

Pulling Up the Anchor:

Addressing Loanword Interference in Japanese EFL Learners

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Abstract: This article examines the double-edged sword of the large English loanword lexicon in the Japanese language, in particular the problems it creates for Japanese learners, and possible causes of those problems. It describes one instructor's method of dealing with this issue in the classroom, justification for that method, observations and insights, and student-reported data regarding the project.

Keywords: Loanwords Vocabulary Katakana English Interference

1. Introduction

Compared to most other languages (English being a notable exception), Japanese has an almost overwhelming number of loanwords. A significant portion of those loanwords are Chinese in origin, and date back to ancient times. Beginning in the 16th century, loanwords of European origin began to make their way into the Japanese lexicon. Initially, most of these words were borrowed from Portuguese and Dutch. However, by 1980, half of the estimated 25,000 loanwords in Japanese had arrived after World War II, most of them from English (Kay, 1995).

Frank E. Daulton, an EFL professor in Japan, has done extensive research on English loanwords in Japanese. He notes that over one-third of the most-used words in the English language (known as high-frequency vocabulary) have been adapted into Japanese as loanwords, in one form or another (1998). He points out the positive effect this has on vocabulary acquisition (1999). It would be hard to argue otherwise.

2. Problems Caused by Loanwords

Yet anyone who has walked to work on *No My Car Day* or paid for *free time* at a Japanese karaoke studio knows that this abundance of loanwords has a dark side,

and a deep one at that. The most obvious problem is that in many cases, an English loanword's Japanese meaning does not correspond to the meaning of the original English source word. The meaning that the speaker intends to convey is not the meaning that is received by the listener. This paper will refer to this phenomenon as *loanword interference* (or in the classroom, *Katakana English*). The speaker's knowledge of the L1 loanword is actually counterproductive when transferring it to the L2, due to discrepancies in meaning and usage between the two languages. The degree of the problem can range from a slight innocuous misunderstanding to a complete breakdown in communication. The reasons for the discrepancies depend on the type of loanword used. These types primarily include truncations, portmanteaus (combinations of truncated words), non-English loanwords, and substitutions (deliberate or otherwise) created with made-in-Japan English (*wasei-eigo*).

The problem is compounded by several other factors. One is that the speaker is often blissfully unaware of a concept such as loanword interference. While an average Japanese person is likely to be able to recognize a European loanword (which is nearly always written in katakana), it may not dawn on them that an English loanword may have a different meaning in actual English. Another is that the average Japanese speaker has no convenient yet effective means of knowing whether a loanword is "clean." The sheer number of loanwords is also a factor. It seems that new loanwords are popping up everywhere, now more than ever, courtesy of the internet.

Fossilization is also a serious concern. How many loanwords do Japanese schoolchildren learn before they open their first English textbook? How many times have they strapped on their *landsels* and trudged off to school? By the time they start learning English, how many loanwords, have likely already become firmly entrenched in their English lexica? How many of these loanwords are likely to cause loanword interference? Pronunciation can also be adversely affected (Yoshida, 1978), perhaps even more so than vocabulary acquisition. A prime example of this is the way many Japanese EFL students pronounce the English word *Japan* ([,dʒa'paŋ], rather than [dʒə'pæn]). A frustrating number of learners pronounce the word exactly the same in both Japanese and English, despite the best efforts of their instructors. Consider the uneasiness one feels when required to pronounce one's own name in a foreign accent.

Fossilized pronunciation is a hard habit to break.

3. Project Objectives

The main objective of teaching vocabulary, whether in L1 or L2, would seem to be the effective internalization of accurate, pertinent vocabulary. In an oral communication course, however, the ultimate goal is somewhat larger – to improve communicative proficiency. Communication suffers when loanword interference causes the speaker and listener not to be on the same page. Arming learners with “correct” vocabulary improves not only accuracy, but also confidence. Making the effort to be understood in a foreign language, only to fail for reasons unknown to the speaker, leads to confusion, frustration, and discouragement. On the other hand, success can be satisfying, rewarding, and encouraging.

