

# Loanwords

## A Pitfall for All Students

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Few government decrees in recent years have been more controversial and even mirth-provoking than the decision of the French Culture Minister to ban the use of "borrowed foreign words" in the French language. Anglicized and other words of foreign origin will have to be replaced by French newspapers, broad-casting, advertising, video games, commercial ventures and public notices. French will be the main language in any international conferences held in France.(1)

To enforce the ban, government-appointed language observers will be empowered to take steps to correct what they consider to be violations of the law, and yet-to-be-announced penalties will be posed. It remains to be seen what effects the campaign will have in France, but there is no doubt that "loanwords" have become an integral part of almost every language and they have contributed greatly to the clarification and richness of native languages. But it can also be said that overemphasis on and improper use of foreign words can lead to misunderstanding and confusion, particularly for non-native speakers trying to learn a language.(2)

The purpose of this paper will be to outline briefly the history and development of "loanwords" in Japanese, and then discuss how these words can be of trouble for foreigners studying Japanese, and for Japanese studying English or other foreign languages. Finally, I would like to attempt to assess the cultural impact.

### Origins of Loanwords

It would be next to impossible to calculate the number and catalog the origin of all loanwords used in Japan. Some words have been part of the Japanese vocabulary for so long that they are now considered as Japanese words. Others, which may be in vogue now, will soon disappear and be replaced by still other short-lived expressions. At any rate, a decade or so ago, researchers decided that more than ten-percent of currently popular Japanese vocabulary consisted of loanwords. And the percentage is still growing.(3) No one would dare to predict what colloquial Japanese will sound like in ten or twenty years.

In tracing the origins of loanwords, it can be said with certainty that English is the primary source today. But that was not always the case. In addition to words taken from Chinese, Korean, Ainu and Sanskrit, Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch were the earliest words adopted by the Japanese.

Interestingly enough, many of the loanwords were related to particular characteristics or qualities of the country from which they were taken. Thus, from Italian came words linked to music and food. French words reflected art and fashion; German contributed expressions associated with science, medicine and mountain sports. Words from English cover the whole spectrum of language.(4) Originally, most of these words conveyed ideas which could not be, or were not, expressed clearly by Kanji. But as the Japanese language developed, many loanwords were adopted for the sake of convenience or style.

### Recent Sources of Loanwords

It is beyond dispute that the mass media is the leading source of new loanwords. News programs, documentaries, game and quiz shows, sports, even dramas add more and more foreign words and phrases to the Japanese language. But their contributions pale beside the additions stemming from the eye-catching slogans in advertising and TV commercials.

For some reason, copywriters believe that foreign words add class or mystique to their copy. It makes no difference that the average reader doesn't understand the message. They aren't supposed to. What does matter is that the text "evokes an image and attaches prestige value to the products being advertised." (5) Unfortunately, some of these strange usages make their way into dictionaries, and then students of both English and Japanese are confronted with ideas that can neither be understood nor translated.

Names or titles, too, reflect an unwarranted admiration for non-Japanese words. A quick scan of popular brand names, or titles of magazines and other publications, can mystify all readers, no matter what their linguistic background might be. And too often, the choice of titles is a source of merriment for those who understand the real meaning of the words. To confirm the above statement, readers might want to consult a recent paperback, *Japanese Jive*, by Caroline McKeldin. (6) The sub-title, "Wacky and Wonderful Products from Japan," says it all.

At any rate, even though the loanwords are spreading at an unprecedented rate. The problems for students are spreading with them.

## **Pronunciation of Loanwords**

Although the pronunciation of loanwords usually resembles the pronunciation of the word in the original language, adjustments have to be made to conform to the Japanese phonetic system. (7) And when these words are written in Katakana, even the most skillful non-native speakers of Japanese are often hard-pressed to come up with the original spelling of the word.

Adding to the confusion, quite frequently loanwords are abbreviated or combined with Japanese words or other loanwords. They have no resemblance to the original source. One distinguished scholar has said that for foreign students, the study of loanwords is much more difficult than the study of Kanji or Japanese words in Hiragana. (8)

Finally, the rules of grammar of the original words are often disregarded when the words are used in Japanese. Prepositions become nouns, nouns become verbs, and conjunctions and suffixes just disappear. All in all, for the foreign student, confusion abounds. In the next few pages, I hope to point out some of the most obvious problems in the use of loanwords and try to find some ways to clear up at least a little of the confusion. At the same time, I would like to show that the misunderstanding of the proper use of Katakana English can cause no end of trouble for Japanese students struggling to master English.

