

Recent English Loanwords in Japanese

— A Comparison on Meaning

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Preface

It has been widely pointed out that there are too many *katakana* syllabary, namely foreign loanwords in Japanese, particularly of English origin, which are used in daily life. The mass media have been a “key player” in the “borrowing and dissemination of *gairaigo*” (1) or *katakana* loanwords. Among them are loanwords that were introduced to Japan more than one hundred years ago which have since fully been incorporated into Japanese. In addition, there are loanwords that have been recently introduced into Japanese that do not always correspond correctly in meaning to the original word or do not take into account multiple meanings that exist for some words.

It is not necessarily a disadvantage for the ever-increasing use of *katakana* for loanwords in the Japanese. One advantage is they allow Japanese people to recognize these words as foreign words easily in most cases. However, there are situations where Japanese use too many loanwords in conversation resulting only in confusing the listener. This overuse tends to lead people to question if it is actually necessary to include loanwords in Japanese at all. Japanese people can generally express what they mean in Japanese without using English words but these English words may still cause much confusion.

In 2006, The National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics published a list of current loanwords proposing for the change of the loanwords into *kanji*. In this paper, we will attempt to look at the pros and cons of transcribing English into *katakana* or loanwords vs. *kanji* from the viewpoint of the speaker and listener. Also, we will review a select number of these loanwords and compare their meaning to the original English word.

The Use of Loanwords in the Japanese Language

Cases for the use of loanwords for speakers

No Japanese word equivalent

In many cases when a new word is introduced, there is no suitable Japanese word equivalent making it almost impossible to translate into *kanji* properly.

McNeil (2) points out “loanwords can serve as purpose to fill a lexical or semantic gap.” This

is particularly true for technical words. Loanwords can be used to label imported things and ideas that did not exist in Japanese culture until recently.

Words such as nanotekunorojii ('nano technology') and dejitarudebaido ('digital divide') were words that did not exist in Japanese culture or the world prior to a few decades ago.

Technical terms

In addition to the above, translation of technical words into *kanji* may not accurately reflect the original word meaning since they are very specific in meaning. Also, technical terms are often accepted into other languages without change. Using the same term would be convenient in discussions internationally and would help avoid any misunderstandings in communication.

Loanwords are a part of Japanese language

Although some English words can be directly translated into Japanese, it is generally more correct to express the word in a loanword rather than *kanji* in order to communicate what they exactly want to mean. This is especially evident when one English word takes on two different meanings in Japanese. For example, "the word yellow is associated with brightness more than ki-iro". (3)

English as the universal language

Since English has been established as the universal language, it is easier to incorporate English directly as is through loanwords rather than *kanji* for clear communication. There is a risk of meaning being lost in transcription to *kanji*, which are meaning-based rather than phonetically-based script as in *katakana*.

English- part of Japanese language

Speakers are aware that it is common for Japanese to know English words which are generally accepted as part of the Japanese language.

Ease of integration into Japanese

Introducing new words using *katakana* over *kanji* has many advantages.

One advantage is that it "allows for any foreign word to be borrowed into the Japanese language, even on a temporary basis, making the loan words immediately legible to even monolingual Japanese".(4)

Kay (5) also notes that "using a domestic script to transcribe foreign words is clearly more convenient than creating new combinations of Chinese characters, which would require a consensus or official approval before they could come into general use."

Conversely, given the reasons above promoting the use of loanwords, there is still room for doubt whether it is meaningful to directly introduce English loanwords into Japanese from a listener's point of view.

Cases against the use of loanwords for listeners

Vagueness and ambiguity

Using loanwords are often effective in obscuring meaning and giving ambiguity deliberately.(6) Politicians are notorious for the high frequency use of loan words when giving public speeches. One effect it may have is to mislead listeners to perceive a speaker as being sophisticated or smart. Several researchers comment that it serves to give speech an atmosphere of modernity, "Westernness", education and sophistication. (7) It seems then that loanwords can give speakers an alternate way of sounding intelligent and capable.

Listener Comprehension

It is a selfish way which gives an advantage to the user due to its convenience rather than considering the listeners' intelligibility instead. This is evident in the news media where government officials use loanwords that only a select number of people in public understand. This serves as a way for them to gloss over issues without adequately explaining their policies, avoiding any questioning from the public but still making a good impression. However, this only serves to cause confusion and defeats real communication.

Translation into Kanji

There is no significant inconvenience in expressing ideas in Japanese which would lead to a clearer understanding in Japanese rather than in English.

Grammar rules

Generally, it is difficult to understand how it can be used in sentences correctly in Japanese. Loanwords are often used creatively by different age groups and professions to suit their cultural situations.(8)

Clearer in meaning using Kanji

Some people believe that it is more effective to first examine the original meaning carefully and then assign an equivalent kanji character to ensure accuracy in translation.

In the following section, we will present examples of loanwords that do not completely correspond to the original English in meaning.

A Comparison on Meaning of Recent Loanwords to Word Origin

We will look at 9 words selected from the 2006 official list of recent loanwords published by The National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics. The institution proposes these current loanwords be transcribed into kanji to decrease the difficulty of usage and comprehension of these words by the public. We will try to consider how these loanwords are used in meaning including comparisons to their original meaning. Examples sentences from the original word definition will be given to show how the word is used in the English language.