A secondary objective of treating loanword interference is to raise awareness. Kay (1995) mentions a general awareness that English loanwords may differ from their sources. Addressing the issue in the classroom reminds the Japanese learner that any given loanword can be an accident waiting to happen. In addition to this type of general awareness, simply presenting a word in the classroom may be enough to trigger the learner’s recall the next time s/he considers using that word. While s/he may not recall the correct information, this more specific type of awareness may raise enough of a flag to merit a second thought, if not a quick check in the dictionary.

Likewise, acknowledging loanword interference in the classroom provides an opportunity to work on accent reduction. The first step in reducing an accent is being aware of the accent. Demonstrating the difference in sounds between a loanword and its original English word can be an effective way to improve learners’ perception. Through production exercises incorporating both items, production skills are improved as well. Demonstrating, for example, word-stress rules, or simply words with similar patterns (e.g. *hurry*, *blurry* and *curry*), completes the third P of Dickerson’s (1989) 3 Ps: prediction. This involves learning to predict sounds, stress, vowel quality, etc. without the need to hear them or consult a textbook or dictionary.

4. Procedure

This project is currently in progress in two oral communication classes

(first- and second-year) at Baiko Gakuin University, as well as in two English Communication classes (third-year) at National Fisheries University, both located in Shimonoseki, Japan. On a designated weekday, three students each present a loanword they have researched. Optimally, this works out to 45 words per 15-week semester, though the actual result is lower for various reasons. At the beginning of the semester, a sign-up sheet is distributed. Depending on class size, students are required to sign up for 2-4 slots over the course of the semester. If a student is absent or forgets to do the assignment, their missed slot is added to the following week's schedule. The figure of three words per week was determined to be optimal because it affords students enough opportunities to research and present, takes enough class time for the students to take it seriously, yet does not overload them with too much work or too many words to be responsible for. Daily presentations were not considered because the students are already expected to write daily journal entries in two of their classes. Adding a third daily assignment could easily become counterproductive.

Students have very little difficulty in grasping the concept of loanword interference, or in identifying a *Katakana English* culprit. Only the words *purin* and *garasu* have been rejected for presentation, due to their orthographical and phonetic similarities to *pudding* and *glass*.

No special equipment is needed; a piece of chalk and a blackboard will suffice. However, a computer with a projector or multiple monitors can be useful for a quick image search on the web, in cases where the Japanese meaning of a term is vastly different from the English meaning. For example, for the loanword ホットサンド (*hotto sando*), a stark photo of hot sand can be effective. This also allows for some levity during the presentations. Also useful is familiarity with the most common problematic loanwords. That said, when a student presents a term that the instructor and/or other students are unfamiliar with, an authentic communication gap is created. The students become the teachers, and they have real information to share. Students on both sides learn to look at both the learning process and their own language(s) more objectively. The instructor can use this kind of opportunity to give learners authentic experience with meaning negotiation.

Before the presentations begin, the instructor writes the following headings

on the board:

The Japanese word is:	The incorrect English word is:	The correct English word is:	For example,
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Below that, the students provide their information:

The Japanese word is: ホットサンド	The incorrect English word is: hot sand	The correct English word is: hot sandwich	For example, I like a hot sandwich.
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While the students are writing, the instructor monitors their work closely, consulting students individually about possible errors. The instructor may also suggest alternate terms and variants, for example (in italics),

The Japanese word is: フライドポテト	The incorrect English word is: fried potato	The correct English word is: french fries <i>fries</i> <i>chips</i>	For example, I like french fries.
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Students then present their terms one by one, allowing for instructor's comments, class discussion, and classmates' questions. The image search mentioned above can be performed here. This is also a good opportunity for the instructor to help students anchor the new information to existing information. This may be particularly important, because the new information is essentially pulling up anchor from where it was previously stored. In the above examples, images of hot sand or fish and chips may be effective new anchor points.

