

## **Distortwords and Some Problems of Studying INGURISHU by the Japanese**

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### **Abstract**

The Japanese have borrowed words, mainly from English, extensively. Clearly English has diffused into almost all aspects of Japanese society from ordinary conversation to governmental documents. In the process of borrowing, however, some distortion occurs, especially in terms of pronunciation, which causes great difficulties in learning natural, 'non-distorted' English. In this paper "how and why do English distortwords get borrowed in the Japanese language?" is discussed and some suggestions are made to improve this situation.

日本人は英語を中心に幅広く言葉を外国から借用してきた。日本社会において英語は日常会話から政府の文書に至るまでほとんどすべての分野に浸透していることは論を俟たない。ただその借用の過程で特に発音の面での歪曲が生じそれが自然な英語の習得に大きな障害となっている。この小論においては歪曲された英語が如何にそして何故日本語に取り入れられたかを論じながらこの状況を改善するための提案をいくつか試みようとした。

### **Introduction**

According to Steven Pinker, language change is a game of Chinese Whispers (Pinker : 1999). In any case, language changes. Why? There are probably many reasons, but, in Japanese, which has borrowed words extensively, one important factor of language change is typically called loanwords, most of which are from English. Over the past five decades, the number of loanwords has grown geometrically from near zero to over 30,000. Clearly English has diffused into almost all aspects of Japanese society, from ordinary conversation to governmental documents (Honna & Heffer, 1999). To call these words loanwords is to note where they come from, but, in terms of Japanese, they are more accurately called borrowed words. To highlight the point of this paper, in order to highlight the words in their relationship between the two languages, I am calling them distortwords, since the Japanese use is actually a distort

tion of the English.

Ironically, the more distortwords the Japanese borrow from English, the poorer their ability to speak and hear English becomes, in spite of the fact that the Japanese people have invested huge amount of time and effort to learn English. It is true that the distortwords help in understanding the meaning of words which come from English, but it is also true that distortwords defeat the ability to speak or hear that word as used in verbal English. Why? My assumption is that the use of katakana, a written symbol in Japanese language, for every distortwords is the cause. In short, the use of katakana facilitates the use of distortwords in Japanese, but at the same time reinforces the Japanese speaker of English in Japanizing the pronunciation of English, promoting unintelligibility, both in listening and in trying to speak English.

The actual symbols or writing of katakana are not important to this project, but the fact they cluster around typical Japanese vowel sounds and typical Japanese syllabization is of most importance. There are only five vowel sounds in Japanese and these I am representing as A, I, U, E, and O. The actual sound of these vowels is only important for the learning of Japanese, but here it is only important to say each sound has a katakana symbol. Then there are other clusters of katakana which unite these Japanese vowel sounds with consonants, making Japanese syllables : KA, KI, KU, KE, KO, MA, MI, MU, ME, MO, etc. Altogether there are fifty-one katakana, the number necessary to distort English (or any other language) into what I am calling Japanese distortwords.

In this paper, answering the following questions are mainly concerned : How and why do English distortwords get borrowed in the Japanese language? What happens to them after they get borrowed? How do distortwords make it difficult for Japanese people to speak and hear English?

And some suggestions to improve the situation are proposed as a conclusion.

### How and why do English distortwords get borrowed in the Japanese language?

The first step of Japan's modernization was the arrival of Commodore Perry from the United States in 1853. It marked the end of Japan's two and a half century isolation and the resumption of overseas trade. The second step is the post World War II military occupation by the Allied Forces (actually the United States) headed by General MacArthur. These two steps are the

basis of the development of huge Japanese distortwords from English. Japan's educational systems were completely revised by the United States twice. Until around the end of the nineteenth century even English and American textbooks were widely used in science and engineering courses from middle school onwards in Japan. After the World War II, English became a key subject in junior and senior high school, which means every Japanese are supposed to start learning English at the age of thirteen and most of them keep learning it until the age of eighteen. As described in the abstract, English has diffused into almost all aspects of Japanese society.

