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## Loanwords in Japanese in the Context of Globalization

### Abstract

Effects of globalization and of the modern exchanges among various countries are seen everywhere, and language does not escape them. Perhaps the most dynamic transformations are seen at the lexical level, where new loanwords are continually introduced. This paper aims to give a brief account of the peculiarities of loanwords in present-day Japanese, with a focus on their origin, degree of assimilation and semantic appropriateness – in the cases where loanwords have lost to a certain degree their original meaning. In the last section, the particular phenomenon of *wasei-eigo*, also known as 'English made in Japan', a derivation of the linguistic process of borrowing foreign words, is also discussed.

**Keywords:** *gairaigo*, 'loanwords', 'wasei-eigo', 'pseudo-Anglicisms', lexical borrowings, lexical innovations, internationalization

### Introduction

In this paper, we will first take a brief overview on the vocabulary strata - Section 1 - and history of loanwords in the Japanese language - Section 2.

Following this background information, in Section 3 we will first present the most recent national linguistic policies as well as people's attitudes toward the introduction of new loanwords, as shown by several national surveys (3.1). Next in 3.2 we will present the main functions of loanwords, as discussed in earlier studies on the subject. Section 3.3 focuses on several concrete aspects regarding loanwords in present-day Japanese, such as their form, preservation or change of meaning and degree of assimilation.

In Section 4, we will discuss the particular phenomenon of *wasei-eigo*, also known as 'English made in Japan', a derivation of the linguistic process of borrowing foreign words, very productive in present-day Japanese.

The final Section 5, briefly presents the conclusion of this paper.

### 1. Vocabulary Strata in Japanese

The Japanese lexicon is traditionally considered to consist of three main strata:

a) The native stratum (known as *wago/yamato kotoba*, 'Japanese words'), which is indigenous to the Japanese archipelago; the words belonging to this category represent a very large part of the basic vocabulary and describe, mainly, fundamental activities (ex. *taberu* 'eat', *iku* 'go'), kinship terms (ex. *haha* 'mother', *chichi* 'father', *musuko* 'son'), animates (*hito* 'person', *inu* 'dog', *mushi* 'insect'), natural phenomena or things (ex. *haru* 'spring', *yuki* 'snow', *yama* 'mountain', *kawa* 'river'), et cetera;

b) The Sino-Japanese stratum (known as *kango*, 'Chinese words'), words that have continually entered the Japanese language since the 5th century, the time of the introduction of the Chinese writing system, such as *ongaku* 'music', *kanshin* 'interest', *ronbun* 'essay' et cetera. Having such a long history, these are not considered loanwords anymore and nowadays they represent approximately 60% of the words contained in a modern Japanese dictionary;

c) The foreign stratum (*gairaigo*, lit. 'words from abroad'), representing mainly Western loanwords, defined by researchers, such as Mark Irwin, as follows: "A *gairaigo* is a foreign word which has undergone adaptation to Japanese phonology, has been borrowed into the Japanese after

the mid-16th century and whose meaning is, or has been, intelligible to the general speech community" (Irwin 10).

## 2. Brief History of Gairaigo

Loanwords have entered the Japanese language in three main phases (Irwin 5ff):

a) The Iberian phase, lasting from the mid-16th to the mid-17th century, when new words and concepts were brought by the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking Catholic missionaries.

The borrowings belonging to this phase can be divided into two broad categories:

– Christian terminology (ex. *Kirishitan* 'Christian', *bateren* 'padre', *pan* 'holy wafer' and later 'bread');

– trade terminology (ex. *tabako* 'tobacco', *furasuko* 'flask', et cetera);

b) The Dutch phase, lasting from the mid-17th to the mid-19th century, a period during which Japan had a policy of isolationism allowing only Dutch merchants to enter the country and consequently making them the only source of Western scientific learning.

During this period, most loanwords are:

– medical and scientific terms (ex. *sutorikinīne* 'strychnine', *chifusu* 'typhus', *magunesiumu* 'magnesium', et cetera);

– terms related to trade (ex. *kōhī* 'coffee', *kakao* 'cocoa', *pisutoru* 'pistol' et cetera);

c) The international phase, beginning with the opening up of Japan after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and extending to present days.

In the 19th century, following the initiation of diplomatic relationships with several countries, there are many borrowings from Russian (*wokka* 'vodka', *tsā* 'czar'), French (*zubon*, from 'jupon' but meaning 'trousers', *kudeta* 'coup d'état') or German (ex. *rentogen* < Röntgen 'X-rays', *wakushin* 'vaccine').

In the 20th century, there are many borrowings from Italian, German and other languages, but especially after the World War II the Japanese language has been dominated by English borrowings.