When all students have concluded their presentations, the instructor calls for a round of applause, and gives a reminder to the following week's presenters. The instructor may also take a brief survey to check how many students knew the correct English term. This is also an excellent opportunity to work on pronunciation, as noted in the project objectives.

The instructor maintains a running log, which is updated weekly. The incorrect English term is stricken though for purposes of clarity. The instructor may choose to replace a student's sample sentence with a more grammatically or

contextually appropriate one. Students are encouraged to keep their own notes, but the instructor's log is available in the class folder on the university server for access and download, and a hard copy is distributed in class halfway through the semester, and again at the end.

The Japanese word is: ホットサンド	The incorrect English word is: hot sand	The correct English word is: hot sandwich	For example, She ate a hot sandwich for lunch.
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Assessment is done either as a stand-alone quiz, or as part of a midterm or final exam. Test items are production-oriented: students are given only the Japanese word, and must provide the correct English word as well as a contextually appropriate example sentence. Students have tended to perform better on stand-alone quizzes, although the number of trials is still too small for a meaningful discussion of format. Gap-fill exercises may also be effective for assessment.

At any point during the semester, if an as-yet untreated problem loanword arises during a lesson, the instructor should point this out to the students. By the same token, when a previously presented term arises during a lesson, it is an excellent opportunity to reinforce not only that single item, but also to remind students to remain aware of potential problems with loanwords.

The process described above feels more student-centered than traditional methods of teaching and learning vocabulary. Rather than receiving a list of words to memorize, the students themselves are responsible for the content as well as its delivery. This ownership of the process brings them closer to the material. In addition, first-year students in particular gain valuable experience in both taking responsibility for their own learning and in making presentations, skills that will be important throughout their university careers and beyond.

5. Student-reported Data

In a short questionnaire given halfway through the second semester of this project, students were asked to identify the types of sources of the terms they presented. Their responses are noted here.

Question: *Where did you get the words you brought to class? It's OK to check more than one answer.*

Response	Occurrences	%
a web search	23 of 26	88%
a dictionary	7 of 26	27%
memory (I already knew the word)	6 of 26	23%
a website that I know	6 of 26	23%
a classmate/another student	4 of 26	15%
other: books	1 of 26	4%
another teacher	0 of 26	0%
a textbook	0 of 26	0%

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100%, as most students checked more than one answer.

Note: 6 students checked three or more sources. 9 students checked two or more. 11 students checked only one source, 10 of which checked the web search option.

In the same questionnaire, students were asked to assess the usefulness of the project. Their responses and comments are noted here.

Question: *Do you think the Katakana English project is useful? Please check one answer.*

Response	Occurrences	%
very useful	7 of 26	27%
useful	12 of 26	46%
a little useful	7 of 26	27%
not useful	0 of 26	0%

Question: *Do you have any questions, comments, or complaints about the Katakana English project?*

Comments:

No question. It's really nice project.

It's a very good idea to learn it, because even if we know the word, we don't exactly know what it means in English.

I love studying about Katakana English in this class!!

Katakana English is important. It's very good to use correct English words.

We major in English.

Note: There were no questions or complaints.

Note: The above data was collected only at Baiko Gakuin University. Student data was not collected at National Fisheries University, where the project is just underway as of the writing of this article.

6. Conclusion & Observations

An endeavor is ultimately judged in terms of success and failure. When objectives are set, the question is whether these objectives have been met. In the case of this loanword interference project (a.k.a. *Katakana English*), both primary (vocabulary internalization) and secondary (awareness and accent reduction) objectives were set forth. While it is likely too early to determine the success of a project that is less than one year old, there is no question that the endeavor is a worthwhile one. In addition to improving oral proficiency, learners gain experience in presenting to a class, taking a more active role in the learning process, learning to view their own language more objectively, and negotiating meaning in an authentic communicative situation. Taking all of this into account, this attempt to mitigate the effects of loanword interference has been well worth the effort, and well worth continuing, developing and refining.

