

# Implications of Cross-Linguistic Lexical Similarities for Japanese Learners of English

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## Abstract

Despite previous research showing an extensive correlation between English-derived vocabulary in the Japanese language (English gairaigo) and high-frequency English language vocabulary, there still exists resistance by language teachers in Japan to incorporate this vocabulary into ELT methodologies. Much of this resistance is due to negative attitudes towards katakana English (English-derived vocabulary written in the katakana script), fostered by arguments that phonological, orthographical, structural and semantic changes make the words incomparable to their English language equivalents. The present study reports on an empirical investigation into the quantity of katakana English loanwords in Japanese by analysing the katakana English occurrences in one month of Japanese-language newspaper front-page articles. Although the data to be presented reflect findings from only one medium, that of Japanese-language newspapers, the results help to shed light on what has been called a 'sub-lexicon' of 'built-in' English-based loanwords. Implications of this sub-lexicon will be discussed in terms of its potential benefits to Japanese learners of English.

## Introduction

If relationships can be established between the learner's already known language(s) and the target language which they are studying, then awareness of any cross-linguistic similarities which are found can help them to draw upon and modify what they already know in their construction of new knowledge (Daulton,

2008; Nation, 1990; Ringbom, 2007). In many of the world's languages, especially ones which are genetically related, these similarities are easy to identify and exploit. However in other languages that are more distantly connected (and by such processes as trade, travel and globalisation than by any genetic links), the similarities are often obscured by variances in scripts, phonology, semantics and syntax. An important area of investigation then becomes to establish whether significant similarities do in fact exist between the known languages and the one being studied.

This article reports on an investigation into an inventory study of the quantity of English loanwords found in one month of Japanese language newspaper front-page articles. The overarching question to be investigated was to what extent English loanwords exist as a sub-lexicon of the Japanese language. The importance of this research lay in the desire to establish lexical cross-linguistic similarities between the Japanese and English languages which could be of benefit to Japanese learners of English. In order to conceptualise any lexical similarities as beneficial to these learners, it would need to be shown that there is a large quantity of lexical items to draw upon in the learners L1 which display similarities to equivalent items in the target L2. This study reports exclusively on the quantity of items found in the inventory analysis, with the future direction of the research being to analyse the words first for formal/structural similarity onto which can be mapped semantic similarities. Such research could help in the construction of an instrument used to measure the extent of formal and semantic similarity between in English loanwords in Japanese and their English language equivalents. This could be of use not only to learners but also educators and materials developers

working in the Japanese context (Barrs, 2011).

## **Background**

Although Japanese and English are not genetically related, linguistic analysis reveals that the area of lexis exhibits strong similarity relationships in the form of an English sub-lexicon existing in the Japanese vocabulary (Daulton, 2008). At one level of analysis, that which primarily focuses on English words in Japan appearing in an alphabetic form, this vocabulary appears to be little more than symbolic representations of English words, used in Japan for their atmospheric effect and connotations of modernity and ‘coolness’ rather than linguistic meaning (see Dougill, 2008 and Hyde, 2004 for discussions of this symbolism). Such uses of English are more decorative than denotative, and are not generally considered to be integrated into the Japanese language as a sub-lexicon. However the Japanese language also codifies English loanwords through the use of the katakana script, making the words into potentially fully functioning syntactic elements of the Japanese linguistic system. Such a codification of English loanwords is seen in Japanese language newspapers where words written in kanji, hiragana and katakana (and to a much lesser extent, the English alphabet) are mixed together to form sentences (Oshima, 2004).

By researching a specific domain of English loanword usage in Japan, those occurring in Japanese newspapers, it was hoped that the findings could not only contribute to those made in other domains such as Japanese television (Ishikawa & Rubrecht, 2008), magazines (Kuang, 2009), advertising texts (Takashi, 1990), and high-frequency words of English (Daulton, 2008), but also to furthering the

findings already made of English loanwords in Japanese newspapers (Oshima, 2004).

