Gairaigo – Remodelling Language to Fit Japanese

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ABSTRACT
This paper in English first examines the history of the inclusion of gairaigo words in Japanese and then explores the changes in meaning, phonology, and morphology which occur in these words because of the structure of the Japanese language. The main thesis of the paper is that gairaigo are used to increase prestige, add color, or make distinctions in Japanese that are not possible with kanji. The idiomatic nature of these words means that they change constantly and disappear as each new age adopts other new words. As such, gairaigo vocabulary cease belonging to the language from which they were borrowed and cannot be considered pidgin-like mistakes. Extensive examples of various categories of gairaigo are provided.

The incorporation of English words into the Japanese language has been called the “bastardization” of English. Japanese people have been heard to say that they were ashamed that they could not use the English word correctly in Japanese. There are also published works that claim that the Japanese language is being ruined by the inclusion of too many foreign words. The purpose of this paper will be to show the role of foreign loan words in Japanese: how usage and pronunciation have changed and are changing, and what purpose such words play in the language. Such loan words are called GAIRAIGO in Japanese - literally, coming-from-abroad words.

From the view of the native speaker of English, the use of a word from English in a different context, with a different nuance, or with a radically different pronunciation than the speaker is used to, can be a threat to the cultural identity of the speaker. However, when one considers that English has borrowed and is borrowing thousands of words from other languages, the Japanese process of borrowing can only be commended.

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Words are borrowed from another language in order to fulfill a need: to name something new that has no name in the language, to express something with a different nuance than is possible with the original term, or to enhance the status of the speaker by use of the borrowed word. The use of borrowed words does not imply a deficiency in the phonological system or in the syntax of the language that does the borrowing, so we can expect that the words borrowed from a language with a different phonology and syntax will be changed to fit the requirements of the language. And, indeed, this is what happens in Japanese.

Japanese has three methods for notation of the written language: 1) kanji, or Chinese ideograms, 2) hiragana, symbols that can represent each sound in the language, and 3) katakana, a set of symbols that corresponds to hiragana and is used to denote words that are emphasized, or, mainly, to denote words that have been borrowed from a language that does not use ideograms. Kanji can be called the basis of the language since ideograms are used to represent most ideas and words. In fact, kanji and much of the vocabulary used in Japanese were borrowed from China in the eighth and ninth centuries. These could be called the original loan words. However, this paper will not deal with this massive borrowing from Chinese.

Hiragana is used mostly to denote the endings of verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and honorifics, particles, and conjunctions. It is the carrier of the grammar of the language. As mentioned before, katakana is used for words that cannot be represented by kanji. Hiragana is seldom used to write out the language, except in children’s books or other places where the reader or writer might not know the correct reading of the kanji for a word.

Since the oral use of the language usually precedes the written, we may assume that for many Japanese speakers, the three different forms of notation do not affect the way that the words are conceptualized or spoken. However, since the katakana notation for most of the words borrowed from European languages appears different to the eye from the kanji and hiragana, it is easy to see why English speakers and well-educated Japanese with a background in English might consider the use of loan words to be a bastardization of English.

In order to make this paper easier to read, the terms ‘gairaigo’, ‘kanji’, ‘hiragana’, and ‘katakana’ will not be underlined since they are used so frequently throughout the paper. Also, when not notated, the gairaigo word will have been derived from English. The gairaigo words to be explained are presented in capitals.

In the interest of making the pronunciation of the gairaigo words more accessible to the non-Japanese speaking, English reader, a long ‘e’ sound has been rendered as ‘EL’ and a long ‘o’ sound has been rendered as ‘OU’ instead of the more conventional method of using the same letter twice, i.e., EE and OO, since such notation would cause the English-only, phonologically
unaware reader to pronounce the words in a very different manner than a Japanese speaker would.

