensive latent English vocabulary found in loanwords versus the communication problems associated with loanwords poses a conundrum for English language teachers. Given that the vast majority of previous studies advocate that loanwords are an ideal resource of vocabulary, it can be strongly recommended that EFL teachers utilize loanwords in the classroom as a way of facilitating faster vocabulary development and increased word recognition. Once instructors are aware of the potential usefulness of borrowed lexemes, they can employ techniques that most effectively bring loanwords to the attention of learners so as to utilize this resource. However, awareness-raising alone is insufficient if students are to acquire, not only receptive, but also productive skills. To achieve this, teachers need to educate themselves on the numerous drawbacks associated with loanwords so that they can explicitly address them in class, and ultimately educate learners to be able to use loanwords correctly. Brown & Williams (1985)¹²⁾ and Topping (cited in Daulton, 1998)²⁾ urge teachers to become familiar with loanwords in their students' native language and further suggest that teachers would benefit from knowledge of the phonological, grammatical and semantic changes of and differences between 'gairaigo' items and English words.

First and foremost, English language teachers need to tackle the problem of katakana pronunciation as this permeates all aspects of communication in English, not just the production in English of loanwords used in Japanese. By working with students to increase awareness of their own pronunciation and how it significantly varies from the original word, students have a better chance of making themselves understood when trying to communicate. To new teachers, katakana English is an obvious inhibitor of communication. However, Japanese English teachers and native English teachers who have

spent considerable time in Japan or speak Japanese themselves, face the danger of katakana English naturally fading into the background as their ears become accustomed to it. It is essential for all teachers to maintain constant checks on learners' pronunciation to ensure that they are doing their best to speak comprehensible English.

As mentioned previously, the process of adaptation of English words tends to follow certain general patterns (Quackenbush, 1977)⁵⁾; therefore, activities can be designed which promote awareness-raising of the various styles of modification. If learners are aware of the possible changes that have occurred, they have a better chance of being able to use the word successfully in communication.

There is no denying that loanwords are a valuable source of vocabulary. Therefore, it is up to EFL teachers to create opportunities for learners to become aware of these words and to understand the differences, and to provide learners with correct examples of usage and a chance to practice the correct locution so as to avoid misuse.

Conclusion

From a linguistic point of view, the Japanese need to be admired for their astonishing ability to borrow and adapt words in the inventive manner that they do. However, loanwords serve as a linguistic barrier unless learners are made fully aware of the various transformations that take place. Most importantly, learners need to be made aware that loanwords are not English, but at the same time, EFL teachers should promote similarities in English cognates as a way of expanding learners' vocabulary base.

While Rebeck (2002)⁴⁾ may argue that the adoption of many loanwords, and in particular technical terms, provides Japanese with a common international vocabulary that is useful in this era of globalization, there remains much to be done in the way of pronunciation improvements and awareness-raising before Japanese can begin to take advantage of them. Therefore, as English becomes more and more the lingua franca of the world, the goal is not to discourage the usage of borrowed lexicon because they may result

in miscommunication, the goal is to help learners to be aware of the benefits and drawbacks of loanwords so that they can more successfully interact with the world around them.

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