## **Methodology**

The data was to be collected from one month of newspaper front-page articles in The Asahi Shinbun (The Asahi Newspaper). This national newspaper was chosen due to its high circulation rate throughout Japan, meaning that the loanwords found in the articles were not intended for a specific geographical sub-population of Japan. It has also previously been used in English loanword research (Oshima, 2004). Only the front-page articles were chosen primarily due to the methodological considerations detailed below, but also because the front-page articles tend to be less subject-specialised and therefore encourage the use of loanwords that are more indicative of those in common daily usage (and therefore more likely to correspond to high-frequency words of English). The reason for the data sample being one month of articles was due to methodological considerations, and also the findings from a previous pilot project of one week of articles which indicated that a month of articles would produce a data sample large enough for analysis. The fact that the month chosen was January 2012 was for reasons of convenience.

The data collection involved conducting an inventory, by hand, of every instance of katakana found on the front page articles (except in the advertising sections, because of the different nature of these sections from the main articles). 31 days of front pages were collected and analysed with each having an average of 5 news articles, resulting in about 155 articles being examined in total. In each separate

news article, the boxed opinion piece near the bottom of the page, and the side bar containing a guide to the newspaper's content, every lexical katakana type was highlighted in one colour with subsequent tokens highlighted in another, and then all instances were entered into an Excel file in list form by newspaper date. The items were then categorised by language. It is important to note at this stage that any occurrence of English appearing in katakana, no matter what the extent of formal adaptation (e.g. truncations such as ビル from *building*), was included; the items were being analysed for their quantity rather than the quality of the cross-linguistic similarities, which is a planned later stage of the research.

## **Discussion**

The findings from the inventory study are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 shows the category breakdown of different types of katakana tokens found. The total number of tokens across all categories was 1280, with 791 of these being related to the English language. The combined percentage of words coming from languages other than English and Japanese was minimal at 2.64%. The presence of 43 words of Japanese origin is primarily explained by the use of katakana for emphasis of native words, just as is done through the use of italics and bolding in the English language. 1% of the words were categorised as 'other' because of a difficulty, even after consultation with a native Japanese speaker, in assigning the word to one specific category. Proper nouns were categorised separately because of (1) the difficulty in relating them to a specific language of origin, and (2) the fact that they are different from other loanwords in that their use is because of necessity rather than lexical choice.

It is clear from this table that the most frequent use of the katakana script was for English loanwords. They represent 61.8% of the total, a figure which rises considerably if English language-related proper nouns are also included. Across an average of 155 articles over 31 days, 791 words relating to the English language were used in the newspaper; resulting in an average of 5 English-related loanwords per article. This statistic alone suggests that English loanwords are a frequently occurring part of the Japanese language, and the fact that 791 words were used across the month of articles, over 99% appearing with no translation, suggests that English loanwords are indeed part of a built-in sub-lexicon of English vocabulary in the Japanese language.

	CATEGORY	TOKEN COUNT	PERCENTAGE	EXAMPLES
1	ENGLISH	791	61.8%	メーカー (maker)
2	PROPER NOUNS	399	31.2%	ロンドン (London)
3	JAPANESE	43	3.4%	エビ (Ebi)
4	GERMAN	28	2.2%	テーマ (teema)
5	FRENCH	3	0.2%	コント (konto)
6	PORTUGUESE	1	0.08%	キリスト (kirisuto)
7	SANSCRIT	1	0.08%	サティアン (sateian)
8	SPANISH	1	0.08%	プラチナ (purachina)
9	OTHER	13	1%	アメ (ame)
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1280</b>	<b>100%</b>	

Table 1. Categorisation of every Katakana Token found in the Newspaper Sample

Table 2 shows a lexical category breakdown of the English tokens, revealing that almost 94% were nouns. This is common in lexical borrowing (Hock & Joseph, 1996, p. 245), where words from one language are often borrowed over into

another language to fill lexical gaps for new items, especially those related to modern technological innovations (p.246). The fact that the vast majority of the borrowing found in this newspaper sample was that of nouns is mirrored in similar studies carried out by Daulton (2008); Ishikawa & Rubrecht (2008); Oshima (2004) and Stanlaw (2004). This suggests that the sub-lexicon of English words in Japanese acts primarily as a resource of nouns, potentially available as an in-built ‘word bank’ to learners of English.