Today there are thousands of gairaigo in Japanese, so many that it is very difficult to categorize them. It is helpful to review the history of gairaigo. Ignoring the first massive borrowing from Chinese, the first gairaigo were from Portuguese. The Portuguese arrived in Japan in 1549 and stayed until 1638. It was a time when the world was being explored by the Portuguese, Spanish, English, and the Dutch. Columbus had discovered the Americas (for the Europeans, at least) and with this discovery, had discovered many foods which were native to the Americas: squash, tomatoes, many kinds of beans, corn, and so on. These foods were introduced all over the world by the Portuguese and the Dutch. Among some that made their way to Japan were potatoes, corn, and squash. However, the Japanese were not aware of the American source of these foods and named them according to the direction from which the sailors had come. Potatoes became JAGAIMO – ‘Jakarta roots’, corn became TOMOROKOSHI, the TO meaning China, so ‘Chinese corn’, and squash became KABOCHIA. ‘Southern squash’, or ‘Cambodia squash’, depending on the source. The Portuguese also introduced a kind of cake reputedly originating from the Castile region of Spain, and so which was called KASUTERA, and a kind of deep-fried fish, TEMPURA, from ‘tempurado’, which has become a representative Japanese dish. The Portuguese also introduced an item – which was to contribute to the bad health of the Japanese people and to the coffers of the present-day government – tobacco, or TABAKO.

Along with foods, new methods of weaving and making cloth were introduced. Since there were no expressions for these, the names were borrowed from Portuguese or Dutch.

SARASA Port. ‘saraca’, Indian cotton
RASHA Port. ‘raxa’, thick wool cloth
KANAKIN Port. ‘canequim’, Dutch ‘canequine’, (Hindu ‘khandaki’), muslin
MERIYASU Span. ‘medias’ (horizontal line), knitted, stretchable cloth such as that used in socks and underwear.

As can be seen, the majority of the words were used for items, which became indispensable to the daily life of Japanese. Generally, kanji fitting the sounds, though not the meanings, were used to represent these words.

The Portuguese were banned from Japan in 1638, but the Dutch were allowed to stay in a restricted area off of Nagasaki. So gairaigo in the first half of the Edo Era tended to be from Portuguese, and in the latter half, Dutch. In 1808, a British ship approached the coast of Japan and startled the authorities. Although Dutch studies had been carried out by private individuals, at this time the government started to encourage the study of foreign languages, in particular, Dutch. Most of the scholars concentrated on scientific works, so many words for scientific items were introduced.
into the language, but these were not as widely used as the earlier gairaigo.

In 1853 Perry forced Japan to open its borders to foreign countries. In 1855 the government established a school for the study of Dutch and English. In 1860 the emphasis switched from Dutch to English. At the beginning of the Meiji Era (1867) many Dutch words continued to enter Japanese as not only the external boundaries, but also the internal boundaries, became more open. As Japan opened its borders, students were sent to Western countries to learn about Western technology. These students began mixing words from European languages written in katakana into the letters that they sent back to Japan.

In 1859 Hepburn came to Japan and wrote a dictionary for Japanese and English. His wife opened an English school that was one of the forerunners of Tokyo University. By 1887 all classes were taught in English. Many of Japan’s famous politicians and authors attended this and similar schools. Obviously, they contributed greatly to the dissemination of English words into Japanese. In general, the words they used were a katakana version of English.

The change from foreign language words to true gairaigo took place over time and occurred more slowly than political change. In 1889, in a Japanese dictionary, there were 85 Dutch origin gairaigo and 72 English origin gairaigo listed. By the middle of the Taisho Era (1911-1924), 51% of gairaigo listed in dictionaries were of English origin, and today, 80% to 90% of gairaigo are of English origin. A simple count of the index tags on the Yahoo Japan Internet home page showed that 33 out of 75 tags were gairaigo, all from English.

The process of creating gairaigo was fairly simple through the early days of the Meiji Era. After that, the sheer volume of words coming into the language makes it very difficult to trace the process by which words entered Japanese and changed. Three examples of change will be offered.

The word SOPPU entered the Japanese in the late Tokugawa and early Meiji Eras. It came from the Dutch 'sop' or 'Soep', and was used by Fukuzawa Yukichi in his writings. The word SUUPU, coming from the English 'soup', was first used in 1858. SUUPU and SOPPU were used interchangeably. Gradually SOPPU came to mean a broth cooked for sick people, while SUUPU meant the broth served with Western-style meals. SOPPU eventually disappeared except in the sumo world where it is still used in SOPPUNI or Soppudaki to refer to the nourishing stew which sumo wrestlers eat. This example shows how the English-based word gained ascendancy over the Dutch-based word. The change can be attributed to political and social changes.

While words connected with food and clothing were readily borrowed in the Tokugawa and the Meiji Eras, words connected with dwellings entered Japanese much more slowly. Except for a certain segment of the population connected with the diplomatic services, most Japanese continued to live in traditional dwellings until after World War II. In fact, many of the gairaigo connected with
dwellings had to do with building materials instead of with the structures themselves.

