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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the extent to which foreign words have become assimilated into the Japanese lexicon during the decade of the 1990s. Since the 1980s, a number of linguists and educators have argued that the rate of loan word absorption into Japanese has increased dramatically. However, most of the studies are speculative or anecdotal. This study presents clear empirical evidence of a marked increase in the penetration of loan words into the Japanese language. This rapid rate of absorption of primarily English loan words has significant ramifications for foreign language learning in Japan. Researchers used the Japanese Proficiency Test, Level 1, for the years 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, and 1998 as the data source. They made the assumption that the test was a conservative estimate of the degree to which foreign loan words have penetrated the Japanese language. Data analysis indicated that rather than moving towards a variety of English, the pattern of loan word absorption in Japan appears to be moving towards an appropriation of English loan words into Japanese, also called the katakanaization of English. Evidence of this can be seen in the rapid increase in the number of loan words on the test. (SM)

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Towards the Katakanaization of English

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Towards the Katakanaization of English in Japan: Implications for Language Learning

Abstract

This paper investigates the issue of the extent to which foreign words have permeated the Japanese lexicon during the decade of the 1990's. Since the 1980's, a number of linguists and educators have argued that the rate of loan word absorption into Japanese has increased dramatically. Unfortunately, most of the studies are speculative or anecdotal in nature. This paper presents clear empirical evidence of a marked increase in the penetration of loan words into the Japanese language. This rapid rate of absorption of primarily English loan words has significant ramifications for foreign language learning in Japan.

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Towards the Katakanization of English in Japan: Implications for Language Learning

Introduction

Historically, the katakana syllabary has had a dualistic and seemingly contradictory influence on loan word borrowing in Japan. Rendering loan words into the katakana writing and phonetic systems marks them as foreign while simultaneously transmogrifying them into Japanese. This phenomenon, variously referred to as katakana-English, Japanese-English, *gairaigo*, or *waseieigo* (literally made-in-Japan English), has in recent years become the topic of a number of studies by linguists and educators (see Motwani, 1991, Honna, 1995, and Loveday, 1996) as well as the subject of a number of articles in the popular press. Even the Japanese government has weighed in, decrying what it sees as a negative trend toward the overuse of katakana-English in official government memos (see Talmadge, 1999). According to Honna (1995), “13% of the lexicon of words Japanese people use in daily conversation are loan words” (p. 45). Loveday (1996) points to a 1964 survey of the popular press conducted by the Japanese National Language Institute that found “ten percent of the Japanese lexicon is made up of non-Chinese and non-Japanese words,” of which over 90 percent are of English origin (p. 48). Honna, unfortunately, does not support his contention with any empirical data, and Loveday’s data is outdated and involves only one textual type, the popular press. It appears that no study yet has been conducted of the extent to which Japanese English words have permeated the Japanese lexicon in the past decade. Have foreign loan words increased markedly during the period? Or does the *gairaigo* phenomenon represent a transient part of popular culture, a fad in language usage? The purpose of this study was two-fold, first, to gauge the extent to which loan words have become assimilated into the Japanese language during the 1990’s, and second to draw some implications based on the data for foreign language learning in Japan.

The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent have the number and frequency of loan words appearing on the reading and vocabulary sections of the Japanese Level 1 Proficiency exam increased or decreased from 1990 to 1998?
2. To what extent have the loan words on 1990's Japanese Level 1 Proficiency exams reflected a shift in loan word type?
3. Based on the data, what implications might be plausibly drawn for foreign language learning in Japan?

Methodology

The source of data used to determine the extent to which foreign loan words have permeated the Japanese language was the Japanese Proficiency Test, Level 1, for the years 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, and 1998 (日本語能力試験, 1級). This source was chosen as a reliable gauge of the assimilation of loan words into Japanese for a number of reasons: first, the test represents the official academic view, as adjudicated by a panel of Japanese linguists and educators, of a level of Japanese mastery equivalent to that required to enter institutes of higher learning in Japan; second, the test was instituted after a rigorous twenty-year piloting period of Japanese language proficiency tests (1970 to 1989); third, the test appears to be more reliable than other non-official sources that could plausibly serve as barometers of loan word usage, such as Japanese-English dictionaries and foreign loan word dictionaries. These privately published sources show significant variance from author to author and publisher to publisher. Motwani (1991) for example lists approximately 4,000 words in his dictionary of loan word usage; by contrast, Sanseido's (1994) Concise Dictionary of Katakana Words includes over 50,000 loan words, approximately the same number of English words as contained in Webster's New World Dictionary (1990).

One may argue that the Japanese Proficiency Test reflects only an official, academic judgment of loan word usage in Japanese, and that the actual number of loan words absorbed into the Japanese lexicon is much larger than the test indicates. The author assumes that the array of loan words on the Japanese Level 1 Proficiency Test is a conservative estimate of the degree to which foreign loan words have penetrated the Japanese language. As support for this assumption, one need only consult weekly magazines, advertisements, novels for young adults, and other text types from Japanese popular culture (see Loveday, 1996).

The following methodology was employed to determine the number and frequency of loan words on the Japanese Proficiency Test. The total number of loan words was counted on all sections of the test, except for the listening component, every two years between 1990 and 1998. Because the total number of Japanese words per page in each section of the test was largely uniform in post 1990 tests, the number of loan words was also represented as a measure of density, that is, the number of loan words per page.