Better than anything else, statistics tell the true story. A couple of them are as follows :

English is a required subject for entrance examinations into almost all of the Japanese colleges and universities. Japan has more than six hundred colleges and universities. This mean that nearly everybody who want to get higher education must study English, although reading or specifically translation ability as well as grammatical knowledge is mainly tested.

The diffusion of English has developed a variety of testing industries, including English conversational schools and proficiency certification organizations. There is no exaggeration in saying that any medium-sized city with the population of about 300,000 people in it, has as many as ten English conversational schools, each of which has at least a couple of hundreds students, ranging in age from three years old to seventy years old. In addition to that, many of the "foreigners" living in the city give private lessons to the people who learn English. I say "foreigner" because many of them are not qualified as English teachers : people from abroad who can speak English, preferably people with blue eyes and gold hair, are welcomed at most of English conversational schools. I know some teachers who are from Brazil who don't even have a bachelor's degree. And the STEP (Society for Testing English Proficiency) attracts more than three million examinees in the three times-a-year series of tests.

Jobs requiring English proficiency are regarded highly. For example, flight attendants are among the highest paid and highest competitive jobs for females because of the ability to speak English.

It may be concluded that English comes into the Japanese language quite naturally as a result of so much contact. Originally written Japanese was borrowed from written Chinese. Because the two grammars are so different, the Japanese had to develop what are known as hiragana in

order to grammatize the Chinese kanji or characters. One use of katakana is the modernization of written Japanese.

### What happens to distortwords after they get borrowed?

Japanese have no such questions as : how can we tell if something is a distortwords or not (which is discussed in Campbell, 1998) because all the distortwords are written in katakana, one of the two Japanese syllabaries, a process that turns the foreign words into Japanese. They are pronounced with a flat rhythm, with no accent, exactly like Japanese, which causes some of the problems Japanese people have when needing to escape that flat rhythm and lack of accent when trying to speak or hear English.

### How do distortwords make it difficult for Japanese people to speak and hear English?

The pronunciation and comprehension of English is made more difficult because of using katakana in the writing of English distortwords. The use of katakana reinforces the tendency to make spoken English sound like Japanese. For example, HA MU E GU seems to be an English expression to a Japanese speaker, and calling it a loanword would strengthen the impression, but it is unintelligible in English, even written in Roman letters. Ham and eggs, which, spoken with proper stress, would be “ham`n eggs.” Pronouncing the “and” fully only blunts the meaning of “ham AND eggs,” which means something slightly different, more emphatically BOTH of them. Pronunciationwise “HA MU” is not “ham,” and “E GU” is not “eggs.” For one thing, two English syllables have become four Japanese syllables, and two English vowels have become four Japanese vowels. The total number of vowel sounds is six, because none of the four Japanese vowels are equivalent to the two actual English vowels. Additionally, the consonant “s” is dropped, because Japanese has a different way of dealing with what is singular or plural, simply by counting things out, for example, what would be equivalent to one egg, two egg, three eggs, etc. instead of one egg, two eggs, etc.

As far as the pronunciation is concerned, the word A ME RI KA (which is America, obviously) is another example of a Japanese distortword from English. This word typifies two problems which reinforce unintelligibility. First, most Japanese pronounce it A ME RI KA with a flat accent, putting exactly the same stress on each syllable. No Japanese pronounce it

“a ME ri ka” with proper stress on the second syllable. Second, the Japanese pronounce the R sound as Americans pronounce the L with the tongue touching the upper palate. One of the most often cited example concerning the L and R sounds is : The Japanese eat lice (not rice).

Problems with English distortwords concern Japanese vowels and their use in making syllables. Each katakana syllable ends in a vowel and the English “club” becomes three katakana syllables, “KU,” “RA,” and “BU.” As noted above, the “lu” sound internal to “club” becomes “RA” in the Japanese distortword, distorting both the vowel AND the consonant. These are some more examples : one syllable “strike” becomes five syllable “SU TO RA I KU,” one syllable “strip” becomes four syllable “SU TO RI PU,” and one syllable “stress” becomes four syllable “SU TO RE SU.”