**TOTAN**  Port. ‘tutanaga’, tin sheeting
**BURIKI**  Dutch ‘blik’, tin sheeting
**GARASU**  Dutch ‘glas’, glass for window panes

Today two-thirds of the vocabulary connected with dwellings are gairaigo.

The first apartment house in Japan was built in Ueno in 1910. It resembled an American apartment house and was called *seivonagaya*. Western-style long house. *Nagaya* refers to Japanese dwellings that are connected like a duplex and are rented out. In 1923 a Western-style apartment house was built in Tokyo. Furnished rooms and cleaning and laundry service were included in the rent. The apartment houses built at this time were mostly Western-style. The English word, ‘tenement house’ was not brought into Japan. Instead, the word *kyojutaku*, cooperative residence, was created. The most common term, though, was APAATOMENTO, which was soon shortened to APAATO.

At the end of World War II, there was a great need for housing, so cheap, small Japanese-style apartment houses sprang up all over the bombed-out cities. These were called APAATO. Obviously, the image of apartment houses was tarnished and a more prestigious word was needed for apartment dwellings. The word MANSION, from the English and American custom of giving large, luxurious apartment buildings names such as “Oak Mansions”, was borrowed to denote apartments, which included a bath.

Other terms were created from the proliferation of apartment dwellers in the cities. One was APAATOBYO, apartment sickness, used to refer to people who could not get used to the close, but impersonal, arrangements of apartment life. Another term was GETABAKIAPAATO, an apartment entered with one’s *geta* on. This term was used for small apartments built over stores or offices for use by the storeowners or workers. While it is highly unlikely that the residents actually wore their *geta* into the apartments, the term meant a lack of separation between the dwelling and the workplace.

Since the introduction of MANSION, there has been a proliferation of terms for apartment houses borrowed from foreign languages in an attempt to find a prestigious name for the building:

**HAITSU**  Eng. ‘heights’, from military housing areas built after the war on bluffs
**HAITAUN**  High town
**HAIMU**  Ger. ‘heim’, house

The name of an apartment building often contains a reference to nature or to sunlight, perhaps to compensate for the lack of both.

**GURIIN HAITSU**  ‘Green Heights’
ZONEHAIMU Ger. ‘Sonne + Heim’ Sun House
CASA BLANCA Span., white house

The trend has been to create more prestigious terms to label apartment buildings. There is a
great attempt to distinguish between apartments according to quality and size. However, builders of
new apartment buildings quickly preempt the newest term for even small apartments.
LEOPARESU (Leo Palace) refers to apartments that have only one room, not exactly palatial
dwellings.

This points to the reason that kanji cannot be used for names. Kanji is limited in the number of
nuances that a character can acquire. One word that is used in the official literature to describe
apartment houses is kosojutaku, high rise dwellings. There do not exist several kanji that can be
used to state the same idea, hence the limit to the connotations that this term can take on. Words
that do not depend on ideograms are not so limited in nuance. Also, they can be borrowed freely; a
new word can be borrowed when the term no longer suffices, perhaps because it is being used by
too many people and is no longer prestigious. For example, the author has not seen a new
apartment building with the term HAITSU as part of the name for several years.

One final note on apartments: the use of a word can lose its derogatory connotations as the
living conditions of people change. In the suburbs of Tokyo, the use of the word APAATO no longer
has connotations of a cheap room, though it still means small. So many people have graduated to
MANSHON that APAATO just means one kind of apartment that may include a bath, a step on the
way to life in a MANSHON. Many owners of new apartment buildings name the building with their
own family name and the word BIRU, short for building.

A rather modern-day change in gairaigo has occurred because of the situation in the job
market. The word ARUBAITO was taken from the German ‘Nebenarbeit’, part-time work. This
was shortened to ARUBAITO, or more recently, usually just BAITO, to refer mainly to part-time
jobs for college students to earn pocket money. Recently, many housewives take part-time jobs to
help with the family finances; these positions are usually referred to as PAATO, short for part-time.
The word PAATO was taken from the English ‘part-time work.’ However, it does not necessarily
refer to a job of less than forty hours a week, but usually means a job where the worker, often
female, is not hired under contract and is paid by the hour. Since this type of job is usually low
paying, the turnover in workers is great. Consequently, employers are reluctant to use PAATO
workers for responsible positions, and women who are looking for more prestigious part-time jobs
are reluctant to take such positions. However, the need for skilled part-time or temporary (as
opposed to full-time or permanent) positions is felt by both employers and potential employees, so
the term SUTAFFU has been borrowed to enhance the prestige of the job. SUTAFFU is from the
English ‘staff’, and is often used in the singular. The problem of the increase in the number of FURIITAA, young people who drift from one part-time job to another without establishing any kind of career, has been addressed in the newspapers. FURIITAA was created from “free” and “ter”, used as a suffix meaning worker.