To determine loan word type, the following procedure was followed. Words that have no Kanji equivalent in Japanese were considered *culturally differentiated* words. A common example of this is the katakanized word for computer (コンピュータ). As Kindaichi (1978) points out, unlike Chinese, Japanese has since the Meiji period generally not produced Chinese character (kanji) equivalents for words that have no direct analogue in Japanese. A subset of these culturally differentiated loan words was further identified--words related to information technology or consumer culture. The purpose of delineating this sub-category was to assess the degree to which terms related to the information age and consumer culture have permeated the Japanese lexicon. A second type of word was simply categorized as synonyms. These are words listed in a wide variety of major Japanese dictionaries as synonyms for Japanese words. A common example of this type is the katakanized word for technique (テクニック). Although a nuanced meaning may be indicated, in a broad range of Japanese dictionaries, technique is listed as a synonym for the Japanese word, *gijutsu* 技術 (See, for example, such varied dictionaries as Kodansha, 1986 and Seiko's electronic IC Dictionary TR-9500, 1997).

The following table lists loan words by number and density on the five tests analyzed from 1990 to 1998.

Table 1

Total number and density of katakanized loan words appearing on the Level 1 Japanese Proficiency exam (日本語能力試験) in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 1996, 1998

	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998
number of different loan words	25	26	22	46	43
Density word/per page (21 pages)	1.2	1.23	1.05	2.2	2.05

Tables 2 and 3 offer a comparison of the 1990 and 1998 Proficiency tests based on type of loan word usage.

Table 2. Loan Words on the 1990 Level 1 Japanese Proficiency Test
(平成2年日本語能力試験一級)

1. オートメーション automation	14. ジャーナリスト journalist
2. ブーム boom	15. ローカル local
3. ボタン button	16. マンション luxury apartment
4. カーペット carpet	17. メンバー member
5. ケース case	18. ミス mistake/error
6. コミュニケーション	19. ラジオ radio
7. カーテン curtain	20. レクリエーション recreation
8. ディレクター delicate	21. シートベルト seat belt
9. デパート department store	22. サービス service
10. エレベータ elevator	23. スピード speed
11. ホテル hotel	24. タクシー taxi
12. インフォメーション	25. テレビ television
13. ジャーナリズム journalism	

1. Total number of culturally-differentiated loan words: 15

- A. Consumer-oriented/information technology terms: 2 (boom, automation)
 2. Total number of loan word synonyms for Japanese terms: 10

Table 3: Loan Words on the 1998 Level 1 Japanese Proficiency Test

(平成10年日本語能力試験一級)

1. ビジネス business	23. プレゼント present (gift)
2. コーチ coach	24. プロ professional (pro)
3. コイン coin	25. フロント front desk
4. コンサート concert	26. ライバル rival
5. コンピューター computer	27. ローマ Rome
6. データ data	28. サービス service
7. ダウンストリーム downstream	29. シャツ shirt
8. ガレージ garage	30. サッカー soccer
9. ガス gas	31. スープ soup
10. グラフ graph	32. スタジオ studio
11. アイディア idea	33. システム system (computer)
12. キーワード keyword (computer)	34. セーター sweater
13. ハイパーテキスト hypertext	35. スイッチ switch (electric)
14. インドネシア Indonesia	36. テープレコーダー tape recorder
15. インタフェース interface	37. チーム team
16. メーカー manufacturer	38. テレビ television
17. ニュース news	39. テンポ tempo
18. ノート notebook	40. アップストリーム upstream
19. オリンピック Olympics	41. ユーザ user (computer)
20. パーティー party	42. ベテラン veteran
21. ピアノ piano	43. ビタミン vitamin
22. プレー play	

1. Total number of culturally-differentiated loan words: 20
 A. Consumer-oriented/information technology terms: 11
 1) computer; 2) system; 3) data; 4) manufacturer; 5) keyword; 6) maker (manufacturer); 7) hypertext; 8) interface; 9) user; 10) switch; 11) news
2. Total number of loan word synonyms for Japanese terms: 23

language educators, that foreign language learning in Japan should commence at as early an age as possible, ideally paralleling language training at the pre-school level. This, it might be added, has recently been recognized by the Ministry of Education, which in 2001 will begin piloting mandatory English classes with public elementary school students

For non-Japanese students studying Japanese, the rapid influx of katakanized English loan words requires that they demonstrate command of a growing number of primarily English loan words. That is, they must learn not only Japanese but an increasing number of *katakanized* English words, a necessity that would likely favor learners from English speaking countries *vis a vis* those from non-English speaking cultures.

Finally, one could plausibly infer that the recent growth of this phenomenon has led to an increased lexical generation gap in Japan, with elderly Japanese people finding it cumbersome to keep up the new lingo. This has been supported by a recent survey conducted by the Cultural Affairs Ministry (see Talmadge, April 1999, Japan Times).

Conclusion

The process of katakanizing foreign loan words has a long history in Japan and is consistent with the way in which foreign loan words have been absorbed into Japanese. The primary difference has not been in the *manner* in which the words have been absorbed, but rather in the *rate* of absorption. There is growing textual evidence that an increasingly large number of common lexical items, such as numbers, colors, and kinship terms are entering the Japanese language in *katakanized* form. Rather than moving towards a variety of English, the pattern of loan word absorption in Japan appears to be moving towards an appropriation of English loan words into Japanese, in other words towards the *katakanization* of English. "Official" evidence of this can be seen in the rapid increase in the number of loan words on the Japanese Level 1 Proficiency Test. The author has posited a proposition that this has led to the fossilization of katakanized pronunciation patterns with respect to the acquisition of foreign words. Further studies need to be conducted to either support or detract from this proposition. Particularly helpful would be observation studies of foreign loan word pronunciation patterns with primary school and pre-school learners. This researcher would argue that such studies would likely show that pre-school young Japanese learners are acquiring their English numbers and letters in katakanized form at about the same time they are acquiring their Japanese numbers. They are learning their wan (one), tsuu (two), suree (three), at approximately the same time they are learning ichi, ni, san.

They are learning their A, B, SHEs (Cs) early on in their language development, and their ABC's much later.

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