English Learners' Awareness of Loanwords and Their Variances with English

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Abstract

This paper begins by reviewing why and how foreign words are borrowed into a language and then discusses homework assignments and class discussions that were designed to increase Japanese junior college students' awareness of the loanwords they use in their first language and to help them think about how these words might affect their communication in their second language, English. In spite of some research indicating Japanese tertiary students are unaware that loanwords are borrowed and have different usages and meanings than English, the current study demonstrates students' awareness of these issues for a select group of loanwords. The study also suggests that many students believe using loanwords during English communication may lead to misunderstandings.

Introduction

Every language has loanwords, words that have been borrowed from another language, and the Japanese language is no exception. Daulton noted, however, that "Japan has distinguished itself by the scale and alacrity of its borrowing" (2008, p. 9), with estimates that ten percent of the Japanese lexicon is borrowed (Daulton, 2011). These loanwords, called *gairaigo*—literally *outside coming language*—in Japanese, are usually written in the katakana script, further distinguishing them from traditional Japanese words, including those that were introduced hundreds of years ago from China.

As the pace of borrowing into Japanese accelerated (Tamaoka & Miyaoka, 2003), particularly from English after 1945 (Kay, 1995), concerns about language preservation arose, spawning the National Institute for Japanese Language to announce it would find "Japanese replacements for loan words-foreign words"

(*Koizumi's Opinion*, 2002, para. 6). As a result, from 2002 to 2006, the Foreign Language Committee of the National Institute for Japanese Language produced working papers that offered alternatives to difficult-to-understand loanwords (National Institute for Japanese Language, 2007). For example, the March 2006 working paper suggested replacing *sensasu* (センサス, census) with 全数調査 or 大規模調査. These efforts were, however, not always successful, as demonstrated by the fact that the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications used *sensasu* (センサス) to discuss the results of the 2012 economic census (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 1996-2008).

Why Use Loanwords?

There are many reasons to borrow words into a language, but for the following discussion, two are pertinent. First, loanwords sometimes enter a language to convey an idea that has no equivalent or that cannot be expressed without a lengthy explanation; this is often the case for words related to food (e.g., *chiizu* チーズ for *cheese*, *koohii* コーヒーfor *coffee*) and new technology. Japanese examples of borrowed words in the computer industry include *mausu* (マウス, computer mouse) and *konpyuutaa uirusu* (コンピューター ウイルス, computer virus). Words that represent objects and ideas that are not native to Japan are also often expressed with loanwords, for example *chuuba* (チューバ, tuba) and *puraibashii* (プライバシー, privacy; final example taken from Kay, 1995, p. 74).

A second reason to borrow words is to create a distinction with an existing word or concept. In English, for example, *cow* refers to the animal while *beef* is used to discuss the meat of a cow (Aitchison, n.d.). In Japan, this type of borrowing is often used to associate a product with a "sophisticated, Western lifestyle" (Kay, 1995, p. 74). As a result, companies utilize these foreign words when they want to distinguish their products, remove themselves from negative traditional connotations, or create the image that the products are modern and sophisticated (e.g., Blair, 1997; Takashi, 1990). In Japanese, loanwords such as *kicchin* (キッチン, kitchen) and *ieroo* (イエロー, yellow) are often used to create a different, more positive image than the traditional Japanese *daidokoro* and *kiiro*, respectively (*What's in a loanword?*, 2003).

Creation and Possible Distortion of Loanwords in the Japanese Language

Borrowed words enter a language through a variety of methods, including new root formation, blending, and compounding (Wilton, 1997-2001). When these new words enter the language, they may be borrowed directly or indirectly. In the latter, a word is borrowed from an intermediary language, which had previously borrowed it. One indirectly borrowed Japanese word is *hanbaagaa* (ハンバーガー, hamburger [the sandwich]), which was borrowed from English although the English word originated with the German *Hamburg steak* (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2000, Hamburger section). As such, English can be viewed as the intermediary language.

In addition to the potential problems caused by the phonological changes as the borrowed word is adapted to Japanese phonetics, distinct differences between the loanword and the original language can create confusion when the borrowed language is used with a native speaker. In Japanese, for example, the blending of parts of two words, particularly words that have been previously borrowed, creates a new word. This word no longer resembles the original language and is, therefore, an example of *waseieigo*, "English" that was created for use in the Japanese language. Examples include *eacon* (エアコン, air conditioner), *rimokon* (リモコン, remote control), and *waaporo* (ワープロ, word processor). Because these words were created in Japan and do not exist in English (e.g., Tamaoka & Miyaoka, 2003), the probability that a native English speaker would find them incomprehensible is high.