	CATEGORY	TOKEN COUNT	PERCENTAGE	EXAMPLES
1	NOUN	742	93.8%	フェンス (fence)
2	ADJECTIVE	34	4.6%	リベラル (liberal)
3	VERB	10	1.3%	プレー(する) (play)
4	PHRASE	5	0.6%	ネバーギブアップ (never give up)
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>791</b>	<b>100%</b>	

Table 2. Lexical Category Breakdown of the Katakana English Loanwords

When the katakana English tokens were examined further it was found that 291 types occurred in the 791 tokens. This means that almost 300 English-related distinct words were used across the one month of news articles and considering that the primary language of the newspapers was Japanese, the fact that the articles contained such a high number of katakana English items again suggests that there is a distinct English-related sub-lexicon of the Japanese language.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

This article reports on the quantity of katakana English items in a limited sample

of only one English medium in Japan. If we combine these findings with those of previous studies, such as in magazines, in the linguistic landscape, on TV programmes and in government reports to name only several other domains of English usage in Japan, then it is clear to see that there is extensive evidence of an English-related sub-lexicon of the Japanese language.

The natural next stage of analysis should involve an examination of the cross-linguistic similarities displayed between the loanwords and their English-language equivalents. This is because the katakana English words can exist in Japanese in various forms of adaptation from their originals, some formally and semantically close to the English language equivalents (e.g. ピアノ /*piano*), and some distant (e.g. デフレーション /*deflation*). If the words when absorbed into Japanese have undergone such extensive adaptations that render them almost incomparable to lexical items in English then these may not be useful to the learner (Ringbom, 2007, p. 6). However, if the extent of lexical similarity can be measured and the majority of word pairs can be shown to display a high degree of similarity, then we could conceptualise this sub-lexicon as pedagogically useful to learners of English in Japan (Ringbom, 2007, p. 77).

Such a conceptualisation would have major implications for English education in Japan (Barrs, 2011). Students could be motivated by having their attention drawn to the fact that they already have a working knowledge of many of the most frequent words of English. They could better plan and carry-out their vocabulary learning if resources were available which highlighted the cross-linguistic lexical similarities; possibly having materials such as frequency lists of English words



annotated with Japanese loanword equivalents and the extent of the similarities and differences involved with each item pair. And they could possibly benefit from engaging with the vocabulary that appears in the Japanese social context, in newspapers, magazines, on TV and on product packaging, by questioning the accuracy of the words used in relation to the target language norms (see Barrs, 2012 for a practical activity suggestion).

Not only this but also the sub-lexicon could be exploited by teachers who are working in the Japanese EFL teaching context, helping students to become more aware of words that have direct similarities and ones which have important differences. Materials writers could better craft learning resources for students, knowing that many high frequency English words are to a certain extent known by Japanese learners (see Barrs, 2011 for a specific discussion of this). English language tests, such as the vocabulary levels tests made by Paul nation, could also benefit from a background understanding of which words will already be known to Japanese learners.

In sum, having a sub-lexicon of English words available as a linguistic resource to Japanese learners of English could be a valuable tool for learners, educators and materials writers. As such, further analysis needs to be made of the findings in this article to investigate issues of whether the cross-linguistic lexical similarities found in the loanwords and any English language equivalents can be conceptualised as advantageous and facilitative rather than deviant and disruptive. Such research into similarities between loanwords in the students' L1 and lexical items in the target L2 form an essential part of contextually and methodologically-appropriate

English language education in Japan.

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