

# BORROWING WORDS

## USING LOANWORDS TO TEACH ABOUT JAPAN

By Linda Menton

**L**oanwords—words adopted from other languages—are an important feature of the Japanese language. Indeed, Japanese probably has more loanwords than any other major language. This is not a new phenomenon. Loanwords have been an important part of the Japanese language for centuries. In ancient times, most loanwords came from China and Korea. Then, beginning in the sixteenth century, as Japan began to interact with merchants and missionaries from the West, loanwords from European languages began to enter the Japanese language. Today, most loanwords assimilated into Japanese, about 80 percent of them, come from English.<sup>1</sup>

Loanwords can be used to help students learn about various aspects of Japanese history and culture. The Western loanwords listed below, for example, a very small sample of the many words Japan has borrowed from the West, can be used as a kind of mini-review of Japan's interactions with various Western countries beginning with the Portuguese in 1543.

However, there is a danger in using this approach. Because there are so many of them—a 1991 Japanese dictionary lists 33,500 foreign words and there are undoubtedly many more—loanwords are sometimes cited as an example of how much Japan has been influenced by other countries, especially by the West. But this influence should not be overestimated. Students need to understand that when Western words or phrases are assimilated into the Japanese language, they are not accepted intact. Instead, there are changes in the ways such words are written, spelled, and pronounced. Furthermore, in some instances, even the meaning of foreign words change when they are “borrowed” into Japanese.<sup>2</sup>

Japan has three main writing systems: the first system, *kanji*, was borrowed from the Chinese. Kanji, which are symbols of meaning, and sometimes of pronunciation, are called characters in the West. Loanwords that came from the Chinese, called *kango*, are written in kanji.<sup>3</sup> The Japanese also use two other forms of writing, called *kana*, which evolved out of simplified versions of Chinese characters. Each kana system contains forty-six characters; each character represents one of the syllables that exist in the Japanese language. *Hiragana* is used to express native Japanese phonemes or sounds. *Katakana* is used principally to express the phonemes or sounds of foreign words and Japanese words derived from foreign languages.<sup>4</sup> Loanwords, therefore, particularly European and American loanwords, which the Japanese call *gairaigo*, literally “language that came from the outside,” are written in katakana.<sup>5</sup> The loanwords reproduced here are written in what the Japanese call *rōmaji*, a method of writing Japanese words in the Roman alphabet that was developed in the nineteenth century.

### Western Loanwords in Historical Perspective

Early loanwords assimilated into Japanese were borrowed mainly from China and Korea. Beginning in the 1500s, however, as Japan began to trade with countries from the West, it began to borrow words from European languages. The loanwords listed below reflect Japan's historical interactions with Western countries beginning with the Portuguese in 1543. Some of the words listed here, such as *pan*, the Japanese word for bread, are still in use today, while others have become obsolete. In some cases the word is still used but the meaning has changed. As might be expected, many early loanwords were the names of objects.<sup>6</sup>

If students are given copies of the loanwords printed here, suggest that they place a hand over the third column to hide it from view. If they pronounce the original word and its Japanese counterpart carefully, in most instances they will be able to translate the word into English.

#### PORTUGUESE LOANWORDS

The Portuguese traded with Japan from about 1543 until they were expelled in 1639. Of the 4,000 Portuguese loanwords that were once used in Japan, only about 100 exist today. These words are so entrenched in the language that they have become Japanese words, rather than loanwords. A few Portuguese loanwords related to Christianity have survived; many disappeared after Portuguese Catholic missionaries were expelled from Japan in 1614. In some cases, the meaning of an original Portuguese word is not clear. Some scholars, for example, say that *tempêro* (*tempura*) may originally have meant a meatless meal eaten in Catholic countries on Friday; others contend it meant seasoning; still others say the meatless meal meaning came from an entirely different Portuguese word, *tempora*.<sup>7</sup> In any case, the word *tempura* is so commonly used in Japan (and now in the United States) that it is no longer considered a loanword in either country.

