

# English Loanwords in Japanese: Effects, Attitudes and Usage as a Means of Improving Spoken English Ability

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## Abstract

This paper looks at the extensive use of English loanwords in Japanese and how loanwords usually have a negative effect on the ability of Japanese people to use spoken English. In addition, the attitudes of Japanese university students towards loanwords are examined using information gathered from the results of a questionnaire. The study showed that Japanese university students did not have a negative view of English loanwords but often have difficulty in understanding them, and thus think that more attention should be paid to teaching loanwords in school. Some practical suggestions are given as to how loanwords should be approached and used as an effective tool for teaching English.

**Key Words:** Loanwords, Japanese, English, effects, teaching

## The History of Loanwords in Japanese

The area of sociolinguistics is a field of study that explores the ways that language and society influence each other. The sociolinguistic situation in Japanese is truly unique. Japanese is a language that has a long history of borrowing, and continues to borrow from other languages at an ever quickening pace. Loanwords (hereafter referred to as LWs) are single or multiple words used in Japanese that have either been taken directly from, or made of components of words from other languages. They are known as *gairaigo* in Japanese, and in recent years, have increasingly become a topic of discussion in the media, the government and amongst members of the general public.

Japanese is a language that has developed through contact with other languages, most significantly in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century AD' when, with no written communication system of their own, Japanese adopted Chinese characters for writing. Since the 1500's when Japan began to interact with Europe, the Japanese

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have had an affinity for the usage of European words (or European sounding words) in their language. Initially, LWs came from Portuguese, after traders and missionaries from Portugal began coming to Japan in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, following that, words from the Dutch language started to seep into Japanese when traders arrived from Holland in the early 1600's. The next inundation of foreign words came from Germany and France, and since the 19th century, LWs have predominantly come from English. This illustrates how the use of LWs runs in parallel with the exposure that the Japanese people had to various countries in the West throughout their history.

The bulk of the English LWs in use today, have come about as a result of the influence of American culture on Japan since the end of World War II, and especially in the last two decades, Japanese have brought LWs into their language with insatiable zeal. A report by The Japanese National Language Research Institute in 1964 found that of all the LWs that came from Western languages, 80.8% were English. While LWs in Japanese have been borrowed from a number of languages, as this figure illustrates, English LWs make up the majority. This study focuses on LWs that have come from English and hence, for the remainder of this paper, the term LW is used to refer to those words used in Japanese that have been derived from English.

### Reasons for the Use of Loanwords

The reasons for the extensive filtering of English words into the Japanese lexicon are manifold. While some words have been introduced to fill a semantic void or lexical gap that existed in Japanese, most LWs initially made their way into Japanese because Western languages were seen as symbolic of progress and modernization. The steady increase in English LWs in Japanese is a clear example of the influence of culture on language. After World War II Japan aspired to creating a country similar in economic and technological progression to the United States. Hence, through their desire to emulate the American way of life, the Japanese people began, perhaps unconsciously, to use more English words in their own language. During Japan's social and economic development the use of foreign words symbolized the power, wealth and prestige of Western countries and naturally gained momentum towards standardized use in everyday language. MacGregor (2003) uses dictionaries to gauge the extent of this increase in LWs, "Loanword dictionary entries continue to grow: the latest *katakana* dictionary published by Sanseido (2000) contains 52,500 foreign word entries. Compare this figure to the 20,000 total of the first edition, published in 1972" (p. 18). In recent decades, even though Japan has certainly reached its goal of becoming a modern, economically powerful society, LWs still maintain their allure to the Japanese as language which is fashionable, cool and generally appealing, Hence, the main forces responsible for bringing new LWs into Japanese are advertising companies, the media and popular culture in general, as outlined in Daulton (2004), "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 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.