7. Appendices

A. Word list, sorted by semantic association

Only entries provided by students during actual lessons are included; duplicate entries have been omitted.

(**auto**: automotive, **app**: appearance, **ent**: entertainment, **pers**: personality, **rel**:

relationships, **tech**: technology, **comp**: computers)

Japanese word	Incorrect English term	Correct English term	Type of interference	Semantic association
アクセル	accel	the accelerator/gas pedal	truncation	auto
オープンカー	open car	a convertible	substitution	auto
ガソリンスタンド	gasoline stand	a gas station	substitution	auto
クラクション	klaxon	a horn	substitution	auto
ダンプカー	dump car	a dump truck	substitution	auto
パンク	punk	a flat tire, a puncture	truncation	auto
キーホルダー	keyholder	a keychain, key ring	substitution	auto/home
アイマスク	eye mask	a sleep(ing) mask	substitution	clothing/app
オールバック	all back	slicked back, pulled back	substitution	clothing/app
ジャンパー	jumper	a bomber jacket	substitution	clothing/app
ショートカット	shortcut	a short haircut	truncation	clothing/app
スタイル	style	a (person's) figure	substitution	clothing/app
チャック	chuck	a zipper	substitution	clothing/app
トレーナー	trainer	a sweatshirt	substitution	clothing/app
ノースリーブ	no-sleeve	sleeveless	substitution	clothing/app
ペアルック	pair look	the same clothes/outfit	substitution	clothing/app
ボーダー	border	striped	substitution	clothing/app
メイクする	to make	to put on make-up	substitution	clothing/app
ラフ	rough	casual	substitution	clothing/app
ランニングシャツ	running shirt	a tank top	substitution	clothing/app
ワンピース	one-piece	a dress	substitution	clothing/app
TVゲーム	TV game	a video game	substitution	ent
ゲームソフト	game soft	a (video) game, software	substitution	ent
タレント	talent	a TV personality	substitution	ent
トランプ	trump	(playing) cards	substitution	ent
ピエロ	pierrot	a clown	non-English	ent
ライブ	live	a (live) concert	substitution	ent
ライブハウス	live house	a music club	substitution	ent
エキス	ekisu	some extract	truncation	food
カステラ	castella	a/some sponge cake	widening	food
カレーライス	curry rice	some curry and rice	truncation	food
クリームソーダ	cream soda	a float	substitution	food
シーチキン	sea chicken	some tuna	substitution	food
シュークリーム	shoe cream	a creampuff, cream puff	non-English	food
ソフトクリーム	soft cream	some soft-serve (ice cream)	portmanteau	food
パン	pan	a/some bread/roll/bun	non-English	food
ハンバーグ	hamburg	a hamburg/chopped steak	truncation	food
ピーマン	piman	(a/some) green pepper	non-English	food
フライドポテト	fried potato	french fries, chips	substitution	food
ペットボトル	pet bottle	a plastic bottle	substitution	food
モーニングサービス	morning service	a breakfast special	substitution	food
レントゲン	Roentgen	an X-ray	substitution	health
アパート	apart	an apartment	truncation	home
アルミホイル	alumi foil	some aluminum foil	truncation	home