PORTUGUESE	JAPANESE	ENGLISH
botão	botan	button
carta	karuta	playing cards
pão	pan	bread
tempêro	tempura	tempura, deep fried fish or vegetables
tobaco	tabako	tobacco

#### SPANISH LOANWORDS

Spanish traders came to Japan in 1592 from the Philippines. In 1624 the Tokugawa shogunate expelled the Spanish, partly because it suspected that Spanish missionaries were plotting with Japanese Christians to overthrow the Japanese government. Very few Spanish loanwords have survived.

SPANISH	JAPANESE	ENGLISH
flamenco	furamenko	flamenco
guerilla	gerira	guerilla
jabon	shabon	soap
tango	tango	tango

#### DUTCH LOANWORDS

Dutch traders arrived in Japan around 1600; trade agreements between the Dutch and the Japanese were formalized in 1609. After 1639, when Japan “closed” itself to foreign trade, the Dutch were the only European traders who were allowed to stay in Japan—on the small artificial island of Dejima (or Deshima) in Nagasaki harbor. The assimilation of Dutch words into Japanese

undoubtedly increased in the eighteenth century when the Japanese government allowed its citizens to learn Dutch. This language facility also allowed Japanese scholars access to Western scientific knowledge, which the Japanese called *rangaku* or Dutch learning.

DUTCH	JAPANESE	ENGLISH
bier	biiru	beer
glas	garasu	glass (pane)
hoos	hōsu	hose
koffie	kōhī	coffee
kok	kokku	cook
kop	koppu	cup
siroop	shiroppu	syrup

Many medical terms used during the Tokugawa period from 1600 to 1868 came from Dutch, and some are still used today. Others were replaced during the Meiji era (1868–1912) with German loanwords when “Dutch learning” in anatomy and physiology was supplanted by German medical expertise. The medical words below were originally borrowed from the Dutch.

alkohol	arukōru	alcohol
cholera	korera	cholera
kamfer	kanfuru	camphor
mes	mesu	scalpel
tinctuur	chinki	tincture

#### FRENCH LOANWORDS

French was studied as a language during the Meiji era, when French culture and art became very influential in Japan. Many French loanwords deal with food, fashion, and the arts.

FRENCH	JAPANESE	ENGLISH
à la carte	a-ra-karuto	ala carte
ballet	baree	ballet
beret	berē	beret
bifteck	bifuteki	beefsteak
chanson	shanson	song
dessert	dezāto	dessert
eau de cologne	ōdekaron	eau de cologne
rouge	rūju	rouge

#### ITALIAN LOANWORDS

A few Italian words made their way into Japanese at the end of the nineteenth century during the Meiji era. Most were musical terms, although there were others.

ITALIAN	JAPANESE	ENGLISH
Fascio	Fasho/Fashizumu	Fascism
gondola	gondora	gondola
opera	opera	opera
maccheroni	makaroni	macaroni
pizza	piza	pizza

#### RUSSIAN LOANWORDS

Although a few Russians came to Japan as technical advisors during the Meiji era, the Russian language was studied in Japan much earlier, in the late seventeenth hundreds. A few borrowed words have survived, but most of them are rarely used.

RUSSIAN	JAPANESE	ENGLISH
troika	toroika	troika
tundra	tsundora	tundra
vodka	uokka	vodka

#### GERMAN LOANWORDS

Beginning in the 1870s many German technical advisors worked in Meiji Japan in medicine, law, and education. Prussians, who were from the most powerful German state and were recognized for their military expertise, were used to train the Japanese army. German influence is also apparent in loanwords dealing with philosophy, sports, and medicine.