## **Seven of the Most Difficult Challenges**

Although a brief summary of special problems with loanwords has been given above, in this section, I will try to give a more detailed explanation. I am especially indebted to Professor Prem Motowani for the outline of this section. (9)

1. The vast majority of loanwords have been taken from English. However, in the Katakana words have only one meaning or usage. For example, 'akusesari' accessory - refers only to artificial or costume jewelry. Hats, ties, scarves or other such objects which are included in the English of the word have other terms in Japanese.
2. The "Japanization" of English words has in shortening, limiting, combining and extending English words to the extent that they are incomprehensible to native speakers. It would take a special imagination to link 'mai-kon' with the English micro-computer. 'Ame-futo' is a long way from American Football.
3. In many cases, loanwords are only used in combinations. Ice in English refers to a frozen substance. But in Japanese it is restricted to terms such as ice cream, iced tea, ice hockey and Ice box. 'On-za-rokku' fills in for Scotch on ice.
4. Distinguishing between loanwords used only colloquially and those used in written Japanese also demand study. 'Baransu' in one sense is used in written language, but in another it is colloquial.
5. Most loanwords are nouns in their original language. But in Japan they are often used as verbs by adding a Japanese verb ending or verb. Others merely add 'suru' to make a verb. 'Dabingu suru' for "dubbing" or "to dub" comes to mind.
6. Loanwords are frequently blended with Kanji or other loan-words to make a new word. "Denwa fakkusu" is a fax machine; "doa-

tsu-doa" means from one place to another.

7. Finally, many former brand names now have taken on a general meaning. "Bando-eido" for Band-Aid, refers to a bandage or the verb to bandage. These specialized words require a knowledge of the original name in order to mean anything in Japanese. Certainly, many other categories could be added to this outline of special challenges. But I think we have enough now to realize that loanwords themselves call for extensive study on the part of any serious student of Japanese. A list of some of the more fashionable loanwords has been included at the end of this paper.

## **Some Possible Solution**

As mentioned several times, loanwords defy logical explanations, and, therefore, there is no really logical way to study them. In preparing this paper, I spoke to several teachers of Japanese as a foreign language. They all stressed one point. Loanwords must be considered as Japanese words and studied in the same way. Their original meanings must not affect their or pronunciation in Japanese.

Secondly, and this sounds like I am avoiding the challenge, non-native speakers of Japanese should try not to use loanwords any more than is necessary. Even when clearly written in Katakana, they often don't sound right when used or read by non-Japanese. Foreign speakers tend to lean toward the original pronunciation and interpretation.

Next, students should not hesitate to ask what the loanword means, if the context of the sentence doesn't seem to make sense. In ordinary Japanese, the Kanji often clarifies the meaning. But Katakana offers no such assistance. Students can easily confuse the other speaker if they misinterpret or misuse words taken from other languages. And occasionally, the mistake might sound like an insult.

Finally, students should not rely too much on the interpretation of loanwords as given in standard dictionaries. Too often, editors seem to have relied on the assistance of native English speakers when defining loanwords. The idea, of course, is praiseworthy, but as I said earlier, loanwords must be considered as Japanese words. It takes a specialist to understand the basic meaning and nuances. I strongly recommend the use of dictionaries focusing on loanword usage. A few of the recognized works will be listed at the end of the paper.

## **Challenges for Students of English**

Though the thrust of this paper has been toward helping students of Japanese understand loanwords, a few thoughts about the dangers loanwords present to students of English should also be given some consideration. It has been my experience that Katakana English is, without a doubt, one of the main sources of English pronunciation problems. Stressing every syllable and adding a vowel at the end of the word, English students often sound as if they are reading Katakana placed alongside of the words. It has often been pointed out that what students consider to be good English often is a confusing and meaningless Japanese-English or "Japlish." Add to that a wrong interpretation of the original loanword, and you can readily see why an interesting conversation a comedy of errors.

There is no simple solution for this problem. But for starters, Katakana should never be used as a guide for pronunciation in English textbooks. With so many useful tapes, videos and pronunciation manuals available, it is foolish for students to rely on Katakana as a sort of crutch.

Repeating the admonition given above to students for students of English, too, loanwords as used in Japan must be thought of as Japanese words - not as English, French, German or anything else. English students must learn the words in their own context, not as adaptations from the Japanese usage.

Particular attention must be given to grammar. Just because articles, prepositions, conjunctions and other such parts of speech are not needed in Japanese, it does not mean that English students can disregard them when using the loanwords in their original language.

Now, putting aside the problems of the correct usage of words, let's take a look at the influence of such words on the Japanese language itself.

# Cultural Implications and Possible Effects on Japanese

Recently, The Japan Times had an interesting kind of hybrid dialect combining English and Spanish that is fast becoming a fad among the Spanish-speaking residents of parts of the United States. Sometimes called Spanglish - sometimes called Tejano - sometimes called Tex-Mex, it mixes the languages in ways that seem to make communication easier and faster.(10) Japan, too, is developing its own hybrid language. Popularly known as "Japlish" or "Janglish," it frequently makes no sense in either Japanese or English. Peter Milward in his Evening News gives what he calls a charming example of Janglish. "'To English or not to English?' It is so quaint ... and so ridiculous. ... (and) it is so wrong."(11)

Throughout his article, Professor Milward points out that the misuse of English, and by extension, loanwords, not only abuses the foreign language, but serves to "impoverish the Japanese language" as well.(12)

Several other language scholars have bemoaned the fact that Japanese speakers are too willing to accept loanwords, and are too careless in attempting to give them a Japanese meaning in an artificial context. In some ways it might be said that the prevailing mood in Japan today is to take the "easy" way. If a simple loan-word does the job as well as well as a more complicated Japanese meaning, younger speakers and the media usually prefer to use the loanword. That is not always bad, but it does not bode well for the future. Ordinary Japanese may lose their appreciation of the beauty and richness of their own language.