### The Purposes of this Study

With LWs making up such a huge part of the Japanese language, it is can be of great value to consider how this affects the way that people in Japan learn and use English. The most important area of English ability to examine in regards to LWs is spoken English ability, because for Japanese people the correct English pronunciation of LWs is a great impediment when they communicate with others in English. LWs seem to offer a large knowledge base of vocabulary that could be used by Japanese when speaking English and both students and teachers of English need to harness this resource. This paper looks at: first, the effects that LWs have on communication when Japanese people speak English, second, the attitudes that Japanese have towards LWs, and third, how LWs and the attitudes that Japanese have towards them should be approached and utilized when teaching spoken English.

### The Hindrances and Benefits of Loanwords when Speaking English

There are two main ways in which LWs create problems for Japanese when they are communicating in English: distortion of correct pronunciation (Yano, 2001) and change or lack of meaning (Tanaka, S & Tanaka, H, 1995). These 2 problem areas of pronunciation and meaning often overlap, creating a compound barrier to comprehension for the listener, when Japanese people speak English. LWs however, also represent a vast body of vocabulary that should be used by both students and teachers as a learning tool to improve English ability.

#### *Problem Caused by Pronunciation*

LWs are usually written in *katakana*, syllabic script used to write words of foreign origin in Japanese, although they are sometimes written using the alphabet. Due to the syllabic restrictions of monosyllabic Japanese *katakana*, consonant clusters cannot be produced without putting vowel sounds in between them. As a result of this, words in English that have few syllables can end up being expanded, requiring far more sounds to produce their *katakana* equivalent in Japanese (see Table 1). In order to save time when speaking, many LWs have been shortened (a linguistic technique that Japanese apply extensively to a host of words and expressions throughout their language). These shortened versions become the standard way of saying or writing the LW, with people often unaware of its original form (see Table 1).

In other cases, two LWs have been combined, with one or both of the original English words being shortened (see Table 1). In addition to these pronunciation changes that take place, another big barrier to fluent communication in English are LWs that retain their basic English form, but are unable to be pronounced correctly using the available Japanese phonemes. In Japanese, there are only 5 vowel sounds, but English has 12 or more ways to produce vowel sounds, which means that many English words must undergo a phonological change in order to be written in *katakana*. One consequence of this is that some LWs are pronounced differently to the English word they came from (see Table 1), and another is that in some cases, one LW could have two meanings in English (see Table 1). All these changes in the pronunciation of English LWs become a significant impediment for Japanese when they speak English because the people they are speaking to may not be able to understand their pronunciation of real English words that are also found in Japanese as LWs.

Table 1 *Phonological Change*

Type of Change	English	Japanese loanword
a) syllable expansion	cream	<i>kurīmu</i>
	steak	<i>sutēki</i>
	taxi	<i>takushī</i>
b) shortening	television	<i>terebi</i>
	supermarket	<i>sūpā</i>
	accelerator	<i>akuseru</i>
c) shortening/combination	air conditioner	<i>eakon</i>
	word processor	<i>wāpuro</i>
	personal computer	<i>pasokon</i>
d) phonological change	work	<i>wāku</i>
	bath	<i>basu</i>
	bus	<i>basu</i>

#### *Problems Caused by Semantic Change*

One of the first things about LWs that any native English speaker who understands even a little Japanese will notice, is that some LWs have the exact same meaning as their English counterparts, while others have a slightly, or completely different meaning to the original English from which they came.

What this semantic change entails for a Japanese person speaking English is that even if they use a word which they know because it is an English LW in their own language, they cannot be sure that the meaning it has in Japanese is the same as its original English meaning. Kay (1995) offers two reasons why many LWs mutate so radically after assimilation into the Japanese language. First, is the fact that the subtleties of the real meaning of the English word may not be completely understood by those using it in Japanese, and second: “with words of foreign origin, there is no deep cultural motivation to protect their original meanings.” (Kay, 1995, p. 72)