## 3. Gairaigo in Present-Day Japanese

### 3.1. National Linguistic Policies and People's Attitude Towards Loanwords

According to Margaret Pine Otake's research, in 1889 there were only 85 *gairaigo* of Dutch origin and 72 of English origin listed in the main Japanese dictionaries (Otake 90). Another research focusing on the number of modern *gairaigo* items listed in *Kōjien* – one of the most prestigious Japanese language dictionaries – shows that the number of *gairaigo* represented 8.5% of all listed words in the 1983 edition, then 9.2% of the total in the 1991 edition and 10.2% in the 1998 edition (Igarashi 4), showing a rapid increase.

This increase may be the response to the need of lining up, linguistically speaking, with the rest of the developed world, in the global present-day context when international and intercultural exchanges of all kinds have so much intensified. In Japanese, western loanwords have taken up the function of a communicative 'bridge' between a language otherwise 'wrecoemizable' from the lexical point of view and the western languages, notably English, spoken all over the world.

In fact in recent years, the Japanese government has pursued a "policy of internationalization for the Japanese language". At the same time, concerned to prevent a too abrupt increase of foreign words, the government established *Gairaigo linkai*, a "Loanword Committee" within the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL), specifically to control the over-proliferation of *gairaigo* (Igarashi 3).

According to Irwin's analysis, many Japanese speakers see a "deluge" of foreign words, and very often the national newspapers receive letters complaining about the excessive use of *gairaigo* (which are "unnecessary, undesirable and misleading words", as opposed to the "beautiful,

authentic Japanese"). However, according to Irwin, this "deluge" may be only an illusion created by the very quick replacement of the loanwords in use by other new loanwords (Irwin 193).

The National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL), the Japanese Agency of Cultural Affairs, Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK, Japan's national public broadcasting organization) and several other institutions have constantly conducted scientific surveys and opinion polls on public attitudes towards *gairaigo*. According to their analysis, in recent years it seems that middle-aged people and company employees consider that there are too many *gairaigo* among the words they read and hear every day. In exchange, younger people and people in other fields of activity (such as agriculture, fishery, et cetera) tend to be less upset by the number of loanwords in present-day Japanese (Irwin 195ff).

In our opinion, these results seem to indicate that loanwords have indeed become a more and more visible presence in at least certain areas of the Japanese lexicon. The tendency revealed by the surveys above could be explained, on one hand, by the fact that young people in present-day Japan have more contact with English and other foreign languages (via movies, music or the Internet) than older generations (eg. the middle-aged and company employees) and for this reason, are more familiar with the loanwords; on the other hand, people in certain fields of activity (eg. Agriculture) have less contact with *gairaigo* and do not perceive them as "invading".

### 3.2. Main Functions of Loanwords

According to Otake (88), words are borrowed from other languages in order to fulfill specific communicative needs, such as naming something new that has no name in the language, expressing something with a slightly different nuance than the original term already in use, or in order to enhance the status of the speaker by creating an image of refinement.

This applies to the Japanese language as well, as we can see in the examples below (all figuring in *Kōjien: the Comprehensive Dictionary of the Japanese Language*).

a) loanwords used to describe newly introduced objects and concepts: these are usually technological terms such as *intānetto* 'Internet', *haifai* 'hi-fi', et cetera;

b) loanwords conferring sophistication/refinement: the foreign loanword is used for stylistic effects, even though a Japanese or Sino-Japanese equivalent already exists in the language.

ex. *ueddingu* 'wedding' instead of *kekkonshiki*  
*yunīku* 'unique' instead of *yuiitsu* or *koseiteki*  
*mēdo* 'maid' instead of *otetsudai* (lit. 'helper') or *otome*.

Sometimes, the loanword, being taken from a different language, less familiar, is perceived as less direct/ strong than its native counterpart, and is used euphemistically,

ex. *rōn* 'loan' instead of the Sino-Japanese equivalent *shakkin*, lit 'borrowed money'  
*adobaisu* 'advice' instead of *sōdan*.

Of the functions mentioned above, the first one, i.e., filling lexical gaps, is without doubt primary and widespread, the "sophistication effect" being only a secondary function of programmatic nature.

At a different level and indirectly, but perhaps not less importantly, loanwords contribute to creating 'common grounds' with other widespread languages, especially English, as we have briefly argued in 3.1.

### 3.3. Modifications in Form and Meaning

In Japanese, there are several paths that loanwords can take on their way to assimilation.

Sometimes loanwords are taken as they were in the donor language, keeping their meaning and length and being only adapted to the Japanese phonological system, where consonants cannot be followed by other consonants<sup>1</sup>, the basic sequence type being consonant-vowel.

ex. *ekisochikku* < exotic  
*kurisumasu* < Christmas

Sometimes, their form remains the same, but they get a slightly derived meaning, such as *toranpu*, originating in the English 'trump (card)', meaning in Japanese 'playing cards', or *mēkā*, from 'maker', meaning 'well-known manufacturer'.