Again, we can see a limit to the ways in which kanji can be used. One word used, rinjishokuin, ‘temporary worker’, refers to a worker hired for a short time to fill a position. This does not cover workers who are not hired under contract but who may work several years for the same firm.

Without going into the historical background, some gairaigo whose meanings have changed from the original will now be listed.

KANNINGU Eng. ‘cunning’, tricky, usually used as a verb, KANNINGU-suru, to cheat on test

KANNINGU-PEIPAA, cunning paper, a crib sheet

KYATCHI-suru from ‘to catch’, used in joхо o KYATCHI suru, to get or obtain information, probably based on the Japanese tsukamu, tsukamaeru, to get or to obtain or to catch.

GEBARUTO Ger. ‘Gewalt’, (power, rights). This was used in the student movements in the late 1960’s to indicate student power. Several terms have been created from this word. GEBEbo o furimawasu – to wield a stave; to threaten with an iron bar, often done to as well as by student radicals. GEBARERUGI – Ger. ‘Gewalt’ + ‘Allergie’, an adverse reaction to the student movement and to student violence by the general public. GEBAru – verb, to participate in a violent student movement. Present-day college students do not understand these terms.

SABOTAAJU a slowdown strike, from French ‘sabotage’, which comes from French workers who used their wooden shoes, ‘sabot’, to kick machinery while on strike, and was first used in Japan in 1919. But the verb SABORu means to cut school or to miss work.

TORANPU playing cards, from the trump card in a card game.

HAIKARA fashionable. This word comes from the Meiji Era when high collars were the Western fashion. The high collar influence can still be seen on the uniforms of Japanese schoolboys.

FEMINISUTO from ‘feminist’, a man who is kind to and thoughtful of women (Now both the English version and the Japanese version of the word are almost unknown!)

BUROMAIDO from ‘bromide paper’. It refers to the still shots of stars from movies, which in the past were made from bromide paper.

BENIYAita from ‘veneer’. This word means plywood, for which veneer was one kind of finish.

MEIKAA from ‘maker’, it means a well-known manufacturer.

RUNPEN from Ger. ‘Lumpen’, old rags, worn-out clothes; means a beggar, a tramp. Recently this term has been almost completely replaced by HOUMURESU, from the English ‘homeless’.

MERIYASU stretchable, knitted fabric, from Span. ‘medias’. In the Edo Era MERIYASU also used
to refer to a song sung in the intermission of a play that could be lengthened or shortened to fit the time required to change the set, in other words, a stretchable song. Recently, this term is seldom used and has been replaced by NITTO, from ‘knit’.

As can be seen by these examples, the borrowed word tends to enter Japanese with a rather narrow meaning, which is then applied to and adapted to Japanese circumstances. As a result, the meaning may veer sharply from the original foreign meaning. Some words, such as BUROMAIDO or HAIKARA, are frozen in usage in Japanese, while they are no longer used in the original language.

The next group of words are called waseigaikokugo, foreign words created in Japan. This includes 1) words where the grammatical order or the syntax has been changed, 2) the formation of words that don’t exist in the foreign language from which the parts of the word come, and 3) words that are a combination of two languages.

RASHAMEN the Japanese mistress of a foreigner who came to Japan when the country was first opened. This comes from Port. ‘raxa’, a word that meant wool from sheep + men. Since foreigners slept with a dog beside the bed, it was thought that they had sexual intercourse with animals such as dogs and sheep, so the word for wool from sheep was applied as a derogatory term to Japanese mistresses.