Table 2 *Semantic Change*

Type of Change	English derivation	Japanese loanword	English
a) pseudo-English	smart	<i>sumāto</i>	thin/slender
	service	<i>sābisu</i>	discounted price or free
	mansion	<i>manshon</i>	well appointed apartment
b) combination	etiquette + brush	<i>echiketto burashi</i>	lint brush
	paper + test	<i>pēpā tesuto</i>	written test
	open + car	<i>ōpun kā</i>	convertible
c) loan-blend	<i>ha</i> (Japanese for tooth) + brush	<i>haburashi</i>	tooth brush
	<i>denwa</i> (Japanese for phone) + box	<i>denwabokusu</i>	telephone box
d) semantic narrowing	tuna	<i>tsuna</i>	canned but not fresh tuna
	bike	<i>baiku</i>	motorbike but not bicycle
	demonstration	<i>demo</i>	group protest
e) semantic widening	sign	<i>sain</i>	signature/autograph
	juice	<i>jūsu</i>	juice/soft drink
	viking	<i>baikingu</i>	Viking/buffet style meal
f) acronym	commercial	<i>CM</i>	TV commercial
	promotion video	<i>PV</i>	music video
	Developing, printing, enlarging	<i>DPE</i>	developing photographic film

Two studies done by Yamazaki (1997/1998), dramatically showed the problems that Japanese people have with identifying the real English meaning of LWs. Using data collected from 154 first year university students who were given a set of questions related to the correct English word for a corresponding pseudo-English word (e.g. *handoru* for steering wheel), he discovered that the percentage of correct answers given was 31.5%. An alarmingly low figure considering that each question had 5 possible answers, meaning a success rate of 20% for completely random answer selection. Another startling result was that 62.3% of respondents in his study thought that *OL* (Office Lady), which means female office worker, could be used correctly in English. This highlights the biggest danger with the use of LWs in spoken English: when Japanese believe that English sounding expressions that have been entirely created in Japan, like *OL*, can pass for real English.

The fact that LWs can end up having a meaning that is so far removed from their original is not only important with regards to the Japanese language, as well as English learners in Japan, but on a broader scale, may have some effect on the state of English around the world. Groddol (1987) describes in detail the worldwide spread of English and points out that when (this has already happened) non native speakers of English outnumber native speakers of English, they will have more influence on development of English than those who speak it as a first language. This puts responsibility on speakers of English as a second language, in the sense that they must be aware that their misuse of English could have a detrimental effect on the way the English language evolves.

### *Loanwords as an Aid to Speaking English*

A study done by Ando (1997) found that two thirds of the vocabulary lists contained in 75 junior and senior high school English textbooks used in 1996 (texts authorized by the ministry of education, culture, sports, science and technology) comprised of English words that could be found in Japanese LW dictionaries. The sheer number of LWs that Japanese know means that even though LWs can create hindrances to communicating in spoken English, they also cannot be avoided when a Japanese person speaks English. So rather than ignoring them or trying to just mask the inaccuracies of LWs, it is far more effective to teach students these differences in pronunciation and meaning, and use LWs as a learning tool for improving English ability. In addition, making Japanese students more aware of the large number of English words they already know as LWs can act as a significant source of encouragement for students of English, showing them that they have a vast, and for the most part untapped, resource from which to draw upon.

### Attitudes towards Loanwords and how they Affect the Teaching of English

When teachers think about how to use LWs as a teaching tool, it is necessary to take into account the attitudes that Japanese people have towards them. If Japanese have a negative attitude towards LWs, then using them as an aid for teaching spoken English would be difficult, and teachers would need to apply more indirect methods of showing students how to utilize them when they speak English. If however Japanese have a positive attitude towards LWs then these attitudes act as confirmation that LWs should be used as much as possible as a way of helping Japanese speak better English.