When Kenzaburo Oe was chosen as the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, the award stirred a spirited debate about the intellectual level of reading and literature in Japan. A New York Times article quoted in the Asahi Evening News said that Mr. Oe was greeted with what amounted to a scolding for pushing people to think too much.(13)

Japan is a success story in many fields, but what of its intellectual life? Professor Donald Keene, a renowned Japanese literary expert, is quoted as saying, "... Authors today are writing for the passing tastes of a young audience. University students were the real market for serious books, but they don't read them anymore. It's a very depressing period."(14)

Of course, loanwords themselves cannot be blamed for this crease of intellectual interest. It may well be that the roles reversed. That is, a decrease of interest in literature and language in general has brought about the proliferation of "easier-to-use" words. But to my way of thinking, the overuse of loanwords has played a significant role in the weakening of the Japanese language.

## Conclusion

It may seem that the scope of this article has gone beyond its original intent. But a summary of its main points may show that it may be necessary for writers and media personnel to take a second look at the overuse and abuse of Gairaigo.

1. The current emphasis on loanwords may be out of control. Often, the usage is meaningless, even foolish. Frequently, older, well-educated readers can't understand what the words mean.
2. Loanwords pose serious problems for foreign students of Japanese and for Japanese students attempting to learn other languages.
3. The over reliance on loanwords may tend to weaken and cheapen the Japanese language. And it may lead to a kind of intellectual and cultural malaise.

I don't pretend to have any solutions to this complicated dilemma. Properly used, loanwords add richness and flavor to a language; overly and mistakenly used, they sow the seeds of confusion and possibly contempt. Although the French would like to purge all foreign words from the French vocabulary, I certainly don't propose any such radical and even impossible solution in Japanese. But I would like to see loanwords used to convey the meaning as given in the original language - not some exotic and incomprehensible meaning as dreamt up by the mass media.

Note 1. A list of some examples of LINGUA NIHONGO. Taken from "Time Out Sunday," The Japan Times, 6 Nov. 1994.

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A Few Examples of Japanese Loanwords in Use Today

## LINGUA NIHONGO

The Japanese language has never the same since arrival of Admiral Perry's Black Ships. What was once a trickle is now an annual flood of new words - some last, many don't. They say the language people speak best reflects the way they live. If so, here's a tiny sliver of Japan today.

### Make it snappy

*bairin* (gyaru) : bilingual girl (usually *terento*)

*hansuto* : hunger strike  
*roricon* : Lolita complex  
*tereaka* : telephone card  
*sekuhara* : sexual harassment  
*yan egu* : young executive

## **Meido in Japan**

*aidoru* : teen idol  
*Konpanion* : female guide for espos  
*tarento* : TV personality/celebrity  
*orendi dorama* : trendy drama

## **Parlez-vous Nihongo ?**

*Charumera* : flute of roving noodle vendor (Portuguese)  
*enerugisshu* : energetic (German)  
*hisuteri* : hysteria (German)  
*randoseru* : school satchel (Dutch)  
*Zubon* : trousers (French)

## **Mix 'n' match**

*aruchu* : alcohol  
*chudoku* (addict)  
*asashan* : *asa* (morning) shampoo  
*itameshi* : Italian *meshi*  
(food *Kawajan* : *Kawa* (leather) jacket  
*ronge* : long *ke* (hair) (men only)

## **Purei boru!**

*gattsu po'zu* : guts pose (fist triumphantly raised above head)  
*g6ru in* : goal in (used also when the race is won)  
*no tatehi* : no touch (ace serve in tennis ; also, off-limits topic)  
*sutandopure'* : (grand) stand play

## **Well, kind of ...**

*gadoman* : security guard  
*hurusu meta* : health meter  
*pepa tesuto* : written test  
*sukinshippu* : physical contact  
*rippu (kurimu)* : chap stick

## **Huh?**

*don mai* : don't mind (don't worry)  
*uetto* : wet, sentimental (as opposed to dorai/dry)  
*panchi* : punch perm (afro perm)

## **Here today, gone tomorrow**

*derukaji* : model casual (fashion of supermodels)

*sukebo* : skateboard

*yanmama* : yankee mama (ex-delinquent woman, with kids)

*wanren* : "one-length" hairstyle

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<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Shepherd-Loanwords.html>