

## **Understanding the Nature of Japanese Loanwords**

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Language does not exist inside of a bubble. Speakers from different locations, backgrounds, creeds, and lifestyles all can bend and stretch the rules of a language to express their lives more accurately. The adoption of cross-cultural ideas and concepts are inevitable for a language to adapt. New words must be incorporated to update the language as trends progress. The Japanese language is no different, possessing “*gairaigo*” or loanwords (LW). Translated literally as foreign words, these words derive their meaning from foreign languages transformed into Japanese and written in katakana. Through this transformation, LW becomes easier to read and can often take on entirely different meanings. The core of their function lies in the expansion of the Japanese vocabulary to foreign ideas, trends, items, and concepts. Beyond this, LWs can even possess new meanings and nuances that can evolve independently from their origins. But despite LWs’ flexibility, there still exists confusion and concern about their usage in the Japanese lexicon. By examining LWs’ place in the Japanese lexicon as well as understanding language user’s perspectives on LW use, we will be able to gain a better understanding of the multi-faceted nature of LW and their place in the Japanese language.

As mentioned previously, LWs are used to expand the Japanese lexicon with foreign ideas and concepts and are denoted by their use of katakana. These words are not just limited to English but often incorporate German, Dutch, French, and Portuguese words. They can even be combinations of these words to narrow or expand the original meaning. The focus of this paper is to examine English LWs in particular and how they are changed and used in the Japanese language.

LW possess phonological and semantic differences from their origins. Phonologically, katakana helps make LWs easily readable for a Japanese speaker. What is of particular interest

are the semantic differences of LWs. Here are six types of semantic changes that illustrate how English words can be transformed through LW equivalents (Olah, 2007, p. 180).

Six types of Semantic Changes:

Pseudo-English: smart→スマート = thin/slender

Combination: paper test→ペーパーテスト = written test

Loan-blend: brush→歯ブラシ = toothbrush

Semantic narrowing: tuna→ツナ = specifically canned tuna

Semantic widening: juice→ジュース = juice/soft drink

Acronym: CM = commercial

From this, we can see how LWs are not just simply one-to-one equivalents. Instead, LW can be flexible and can take on different meanings or combinations that fit more naturally into the Japanese vernacular. A good example is how ツナ means canned tuna but not all tuna, otherwise it would be very confusing for Japanese people familiar with the word 鮪 and would also lead to confusion over whether a speaker was talking about cooked or uncooked tuna. Semantic changes like these not only help prevent confusion but help augment the language with more precise language making LW an asset for easily adapting new words to the Japanese language.

Loanwords are especially open to modification, both on entering the language, and with time. One reason is that the meaning or usage of a word in its original language may not be fully understood, as loanwords are used without reference to their source words. Because of this, combinations like Kanji compounds can be created to have intuitive meaning. These words are known as, “*Waseigaikokugo*” and they are words that can act entirely independent of the LW’s

English origins. In addition, LW can be used to expand on English expressions and can even be utilized as verbs. ショッピングする for example is a word that combines katakana and hiragana into a conjugatable verb. This combination of LW and grammar allows for easier integration. What these examples help to illustrate is the flexibility of LW as a part of the Japanese language. Their creation can exist organically to match the needs of speakers without having to follow traditional rules of the language.

Today Japan has a vast assortment of loanwords, many of which stem from English during the Post-war era. The initial appeal of loanwords was not just in giving a name to new things and ideas, but in relating a sense of progress and modernization, something that many felt was a sign of Japan's progressing maturity on the world stage (Kay, 1995, p.72). Despite this appeal, there does exist a desire to take a more measured approach to preserve Japanese language tradition as Kay (1995) explains, "Modern Japanese society is searching for ways to express itself while maintaining Japanese traditions, no matter what the degree of contact with Western culture. Incomplete linguistic assimilation of foreign loans helps allow Japanese traditional concepts and culture to be maintained," (Kay, 1995, p. 73).