GERMAN	JAPANESE	ENGLISH
Aspirin	asupirin	aspirin
Demagogie	dema	false rumor/demagoguery
Eisbahn	aisubān	skating rink/frozen road
Gaze	gāze	gauze
Hämoglobin	hemogurobin	hemoglobin
Hormon	horumon	hormone
Ideologie	ideorogī	ideology
Puls	purusu	pulse
Röntgen	rentogen	x-ray
Stock	sutokku	ski pole; now stock or inventory
Thema	tēma	theme or subject matter

#### ENGLISH LOANWORDS IN THE PAST

Although the English traded with Japan from 1613 to 1623, no loanwords from this period appear to have survived. English loanwords began to be assimilated into Japanese during the Meiji period, when elements of Western culture were introduced to Japan. More Western loanwords were introduced during the Taisho era (1912–25), especially in the 1920s, when now-obsolete words like *mobo* (modern boy) and *moga* (modern girl) entered the language. Beginning in the 1930s and throughout the war years (1937–45) the Japanese government officially banned the adoption of loanwords. As might be expected, however, this situation changed during the American occupation, and loanwords proliferated. American influence was reflected in loanwords like *jī-ai* (GI, a member of the armed forces), *em-pī* (MP, military police), *pāji* (purge), a reference to the American removal of Japanese leaders who represented militarism and ultranationalism from public life, and *chiiku-dansu* or cheek-dance, a word invented to express the startling sight of Americans dancing cheek-to-cheek.<sup>8</sup>

#### ENGLISH LOAN WORDS NOW

Linguists estimate that approximately 5,000 English words had been assimilated into Japanese before World War II. Today, thanks to the mass media, there are thousands of English loanwords in Japanese. Technological change has also meant an increase in loanwords like *fakkusu* (fax) and *konpyūta* (computer). In some instances, especially in the case of objects, the meaning of a loanword is fairly obvious. The loanword for a Western-type door is *doa*. A *sāfā* is a surfer, an *eakon* is an air conditioner, and a *kohīkappu* is a coffee cup.

However, many other English loanwords have taken on very different meanings, even though their meaning might seem obvious when such words are pronounced. A *manshon*, for example, is not really a mansion, but a high-class apartment house or an apartment or condo in such a building. A *mishin* is indeed a machine, but refers specifically to a sewing machine. And when someone says a friend is *sumāto* the speaker is saying the friend is stylish, slim, or elegant, not smart in terms of brains or making good grades.

Some English loan contributions taken into Japanese are fun and fanciful. For example, pokeberu, literally pocket bell, is a beeper. *Romansu-gurē* or romance gray is the term used for older men with a touch of gray in their hair.<sup>9</sup> A *wan-man-kā*, which linguists call a pseudo-loanword, since there is no such thing as a one-man-car (or bus) in English, means a bus without a conductor. Until the 1960s Japanese buses had conductors who collected ticket money and announced stops. When all these duties were taken over by the driver, the words *wan-man-kā* and *wan-man basu* were invented.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, not every English word that is borrowed into Japanese has staying power. Some words are simply fads that come and go much as slang expressions do in English. It seems unlikely that trendy young people in Tokyo today are buying *hottopantsu* (hot-pants) or going to the *kinema* (cinema).<sup>11</sup>

## IT WORKS BOTH WAYS

### Japanese Loanwords in English

Because the Japanese seem to be so open to both learning English and to assimilating loanwords into their language, we sometimes forget that many Japanese loanwords have found their way into English. Recent studies indicate that there are about 700 Japanese loanwords in English. Japanese is the second most common source of loanwords in English, although it lags far behind the first source of such words, French. Most Japanese words that are borrowed into English are nouns; many deal with foods or the martial arts.<sup>12</sup>

Japanese loanwords that have been borrowed into English can be found in standardized dictionaries. Some, like kimono and origami, have become so well-known that they are really not loanwords anymore. Others are so assimilated that few people realize they were ever loanwords at all. Kudzu, for example, the English word for the climbing vine that bedevils much of the American south, first came into English in 1876 from the Japanese word *kuzu*. The English word *honcho*, which is used as a noun to describe someone in charge of something (Joe is the head honcho on that project) or as a verb (Joe will honcho this project through) comes from the Japanese words *han*, meaning group, and *chō*, meaning chief.<sup>13</sup> Tsunami, the Japanese word for tidal wave, is an interesting example of an old loanword—it actually was first borrowed into English in the nineteenth century—that is now commonly used on weather reports on national television. Consequently, a word that many Americans might have difficulty pronouncing, since there are virtually no words in English that begin with “ts,” has been accepted into the language with an approximation of its proper pronunciation: *sü nä mē*.