オーブントースター	oven toaster	a toaster oven	substitution	home
クーラー	cooler	an/the air conditioner	substitution	home
コンセント	concent	an outlet	subst./trunc.	home
フライパン	fry pan	a frying pan	truncation	home
ベビーカー	baby car	a baby buggy/carriage, pram	substitution	home
ミシン	machine	a sewing machine	truncation	home
リニューアルする	to renew	to renovate	substitution	home
リフォームする	to reform	to remodel	substitution	home
リンス	rinse	some conditioner	substitution	home
PR する	PR	to (do) self-promote/promotion	substitution	pers/rel
アベック	avec	a couple	non-English	pers/rel
イメージダウンする	image down	to hurt one's reputation/image	substitution	pers/rel
ヴァージンロードを通る	virgin road	to go/walk down the aisle	substitution	pers/rel
スキンシップ	skinship	some physical contact	substitution	pers/rel
ナイーブ	naive	sensitive	substitution	pers/rel
マイペース	my pace	one's own pace	substitution	pers/rel
マザコン	mother complex	a mama's boy	portmanteau	pers/rel
マニア	mania	a maniac	substitution	pers/rel
マンツーマン	man to man	one-on-one	substitution	pers/rel
オーダーメイド	order-made	custom-made, made to order	substitution	shopping
クレームを言う	claim	(to make) a complaint	substitution	shopping
スーパー	super	a supermarket	truncation	shopping
ノーブランド	no-brand	generic	substitution	shopping
ウォーミングアップする	do warming up	to warm up	substitution	sports
キャッチボールする	do catch ball	to play catch, to have a catch	substitution	sports
ナイトー	nighter	a night game	substitution	sports
ヘディング(する)	heading	a header, to head the ball	substitution	sports
ロスタイム	loss time	some additional time/ injury time/extra time	substitution	sports
ヴァージョンアップする	version up	to update/upgrade	substitution	tech/comp
モーニングコール	morning call	a wake-up call	substitution	travel
OL	OL/office lady	an office worker	substitution	work/school
アルバイト アルバイトする	Arbeit	a part-time job (noun) to work (part-time) (verb)	non-English	work/school
ガードマン	guardman	a security guard	substitution	work/school
カメラマン	cameraman	photographer, cameraman	widening	work/school
カンニングする	cunning	to cheat	substitution	work/school
サイン	sign	an autograph/a signature	substitution	work/school
サラリマン	salaryman	an office worker, businessman	substitution	work/school
シール	seal	a sticker	substitution	work/school
シャープペンシル	sharp pencil	a mechanical pencil	substitution	work/school
ネームカード	name card	a business card	substitution	work/school
ノート	note	a notebook	truncation	work/school
ノルマ	norma	a quota	non-English	work/school
ハードスケジュール	hard schedule	a tight schedule	substitution	work/school
ブックカバー	book cover	a (book) jacket	substitution	work/school
ブラインドタッチ	blind touch	(to) touch-type/typing	substitution	work/school
プリント	print	a handout/printout	truncation	work/school

ボールペン	ball pen	a ball-point pen	truncation	work/school
ホッチキス	Hotchkiss	a stapler	substitution	work/school

Note: The most frequently duplicated words among classes were シール, キーホルダー, アパート, アルバイト and カステラ.

B. Lexicon Breakdowns

By loanword category	Occurrences	%	By semantic topic	Occurrences	%
substitution*	67	73%	workplace/school	18	20%
truncation	14	15%	clothing/appearance	14	15%
non-English word	2	2%	food	13	14%
portmanteau	2	2%	home	12	13%
semantic widening	2	2%	personality/ relationships	10	11%
orthographic coalescence**	0	0%	automotive	7	8%
			entertainment	7	8%
			sports	5	5%
			shopping	4	4%
			travel, health, or technology/computers	1 each	1%

*Note: This category consists of loanwords that have replaced the source word with a semantically-related English or pseudo-English term, also known as *wasei-eigo* (made-in-Japan English).

**Note: This category consists of words that become homonyms when transliterated into Japanese. Learners are often not aware that there are separate source words, thus producing terms like *ice cream corn*. While not a true example of coalescence in the hierarchy of difficulty described by Stockwell et al (1951), the concept is similar. Interestingly, this type of loanword interference has not yet surfaced in lessons, perhaps due to lack of awareness.

8. References

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