In other cases, after being in use for some time, and especially in the case of compound words, they are truncated, usually to four morae, by keeping the first two morae of each element of the compound<sup>2</sup>.

ex. *pasokon* < *pāsonaru konpyūta* 'personal computer'  
*rimokon* < *rimōto kontorōru* 'remote control'  
*sekuhara* < *sekushuaru harasumento* 'sexual harassment'.

In yet other cases, their forms show a higher degree of assimilation into the Japanese language, especially when receiving verb endings specific to the *wago* or *kango* strata.

ex. *kanningu*, from the English word 'cunning', used in a compound verb with the auxiliary *suru*<sup>3</sup> 'to do', in the expression *kanningu suru*, meaning 'to cheat';  
*saboru*, from the French word 'sabotage', with a typical Japanese verb ending, *-ru*, meaning 'to skip/cut a class', 'to be truant'.

#### 4. The 'Japanese Recipe': *Waseieigo*, Japanese-Made English

A particularly interesting phenomenon, a derivation of the linguistic process of borrowing foreign words, very productive in present-day Japanese, is the so-called *wasei-eigo*, literally 'English made in Japan'. The term refers to pseudo-Anglicisms, expressions that are not used in the English-speaking world, and usually having in Japanese a meaning derived from the original meaning. (Examples taken from *Kōjien*, the *Comprehensive Dictionary of the Japanese Language*).

*baikingu* < 'Viking' meaning in Japanese 'Swedish/all-you-can-eat buffet'  
*sararīman* < 'salary' + 'man', meaning 'company employee'  
*dokutaa stoppu* < 'doctor' + 'stop', meaning 'the doctor's instructions to slow down'  
*goruden wiiku* < 'golden' + 'week', referring to the Japanese extended public holidays between April 29 and May 5

Shibasaki et al. classify the *wasei-eigo* into four large categories:

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<sup>1</sup>Except the nasal mora /N/, that can be followed by a consonant, as in *saNpo* "walk", *teNki* 'weather', *haNsamu* 'handsome', *mango* 'mango'.

<sup>2</sup>The four-morae structure is considered to be very harmonious in the Japanese language. Also, the same truncation pattern (2 + 2 morae) is frequently used for Japanese or Sino-Japanese words as well: ex. *Toodai* < *Tookyoo Daigaku* 'Tokyo University', *Kokuren* < *Kokusai Rengoo* 'the United Nations'.

<sup>3</sup>The combination noun + *suru* ('to do') is very frequent for Sino-Japanese words, ex. *benkyō suru* 'to study' (lit. 'to do study'), *kekkon suru* 'marry' (lit. 'to do marriage') etc.

- a) the word exists in English, but is assigned a different meaning in Japanese, ex. *juice*, meaning 'drink derived from fruits or vegetables' in English, whose Japanese equivalent, *juusu*, can refer to 'soft drinks' or 'carbonated drinks';
- b) the Japanese word represents a truncation of the original English word, ex. *depaato* < department store;
- c) the word does not exist in English, ex. *naitaa*, whose equivalent would be *nighter*, inexistent in English, having the meaning of "night game";
- d) two or more words, each one existent in English, combine and get a new meaning in Japanese, ex. *mōningu sābisu*, from "morning" + "service", meaning "a discount menu during morning hours". (Meerman and Tamoaka 23).

Due to the fact that these combinations lose their initial meaning and, moreover, are not governed any more by the grammatical rules in the donor language, they sometimes produce a strange effect, at least for the speakers familiar with the donor language. Such is the case with the *wasei-eigo* expressions *mai hōmu* or *mai pēsu*, whose equivalents in English would be "my home" and "my pace", but meaning in Japanese "one's own home", "at one's own pace". The following sentences are acceptable in Japanese, disregarding the incompatibility of pronouns that would arise in English:

*Tomodachi no mai hoomu watotemo suteki da wa!*  
friend GEN "my home" TOP very splendid COP PRT.EMPH  
lit. "My friend's my home is splendid!"

*Jikan ga aru kara, mai peesu de yatte kudasai.*  
time NOM have because "my pace" at do please  
lit. "There is plenty of time, so please do it at your my pace".

A question that has not yet been satisfactorily answered is WHY *waseieigo* are created, instead of trying to express the same concepts with Japanese words or simply borrowing the words with the desired meaning from another language. According to Miller, there may be several factors involved, such as an innate propensity in Japanese to borrow foreign things or perhaps the desire to emulate prestigious foreign languages and cultures (Miller 129).

### Conclusion

As Japan heads more and more towards internationalization and globalization, new loanwords are constantly introduced in present-day Japanese in order to meet the communication needs. Loanwords are used not only related to the new technologies, but to everyday life as well. While some of them keep the original meaning and remain similar to the original form, others are modified – form and meaning as well, showing a higher degree of assimilation into the Japanese language. A particularly interesting phenomenon is the *wasei-eigo*, 'English made in Japan', following the model of true loanwords, perhaps in the aim of bringing 'international flavor' to the Japanese language.

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