### SUMMARY

Japan’s willingness to borrow from other cultures and simultaneously maintain its cultural identity has long been a subject of both popular and scholarly inquiry. Loanwords are an interesting example of Japan’s ability to maintain both cultural flexibility and cultural integrity. They reflect Japan’s history over a period of time, and indicate what the Japanese people were or are interested in at a given moment in time. They can be used to put Japan in the larger context of world events, and to help students learn about cultural interactions, and the cultural understanding and misunderstanding such interactions create. They provide students with an opportunity to learn about Japan via its most fundamental manifestation, its language.

Students who want to learn more about English loanwords in Japanese and Japanese loanwords in English will find the following sources useful:

*A Dictionary of Japanese Loanwords* by Toshie M. Evans (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997).

*English Loanwords in Japanese: A Selection* by Akira Miura (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1979).

*A Guide to Modern Japanese Loanwords* by James H. M. Webb (Tokyo: The Japan Times, 1994).

“Japanese-Style English For Business and Pleasure,” by Glenn Sullivan, in *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993), Vol. 1, pp. 898–9.

“Loanwords,” by Kawamoto Takashi, in *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983), Vol. 5, pp. 61–2.

*The Random Dictionary: A Glossary of Foreign Words in Today’s Spoken Japanese* by Toru Matsumoto (Tokyo: The Japan Times, 1974).

*The Tuttle Dictionary of Loanwords in Japanese: A User’s Guide to Gairaigo* by Taeko Kamiya (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1994).

*The Oxford Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases* edited by Jennifer Speakes (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

### NOTES

1. Takako Tomoda, “The Impact of Loan-Words on Modern Japanese,” *Japan Forum* 11 (1999), p. 232.
2. Kay Gillian, “English Loanwords in Japanese,” *World Englishes* 14 (1995) p. 67 and pp. 68–72.
3. Tomoda, p. 232.
4. Eileen Tamura, “Japanese Writing Systems,” in *The Rise of Modern Japan*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, Curriculum Research & Development Group. Forthcoming). See also Yuki Sato, “Japanese English (For Beautiful Human Life),” *Look Japan* 41 (September 1995) p. 30.
5. See Tomoda, p. 232. *Katakana* are also often used for emphasis and onomatopoeia.
6. See especially Whaja Park, *Western Loan-Words in Japanese* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, Department of Oriental Languages, 1987), pp. 1–28; and Taeko Kamiya, *Tuttle New Dictionary of Loanwords in Japanese* (Rutland, Vermont, Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1994.) Students consulting dictionaries and other sources of loanwords may find slight differences in spelling between sources or in the spellings given here. In some instances they may not be able to find a specific loanword in a recent dictionary, an indication that the word may be obsolete. All of the loanwords listed here, with the exception of *purusu* (pulse) can be found in *Kenkyusha’s New Japanese-English Dictionary* (Fourth Edition, 1979).
7. For information on the origin of tempura, see Park, p. 8. See also Jennifer Speake, editor, *The Oxford Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 426.
8. For the origins of GI and MP, see Park, p. 34. For information on purge and cheek dance, see Akira Miura, *English Loanwords in Japanese: A Selection* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles T. Tuttle Company, 1979), p. 115 and p. 38.
9. Sato, pp. 30–1.
10. Miura, p. 169.
11. Tomoda, p. 238.
12. Toshie M. Evans, *A Dictionary of Japanese Loanwords* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. ix; and Garland Cannon, “Recent Japanese Borrowings into English,” *American Speech*, 69 (1994), p. 374.
13. Evans, pp. 94 and 56.

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