### *Attitudes towards Loanwords in Japan*

This current study on the attitudes towards LWs is especially relevant to teaching English as a foreign language in Japan because in recent years there has been more discussion in Japan about the unabated stream of LWs into Japanese. Negative attitudes towards LWs could indicate that there is an overall negative attitude to English, meaning that English teachers must not only teach the language, but also try to facilitate a learning environment that fosters positive attitudes towards English. Loveday (1996) explains this growing sentiment in Japan that the overuse of LWs is tarnishing the Japanese language as follows:

A further attitude that has received little attention is the conception that the current extent of Western borrowings is leading to language “decline” or “infection” and is a sign that the Japanese have lost faith in their own linguistic creativity - and beyond this, their own culture as represented by language. (p.208)

Probably the most dramatic evidence of the opposition to the plethora of LWs that continue to pour into

the Japanese language are the lists of LWs to be avoided, that have been drawn up by The National Institute for Japanese Language. Since April 2003, this government organization has put out four lists of *gairaigo* that they feel need to be simplified or changed. The main reason this organization claims that problems arise with *gairaigo* is that older people have trouble understanding the language of younger generations who excessively use LWs.

#### *Attitudes to Loanwords amongst Japanese University Students*

In order to investigate what attitudes Japanese university students have towards LWs, a questionnaire was administered to a group of 153 first year Japanese university students at Komazawa University in Tokyo, Japan. All the participants were students in the Global Media Studies faculty, and their program involves a considerable amount of English study. The questionnaire consisted of 8 statements relating to LWs, to which the subjects gave a response relative to how much they agreed with the statements. The statements were written in Japanese (for the English translation, see Appendix). Due to the difficulty for Japanese students of distinguishing English LWs from LWs of other origin, the statements did not make specific reference to English LWs but referred to LWs in general. The responses were given using a five-point Likert scale: 1. Strongly disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Neither agree nor disagree, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree.

The students participating in the survey were not told the purposes of the study. After collection of the data, the responses were tabulated to show the total number and percentage of responses that agreed, were neutral or disagreed with the statements (see Table 3). It was expected that the results of the questionnaire would show that Japanese university students have a positive attitude towards LWs and want them to be taught within English classes in junior high and high school.

## Results

The results for statement 1 showed that 60.8% of the respondents thought that there were too many LWs used in Japanese, a figure that suggests that university students did not have a positive attitude towards the amount of LW use in their language. Two of the other results however, seem to contradict the high percentage of agreement for statement 1. The attitudes towards statement 4 were almost evenly distributed between agree, neutral and disagree, meaning that there was no clear indication that students thought the excessive use of LWs necessarily amounts to a threat to Japanese. The other result that was in contrast to the negative attitudes towards LWs shown in statement 1 was the low number of students (13.2%) who thought that LWs need to be regulated by some government body (statement 7). These three results viewed together do not give a clear indication of whether the subjects had a positive or negative attitude towards LWs.

Table 3 *Results of the Questionnaire*

Statement	N=153		
	Agree (total of 4 & 5) Responses (%)	Neutral (3) Responses (%)	Disagree (total of 1 & 2) Responses (%)
1) There are too many LWs in Japanese.	93 (60.8)	37 (24.2)	23 (15.0)
2) I Like to use LWs when I speak Japanese.	43 (28.2)	68 (44.4)	42 (27.4)
3) LWs give new ways of understanding the world.	73 (47.7)	56 (36.6)	24 (15.7)
4) LWs are a threat to Japanese.	48 (31.8)	50 (33.1)	53 (35.1)
5) LWs should be taught in English lessons.	95 (62.9)	32 (21.2)	24 (15.9)
6) I adjust the LWs I use for people over 40.	47 (31.1)	61 (40.4)	43 (28.5)
7) I think LWs should be regulated.	20 (13.2)	47 (30.9)	85 (55.9)
	<b>More than 50%</b> (total of 4 & 5) Responses (%)	<b>50%</b> (3) Responses (%)	<b>Less than 50%</b> (total of 1 & 2) Responses (%)
8) Percentage of media LWs I don't understand.	66 (43.2)	45 (29.4)	42 (27.4)

Note: The questions have been shortened, see Appendix.

For statement 8, 43.2% of the subjects responded that they did not understand more than 50% of the LWs used in media sources such as TV and newspapers. This is a very high figure and could explain why so many respondents thought there were too many LWs in Japanese (statement 1). Perhaps the reason that so many respondents said that there were too many LWs in Japanese was not because they have a negative attitude towards them, but because they didn't understand many of the LWs used by the media.