ENJINKII from ‘engine’ + ‘key’, a car key.
ENSUTO from ‘engine’ + ‘stop’, a stalled car engine
GAARUHANTO from ‘girl’ + ‘hunt’, picking up a girl
OORUBAKKU from ‘all’ + ‘back’, a hairstyle where the hair is combed straight back from a man’s forehead
KAFUSUBOTAN from Eng. ‘cuffs’ and Port. ‘botao’, cufflinks
GOORUINsuru from ‘goal’ + ‘in’, to reach the goal, often used when a couple gets married
GORO a grounder in baseball, probably shortened to GORO because of the resemblance to gorogoro, onomatopoeia for the sound of something rolling along the ground
KONSENTO from ‘concentric, a wall socket, probably from the concentric course of the electricity
SHAAPU-PEN from ‘sharp’ + ‘pencil’, a mechanical pencil. This type of pencil was sold by the Eversharp Company in the U.S. in the 1880’s. The Japanese name probably came from there.
CHAKKU from ‘Chack’, a Japanese brand name for a zipper. Chakku means the length of the fabric in Japanese, so the term was probably used to refer to the length of the garment being fastened.
TOREPAN from ‘training’ + ‘pants’, sweat pants.
NAITAA from ‘night’ + ‘er’, a night game in baseball. This is always given as an example of a
mistake from the English, but actually it is a rather reasonable combination in English
compared to some of the other words such as GOORUIN_suru.
HEN JAPA from hen + ‘Japanese’, a weird Japanese person. Hen means strange or unusual in
Japanese. This term was used at colleges such as ICU or Sophia in the 1970’s to refer to
Japanese students who had lived abroad for a long time. These students spoke Japanese, but
with different cultural nuances than the Japanese who had grown up in Japan.
NISU from Dutch ‘vernis’, varnish. This entered the language in the Meiji Era as WANISU since
the V sound was not pronounceable in Japanese. Because wa means Japanese, WANISU came
to mean Japanese-style varnish while YONISU was created to mean Western-style varnish
since YO refers to the West. Eventually, both forms were shortened to NISU.
MAIKAAzoku from ‘my’ + ‘car’ + zoku (tribe), people who own cars. This term is now
becoming obsolete since most of the country owns a car!
MAIPEISU from ‘my’ + ‘pace’, at one’s own pace
MAIHOOMUsuggi from ‘my’ + ‘home’ + suggi (principle), a home- and family-centered lifestyle,
as opposed to a work-oriented lifestyle. MAI has been borrowed as a word meaning private or
personal.
A great many of these waseigaikokugo are a combination of two nouns, a syntactical
construction that is very common in Japanese because of the linkage of two kanji to form one word.
The parts of the word seem to enter Japanese separately and then to be combined, rather than
entering the language as a compound word. In the process, the meaning and the grammatical form
of the part may change, allowing for combinations that would be impossible in the original language.
An example is MAI, from ‘my’, which has taken on the function of a noun rather than the pronoun
that it is in English. Also, the sound of the word seems to influence the way that the word is
adopted into Japanese.
Before delving into phonological changes in gairaigo, we shall take a look at some syntactical
changes.
APPU from ‘up’, used as a verb with suru or as part of a noun ‘to increase’, as opposed to the
use of ‘up’ as an adverb in English
a) IMEIJI-APPU an improvement in the image of a person or a place
b) GAKURYOKU-APPU_suru to increase one’s scholastic knowledge for the purpose of getting
better grades, or passing an examination
c) BEISU-APPU an increase in the base salary
OOBAA na iikata a noun meaning an exaggerated manner of speaking, from Eng. ‘over’, to pass a
limit
ABEKUKU  a noun used in the 1960’s and 1970’s meaning a couple, two lovers, from the French
preposition ‘avec’. with
SAIN  a noun meaning autograph, from the English verb ‘sign’
   a) SAINsuru  to sign an autograph. (To make the original English verb back into a verb in
Japanese, it is necessary to add suru for ‘to do’.)
   b) SAIN-BUKKU  an autograph album
   c) SAIN-BOURU  an autographed ball

Probably the final ‘n’ sound in this word makes it sound like a noun since many Japanese nouns
end in an ‘n’ sound.
DABuru  to do something redundantly, from ‘double’, an adjective in English. Obviously, the final
sound, when translated into Japanese as ru makes this word sound like a verb since many Japanese
verbs end in ru. We have already seen two examples of words where ru was added to a shortened
form of a word to form a verb: GEBAruru and SABORuru.