Although most words on the list were accurate in meaning to the original English definition, a selected number of words did not take into account additional meanings present in the original English word.

“LW” denotes example sentence based on the Japanese loanword definition.

“E” denotes example sentence usage based on original English word definition which is not found in the loanword.

1. Fellowship

LW: This loanword is limited in meaning to situations where financial aid is given to people for research.

Ex. Dr. Suzuki *received a **fellowship** for new research in nanotechnology.*

E: This word is sometimes associated with a group of people who share common beliefs or activities such as members of a church or club. It is synonymous with the word, “friendship.” It is used more often in noun form (above example) than in verb form.

Ex. *The Christian Club encourages members to **fellowship** with new members and with people in the community.*

2. Care

LW: This word relates to nursing care for the elderly, mental care and day care for children. It also includes the maintenance of clothing, pets and health-related items (i.e. contact lens)

Ex: *The pet **care** business in Japan is gradually increasing due to the pet boom.*

E: The word *care* can be used in the polite form of a request as in,

Ex: *Would you **care** for some coffee?*

or in dictating preference,

Ex: *I don't **care** much for chocolate.*

3. Supplement

LW: This word is associated with the health industry related to vitamins and other nutrition tablets.

Ex: *Women sometimes take **supplements** when they skip breakfast.*

E: This word includes “something added that is lacking” as in the sentence,

Ex: *In addition to the textbook for this class, the teacher will **supplement** each lesson with handouts.*

4. Reduce

LW: This word refers to the control and lessening of garbage disposal popularized by ecologists.

Ex: *Please **reduce** trash as much as you can.*

E: This word is often used in other fields as well; in cooking, it means lessening the volume of a preparation thru simmering.

Ex: *The chef **reduced** the soup mixture to a thick, smooth sauce.*

Also, it can mean the lessening of a person's state of being;

Ex: *She was **reduced** to tears after hearing about the deaths resulting from the earthquake. Unfortunately, many families will be **reduced** to poverty due to the disaster.*

5. Recipient

LW: This word is given to a patient who is the receiver of an organ from a donor thru an organ transplant.

Ex: *The man finally became a heart transplant **recipient** after a 6-month wait.*

E: This word is also for a person who receives any goods or services, particularly an award or prize in a contest, or a college scholarship.

Ex: *She was overwhelmed after hearing she was the **recipient** for a full scholarship to Oxford.*

6. Incubation

LW: This technical term is limited to the act of an organization assisting start-up companies, generally with respect to providing knowledge and technical assistance.

Ex: *The average survival rate of companies in Canada that go through business **incubation** has been shown to be higher than 80% after five years.*

E: This term related to business, is a relatively new word in the English language. In addition to the above, this often refers to the early development of an organism.

Ex: *Babies that are born prematurely often need to stay at the hospital under **incubation**.*

7. Follow-up

LW: This word refers to further action taken after an activity is completed.

Ex: *A follow up inspection was done on the bridge after one year.*

E: This word is also used for actions in other fields such as:

Ex: *John **followed up** with a thank you letter after his business interview with the company.*

Ex: *She made an appointment for a **follow-up** visit to the doctors for a check up.*

8. Safeguard

LW: In technical language in business, a safeguard is used to restrain international trade in order to protect a certain home industry from foreign competition.

Ex: *The Japanese government decided to limit the import of rice as a **safeguard** to protect the domestic rice farmers.*

E: This loanword does not include the use outside of trade such as:

Ex: *People sometimes put a second lock on doors to **safeguard** their home from burglars.*

Ex: *It is important that parents and police **safeguard** children from strangers when children return home from school.*

9. Solution

LW: The meaning here relates to an explanation or answer to a problem in business.

Ex: *The president proposed a **solution** to help end the 10-day strike.*

E: This word can also mean a mixture of two substances blended equally. A solution can be a gas, liquid or solid. To the average person, it is often associated with a liquid, usually water.

Ex: *Hardware stores often have a variety of cleaning **solutions** for car care.*

Conclusion

Although Japanese people have far more opportunities to use English loanwords regularly than English itself, the meanings between them may differ greatly. These loanwords may not always reflect the original English word due to lack of consideration for all definitions existing from the original word.

The use of *katakana* to introduce new English words may prevent the Japanese from learning English after all. Ironically enough, the more the people use loanwords, the poorer their English becomes, despite their desire to learn English. Consequently, when speaking or writing English, it is important not to completely assume that loanwords have the same meaning. To make matters worse, there is a flood of Japanese English, which is literally “made in Japan English”, based on English and accepted only in Japan.

Although loanwords have become firmly established in Japanese, and can be found in dictionaries transcribed as “Japanese English”, these new words are very difficult to distinguish from real English. Some people have suggested expressing new words using *kanji* instead of *katakana* or even to use *romaji* in writing as an alternative method instead of *katakana*. In any case, finding a way to introduce new words more accurately, both phonetically and in written form, will help minimize confusion among users and listeners.

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