The statement with the highest level of agreement was statement 5 (Lessons about the meaning and pronunciation of English loanwords should be included in the English courses taught at junior high school and high school). This is a very significant result because it shows that students have a strong desire to receive further tuition in LWs. Making LWs a part of English classes in junior and senior high school would have the dual benefit of improving spoken English ability as well as reducing the number of LWs used in the Japanese media that are beyond the comprehension of many people.

As was mentioned earlier, one of the reasons that the Japanese government is making attempts to control the use of LWs is that it feels LWs create a barrier in understanding between young and older generations of Japanese. The responses to statement 6 indicate that only 31.1% of the respondents make an effort to alter the LWs that they use when they are speaking to older people. This shows that most young Japanese are unaware of the gap in LW understanding that exists between different generations. Loveday (1986) highlights the results of a study by Ishino (1983), which showed that depending on the age of the respondent, for some LWs there was a 63% difference in terms of whether they were considered to be acceptable Japanese. As an example, the Japanese loanword word for "live" (as in live

performance) was seen as Japanese by only 16 of 100 people aged in their 50's while 79 out of 104 university students considered it to be acceptable Japanese (as cited in Loveday, 1986, p. 303). With such a large generation gap in the understanding of LWs, if older Japanese teachers of English are going to provide the attention to LWs in the classroom that this survey shows students want, then these teachers must strengthen their knowledge of the more recent LWs in Japanese.

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. This result is consistent with Morrow's (1987) view that the common consensus among researchers who have done studies on LWs is that Japanese have a very positive attitude towards them because they are considered modern and attractive.

### Loanwords as an Effective Aid in Teaching Spoken English

The results of this study showed that the prevalent opinion amongst university students was that the study of LWs should constitute some part of the English curriculum during junior and senior high school. English teachers (both Japanese and native speakers) must study LWs, understand their semantic disparities when used in English and Japanese, and teach these differences to their students as required. In addition to teaching the differences in meaning of LWs, emphasis must also be placed on teaching pronunciation. This is a view shared by Ando (1997), who advocates the importance of using the LWs that Japanese already know as a teaching aid for improving English proficiency. Seeing as LWs have become such an integrated part of the Japanese language, the situation is such that it would seem to be impossible, with LWs used in Japanese, to alter their pronunciation so that they sound more like real English. What students and teachers of English must aspire to, is developing a more natural pronunciation of LWs when Japanese people use them in an English speaking environment. An example of an educational institution where these teaching ideas have already been implemented is Meiji Gakuin University. One of the key focal points for the English classes within the center for liberal arts at that university is to make students aware of their *katakana* English pronunciation, and then teach more natural sounding English pronunciation.

At present, little, if any specific attention is given to LWs within the junior and senior high school English curriculums. One obvious way that teachers and textbook authors could integrate LWs into English classes is to include lists of LWs in textbooks that are relevant to a grammatical or thematic area of study. So if a chapter of a textbook was focusing on travel for example, a list of LWs related to travel could be written on one part of the page. While all junior high and high school English textbooks in Japan include long lists of vocabulary the words are almost never separated into words that exist or do not exist as LWs in Japanese. Having such separation would at least bring an awareness to the students

that they may already know some of the vocabulary required as part of their English classes, an awareness that would surely enhance their confidence when speaking English. If a text book did not have such a list, teachers could write up a list on the board, practice the pronunciation of these words and explain any semantic differences between the use of the words in Japanese and in English. Incorporating LWs into teaching curriculums like this would increase students' awareness of LWs and help them to utilize the English words that lay dormant in their Japanese lexicon. Kay (1995) outlines the benefits of utilizing LWs as follows: "there is no doubt that a large corpus of English-derived words within one's own language has the potential to aid communication with English speakers" (p. 74). Daulton (1998) concurs that LWs can provide an invaluable resource to Japanese learning English. His study showed that for a group of Japanese junior high school, high school and university students, there was a 69% improvement in their ability to remember the pronunciation of an English word if it was a word used as a base for a Japanese LW, as opposed to an English word that was not used in any way in Japanese. LWs are one area of English education that may be better suited to being taught by a Japanese teachers rather than native English teachers. While sacrifices would be made in terms of their capacity to teach correct pronunciation, Japanese teachers would be able to explain to students in their native language the often subtle differences in semantic nuance that LWs have from their English words of origin.