In the examples already given, it can be seen that Japanese has no consonant blends so that it is
necessary to render ‘bra’ as BURA, ‘cro’ as KURO, and so on. Historically, the process for making
these changes has itself changed. Some gairaigo can be dated by their pronunciation as to when
they entered Japanese. In the Tokugawa to early Meiji Eras consonant lends were rendered
according to the vowel that followed the second letter.
GARASU  Dutch ‘glas’, window glass
KIRISUTO  Port. ‘Christo’
KOROKKE  French ‘croquette’
TARAPPU  Dutch ‘trap’ the gangplank of a ship

If these words were adopted today they would become GURASU, KURISUTO, KUROKKE, and
TORAPPU. A final ‘k’ sound was rendered as KI, while today it would be KU as in BUKKU
(book).
INKI  Dutch ‘ink’, now the pronunciation is changing to INKU
KEIKI ‘cake’
DEKKI  the deck of a ship or a stereo system. This pronunciation does not seem to be changing.
SUTEEKI ‘steak’

An interesting change in pronunciation is in words that have the same pronunciation but
different meanings in the original languages.
1) GARASU  Dutch ‘glas’, window glass
   GURASU  English ‘glass’, a drinking utensil
2) AIRON  ‘iron’, a flat iron for ironing clothes;
AIAN ‘iron’, a golfing iron

3) KARUTA a form of playing cards
KARUTE a doctor’s chart
KARUTO as in ‘a la carte’

All of these are from the Portuguese ‘carta’

Several factors seem to be at work in the change in the pronunciation of gairaigo. One factor is the dropping of sounds that have no relation to Japanese morphology: plural ‘s’, adjectival ‘ed’, and the ‘-ing’ used for noun gerunds, and others.

**Dropped ‘s’**

SANGURASU sunglasses
OFURIMITTO off limits
ORIMPIKKU the Olympics
SURIPPA slippers
TAIMU-APPU Time’s up.
MANAA manners

**Dropped ‘ed’**

KONDENSUMIRUKU condensed milk
KOONBIIFU corned beef
MASSHUPOTETO mashed potatoes

**Dropped ‘ing’**

SUKEITORINKU skating rink
SUPERU spelling
FURAIPAN frying pan
BIRU building

In Japanese verbs are often formed from nouns, while in English the reverse is true. Consequently, the English morphological endings (‘-ism’, ‘-tion’, ‘-ment’), which are added to verbs to create nouns, are dropped when the word is adopted. The preceding syllable is often dropped, too.

ACHIIIBU achievement test
APAATO apartment
INFURE inflation
ENGEIIJI-RINGU engagement ring
KONBI combination
KONBIINI convenience store

ANAUNSU announcement
IRASUTO illustration
EAKON air conditioner
KONE connection
KONPE competition
Words seem to be reduced to the fewest number of syllables necessary for comprehension. This often means that part of a compound is dropped. One reason for this is that the Japanese pronunciation of gairaigo becomes very long because of the lack of consonant blends and final consonant sounds (except for ‘n’).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEPAATO</th>
<th>department store</th>
<th>TEREBI</th>
<th>television</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MANERI</td>
<td>mannerism</td>
<td>RIIHABIRI</td>
<td>rehabilitation</td>
</tr>
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INTAA  interchange  INTERI  intelligentsia  
KATSU  cutlet  SUUPAA  supermarket 
SUTANDOPUREI  grandstand play  ZENESUTO  general strike 
SUFU  staple fiber  ZEMI  Ger. ‘Seminar’ 
SENCHI  centimeter  DAIYA  diamond  
NEGA  negative  NOOTO  notebook  
PAAMA  permanent wave  PATOKAA  patrol car  
PANKU  puncture, flat tire  PURAMODERU  plastic model  
HOUMU  platform  MISHIN  sewing machine  
YUUKARI  eucalyptus tree  RIMOKON  remote control  
NETTO  Internet  PASOKON  personal computer  

Of course, the dropping of sounds means that it is very difficult to recognize related words as such. However, as stated earlier, words tend to be borrowed with a narrow meaning attached which is then expanded to fit Japanese circumstances, so that whether or not words were related in the original language is of little concern to the Japanese speaker. Two examples of this follow.

Y-SHATSU: a man’s dress shirt. This comes from ‘white shirt’, which was shortened, to WAISHATSU. Since the WAI sounds like the Roman letter ‘Y’, the notation was changed. These days Y-SHATSU refers to any color of dress shirt. SHATSU refers to an undershirt.

OBIIRU ‘o’ is a polite term used in front of certain nouns. It is used extensively by middle-aged and older women. In Japanese, sake is preceded by an ‘o’ in these women’s speech; this usage has been extended to beer but not to milk or other non-alcoholic beverages.