If the first and last vowels in KU RA BU, and the first, second and fourth vowels in the above examples are left off, as it would be in English, the sounds are much closer to English, though the single vowels that would be left, one in each of the four words, all these vowels would still be incorrect in sound. “Shifting” KU RA BU to K RA B makes the words more understandable, because to the English listener there is only one problematic vowel instead of three. The intrinsic problem is that Japanese has only five vowel sounds and English has many more vowels, which means there are fair chances for the Japanese speaker of English to mispronounce English even if the Japanese could start writing the English distortwords without using katakana. With the simple use of Romaji or Roman script, without using katakana, some of the impediments that Japanese people face in learning to speak and understand English would come clearer into their awareness.

Concerning distortwords, another problem the Japanese have is compressing or shortening. For example, the words DE PA A TO (department store) or WA A PU RO (word processor), or SU TO (strike, as in a union strike). One of the most popular misleading distortword, which foreigners living in Japan have a hard time figuring out is HA MU SAN DO, on a restaurant menu. If it is written in Roman script it is Ham Sand, meaning ham sandwich. These examples, along with many other distortwords, are often typified by compression. The compression may serve the borrowing of English in Japanese, but it serves also to defeat the learning of spoken or heard English, which is the dream of so many Japanese.

In the natural learning of language, i. e., child language acquisition, humans first learn to

listen, then to speak, next to read, and then to write : these are actually overlapping stages. This is the natural progression of language skill gaining. In learning a foreign language in an academic atmosphere, the distortion of this natural progression is to learn first by translation, to memorize words and sentences, to practice distortions which later may become insurmountable. Even in our own native languages, we may have great difficulty with dialects. An American friend of mine living in Japan once explained something to me this way : he said he could understand and be understood in Japanese only when communicating with native speakers. He even explained some Japanese dialect which was peculiar and unintelligible to me. The locals said, MA ME DE SU KA? To me, in my dialect of Japanese, this would mean, “Would you like some beans?” To this local it meant, “How are you?” This same American who “translated” for me also told me that though his Japanese skills could bridge some dialect hearing, he could not communicate at all, in Japanese, with other foreigners, even Americans.

#### Some suggestions to improve this situation

In Japan, it would be hard and pointless to stop the influx of words from abroad, since the Japanese are such heavy borrowers. Before its contact with the West, Japan borrowed a lot from China. Now it borrows extensively from the technologically advanced West, especially America. It may be possible that we Japanese can improve our ability in English by using what might be described as true loanwords, rather than distortwords. using them not only for their meaning, but also more in their native state.

For this I would suggest three ideas. First, no katakana transcription should be used for loanwords. Katakana is a detriment in the learning of a non-Japanese language. though according to an American friend of mine, katakana, ironically, is useful for an American wishing to learn how to pronounce Japanese. Second, loanwords are to be used in the native form, with the exception of perhaps using the IPA, International Phonetic Alphabet, attaching its use to all loanwords. This might be too cumbersome, except for language study textbooks, so perhaps, at least, a simple accent sign might be accompanied with English words. Third, no compression or shortening for loanwords should be allowed.

## Conclusion

How important might these changes be to Japanese wishing to hear and speak English? An American friend of mine, who is a prison guard, told me about American prisons and something called Pig Latin. Pig Latin apparently is a childish game, taking the first consonant and putting it at the end of the word and ending the word in “ay,” for example Igpay Atinlay, for Pig Latin. My friend told me the American convicts used Pig Latin to speak in front of guards and were so good at it that the guards couldn't easily understand what was being said. In conclusion, I would emphasize that distortwords spoken by the rules of katakana are far less intelligible to native speakers of English than any Pig Latin could ever be.

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