One other way that LWs can be used when teaching English is to assume that students already have a good enough understanding of English words that are used as a base for LWs in Japanese, and to focus vocabulary instruction on English words that have little or no connection to Japanese. This is a suggested method of English instruction for junior high school students in Daulton (1998), "teachers can assume that basewords are understood and focus all their vocabulary instruction attention on nonbasewords." (p.21)

## Conclusion

The large number of English LWs used in Japanese creates problems for Japanese people when they speak English because the poor pronunciation of these LWs acts as a barrier to understanding. In addition, the meanings of some LWs are considerably different to the English words from which they came, a semantic gap that creates further problems when Japanese speak English. The results of a questionnaire given to a group of university students showed that most of them thought that there were too many LWs used in Japanese, a response which could indicate a negative attitude towards LWs. Another significant result from the questionnaire was that the subjects indicated that there was a large number of LWs they did not understand. This lack of understanding has a negative effect on both their ability to communicate in Japanese and in English.

The overall response to the questionnaire however, revealed that a positive attitude towards LWs was predominant. The most important data extracted from the questionnaire was the clear sentiment that students want LWs to be taught as part of English classes at junior high and high school. These attitudes revealed in the questionnaire act as positive reinforcement that teachers of English should make every effort to use LWs in their lessons, and that the students will positively welcome such teaching methods.

The key to LWs being a valuable resource, rather than a hindrance, when Japanese people speak English is creating an awareness of them, not only when they are employed in Japanese but also when they are used in English. A study done by Tamaoka and Miyaoka (2003) investigating interlexical activation when people are translating lexical items from a first language (L1) to a second language (L2) showed some surprising results relating to LWs written in *katakana*. Their study found that the time required to judge LWs which had a similar pronunciation to their original English was no faster than for LWs with a variation on their original pronunciation. They concluded that:

The fact that there was no effect of phonetic similarity in our study on lexical decision of loanwords suggests that native Japanese speakers were able to process loanwords with little or no activation of lexical representations of the original English words. (p. 78)

While these findings indicate that the LWs that are used in Japanese are probably of little use when learning English, there are several researchers including Kay (1995) and Brown (1995) who believe otherwise. The results of Brown's study showed that Japanese university students had a tendency to use English words that occur as LWs in Japanese when asked to select from a number of words to complete a sentence. This led him to conclude that it is the responsibility of English teachers (particularly Japanese English teachers) to make the most of the latent knowledge of English that Japanese students possess through their exposure to LWs.

Seeing as different *katakana* sounds distort the natural pronunciation of English to different degrees, one area of further research that would be of benefit is investigating which *katakana* sounds create the largest barriers to understanding for the listener. Knowing this information would help English teachers to focus on monitoring and correcting the pronunciation of those LWs that contain *katakana* sounds most detrimental to understandable spoken English.

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## Appendix

### The questionnaire

1. There are too many loanwords used in Japanese today.
2. I like to use loanwords when I speak Japanese.
3. English loanwords give us new ways of viewing and understanding the world, and our ideas.
4. I think the increasing number of loanwords is a threat to the Japanese language.
5. Lessons about the meaning and pronunciation of English loanwords should be included in the English courses taught at junior high school and high school.
6. I adjust my use of loanwords when I speak to people over the age of 40.
7. I think there should be some government regulation on the number and the type of loanwords that are used in the media.
8. What percentage of loanwords used in media such as T.V., magazines and newspapers, advertising or pop songs do you not understand? Answer: 5=100%, 4=75%, 3=50%, 2=25%, 1=0%.

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