This idea is similar to the sentiment discussed by Loveday's (1996) who explains that attempts to limit LW creation and overuse are rooted in the idea that Western language LWs "decline" the Japanese language by acting as shortcuts for new meanings when Japanese equivalents exist or can be created through kanji (Loveday, 1986, p. 208). This is even strengthened by the presence of four lists on LW not to use written up by the National Institute of the Japanese Language since 2003. The organization cites that limiting LW helps reduce the gap

in understanding between younger and older generations (Olah, 2007, p. 183). This evidence seems to indicate that this view toward LWs is not a niche concern.

While these sentiments toward LWs exist, it is questionable whether LW does as much damage to the language as is believed. Regardless, getting a perspective of everyday speakers and their feelings towards LW may help identify the problems and shortcomings of LWs. In a questionnaire administered to a group of 153 first-year Japanese university students at Komazawa University in Tokyo, Japan, students were asked whether they felt that there were too many or too few LW in Japanese. The results seem to indicate a mixed response with a slight majority saying that there are too many LW but that they did not represent a threat to the Japanese language (Olah, 2007, p. 183). Surprisingly, the study also revealed that LW is often unknown even to a young audience with 43.2% of students responding that they did not understand more than 50% of LW used in media sources such as TV and newspapers (Olah, 2007, p.183). It almost seems baffling that LW would even be used this much.

It comes as no surprise then that the National Institute of the Japanese Language cited that the elder population has a hard time understanding LWs. It also seems to explain why many students in this study believed that there were too many LWs. Despite this, it is quite surprising when Olah (2007) explains, “The 47% agreement to statement 3 (English loanwords give us new ways of viewing and understanding the world, and our ideas) is the strongest indicator that students had a positive view towards LWs,” (Olah, 2007, p. 183). Perhaps to these students, the friction in constantly adapting to new LWs is seen as a natural course towards globalization. Despite having difficulty understanding a large portion of LWs used, their use, in general, would seem to appeal to more internationally minded Japanese people. Regardless, it seems to confirm

that LWs exist in a sort of strange space within the language where their use is widespread but viewed with caution and confusion.

Of course, when discussing English LW in Japanese it is impossible not to mention their place in Japanese media culture. Due to Japan's advanced media culture, LW enters and exits quickly due to leading trends or events. A variety of goods and entertainment supply a vast majority of these new "trendy" LW. It is only when considering LW use in Japanese media that it is understandable that university students do not understand more than 50% of the LWs in media.

"The most common source of sociocultural contact with the English language in Japan is the mass media, for instance, fashion magazines and commercial advertisements of modern technology" (p. 286). A study was done by Takashi (1990), in which 513 TV commercials and 406 print advertisements were examined, found that of the 21,149 words in these advertisements, 5,555 (23%) were English LWs," (Olah, 2007, p.185).

In Japanese popular culture, there is a sophisticated appeal given to LW which is used to portray a sophisticated or premium image. LWs are also used for attention-grabbing effects. Much like using katakana for words typically spelled in kanji, the ability for exotic-sounding LWs to grab attention due to their foreign nature can invoke interest despite audiences not understanding the word (Kay, 1995, p. 76). The attractive nature of LW in advertising certainly confirms that Japanese consumers are not entirely against the idea of LWs in media. But media itself may be viewed as a safe space for LWs instead of an academic setting where their usage may be more frowned upon.

LWs have many uses in the Japanese language. They help expand the Japanese lexicon to foreign ideas, act as a convenient method for transcribing foreign pronunciation, and allow for greater flexibility in language combination. The debate remains whether their use undermines the foundations of the language, but most concerns seem to be comprehending them rather than reducing their frequency. Unlike many other languages, LWs in Japanese possess a flexibility in creation and usage which can help the language adapt to cultural changes. It is through this function that LW can be examined and experimented with to potentially solve these problems for the future of the language.

## References

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