A mention should be made of the source of gairaigo. Most Japanese study English for a minimum of six years in school. Students are taught English grammar in Japanese and memorize great quantities of English vocabulary. It is necessary to know a minimum of 8,000 English words in order to pass the entrance examination for Tokyo University. This dependency on dictionaries can be traced back to the Dutch schools in Osaka and Tokyo in the Tokugawa Era where the students had to rely on dictionaries to translate books. In fact, some of the English words incorporated into Japanese in the Meiji Era took on a strong Dutch flavor because the Dutch scholars had switched to
being English scholars.

English education has depended on reading so that the pronunciation of some gairaigo was influenced by the way the word looked to the Japanese reader rather than by the original pronunciation.

ARUKAIKKU-SUMAIRU archaic smile
ANMONIA ammonia
GUROBU 'glove', rhymes with 'stove'
KOKOA cocoa

The long years of English education are also the source of the claims that gairaigo is incorrect instead of being the result of a natural process of adaptation. Certainly it can be a sign of being well educated and thus a sign of prestige if the speaker can claim to know the ‘correct’ form of gairaigo. Evidence of the natural evolution of words, in this case gairaigo, is that small children, older people, and people in the country show no hesitation in using gairaigo to an English speaker, usually because they are unaware of the origin of the word – it’s part of Japanese for them.

Of course, the turning of a word into gairaigo can cause confusion for both Japanese and non-Japanese language users alike.

MEIRU e-mail

This word is interesting because it has metamorphized into a word that does mean something else, though something similar, in English: ‘mail’. English teachers have commented on using ‘mail’ in sentences such as “I got some mail from my mother. She sent me a package,” and having the students miscomprehend this because, obviously, packages can’t travel over the Internet.

HURIIZusu (pronounced with a long è sound), ‘freeze’, as in “My computer froze and I lost most of my academic paper.” The author and other non-Japanese speakers have translated this, without thinking, to, “Pasokon ga kootte, rombun ga hotondo naku natta,” and received uncomprehending looks from Japanese speakers for whom ‘HURIIZusu’ only applies to the computer, while ‘kooru’ only applies to objects that freeze.

There have been some attempts to convert gairaigo to kanji-based words. When the country was opened, kanji whose sound approximated the sound of the names of foreign countries were chosen.

仏蘭西 FURANSU France
亜米利加 AMERIKA America
英吉利 IGIRISU England
欧羅巴 YOOROPPA Europe

In present-day Japan, the first character (or in the case of America, the second character) is
used in print to mean that country in order to save space. The pronunciation version is the same as the katakana version would be.

Technological terms, which entered the language as gairaigo, were converted to kanji in the Meiji Era. This still occurs to some extent and is rather easily accomplished because such terms are a combination of concrete concepts, much as English technological terms are created from Latin or Greek roots.

At the beginning of World War II the government made an attempt to abolish gairaigo that could be recognized as being of American or British origin. The officials concerned were wise enough to know that they could not actually abolish baseball, so they converted the gairaigo terms to kanji. Today both the gairaigo terms and the kanji-based terms are used interchangeably.

Large quantities of gairaigo disappear when they fall out of fashion. One example already given was the vocabulary introduced during the student movements of the 1960’s. Another example is the words related to various kinds of fabrics which were brought into Japan by the Portuguese and the Dutch: RASHA, KANAKIN, SARASA, and so on. Japanese of the generations born after the war do not know these terms since most clothing is bought ready-made. Knowing the names of fabrics for sewing is no longer a requirement for a woman. In 2007 the word METABO, meaning ‘overweight’ or ‘fat’, has become popular. It is derived from “metabolic syndrome,” a medical term, and is being used as a euphemism, even in the press. It is my guess that this term will disappear from Japanese shortly, since it is based on popular news and is definitely part of a fad.

On the other hand, the many gairaigo words used for the Internet and the computer will probably become fixed vocabulary items in Japanese since they relate to concrete items and concepts.

The introduction of gairaigo into Japanese is a process based on Japanese needs for new vocabulary, either in terms of new concepts or a desire for prestigious terms. This process is shaped by Japanese phonology, morphology, and syntax, not by the systems of the language from which the words were borrowed. It will be interesting to see what shape gairaigo take in the future, but it is sure to take a Japanese shape.
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