In addition to new word combinations, semantic differences between the original English and the Japanese loanword may create confusion during communication. For example, even when a word is borrowed with relatively minor phonetic changes, the borrowed word may be "radically different from the original English usage" (Norman, 2012, p. 444). *Sutoobu* (ストーブ), an American cooking appliance but a Japanese space heater (Norman, 2012), exemplifies the potential for confusion when using a loanword as if it is English.

Impetus for Research

In Japan, researchers have investigated the background of and trends in loanwords (e.g., Blair, 1997; Nakagawa, 1996), the cognitive processing of loanwords (e.g., Tamaoka & Miyaoka, 2003), and the types of loanwords (e.g., noun, adjective) often used (Nakagawa, 1996). More specific to the second language classroom, there have also been studies on the influence of loanwords on English (as a second language) vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Daulton, 1998; Daulton, 1999), attitudes toward *gairaigo* (e.g., Daulton, 2011), the ability to supply the Japanese katakana word when given an unknown English loanword (Uchida, 2007), and the potential for problems with intelligibility when using loanwords (Harris, 2012). Sonda concluded that students need to "pay more attention to English loanwords both inside and outside their classrooms" (2012, p. 562), but provided no specific suggestions about how to achieve this, other than noting that translation, explanations about form, grammar, spelling and pronunciation, and active discussions can be helpful. Similarly, although asserting that teachers should develop students' consciousness of language differences between English and borrowed English words, Yamaguchi (2002) failed to provide any suggestions on how to do this. As a result, the current study was designed to explore students' current cognizance of loanwords and their English equivalents while at the same time begin to investigate effective methods for increasing students' awareness of loanwords.

Method

Homework was assigned to a class of 17 sophomores majoring in English at a two-year junior college. This homework was designed to increase students' awareness of the number of loanwords they already know and use on a regular basis. Before assigning this homework, there was no discussion of loanwords in class. In addition, for the homework, no differentiation was made between katakana words that are true loanwords and katakana words that are actually *waseieigo* (i.e., made-in-Japan English).

The students' homework answers were compiled before class. At the beginning of the next class, the answers were discussed. After the positive reaction to the

homework, including students' comments suggesting their awareness of loanwords increased, a second assignment was given and the same procedure was followed.

Results and Discussion

List of Katakana Words and English Equivalents

Students were asked to compile a list of 10 katakana words and their English equivalents and e-mail it to the instructor. In total, 120 different words were given by the 17 students, with 38 words given by two or more students. The most frequent response, given by six students, was *arubaito* (アルバイト) *part-time job*. Five students included

- *toranpu* (トランプ) *card, card game, playing cards*,
- *naitaa* (ナイター) *night game* (for baseball),
- *manshon* (マンション) *condominium, apartment house, block of flats*.

Konsento (コンセント) *outlet, (wall) socket*, *hocchikisu* (ホッチキス) *stapler*, and *sumaato* (スマート) *slim, slender* were on the lists of four students. As these examples demonstrate, many of the words are those which students presumably use on a regular basis.

The complexity of finding English equivalents was apparent when students provided the same English for different katakana words. For example, while one student referred to an *eakon* (エアコン) as an *air conditioner*, two students called a *kuuraa* (クーラー) an *air conditioner*. Similarly, both *chakku* (チャック) and *fuasunaa* (ファスナー) were called *zippers*. These examples also demonstrate the flexibility of language and the fact that there is often more than one "correct" answer in languages.

Three of the students wrote both the incorrect, literal translations of the borrowed words and the correct English usage. For example, one student noted that *a felt-tip pen* should not be called *a magic pen* (*majikkupen*, マジックペン); another student realized that *pair look* (*pearukku*, ペアルック) means *his and hers* in English, and the third student understood that *cunning* (*kanningu*, カンニング) and *cheating* are not the same in English.

In spite of numerous examples demonstrating an understanding of loanwords and their English equivalents, there were a few loanword-English pairs which

were incorrect. For example, one student wrote *kneeling bus* for ノンステップ バス (*nonsuteppubasu*) to express *a wheelchair accessible bus*, and another student thought *domestic help* would be acceptable for *hoomuherupaa* (ホームヘルパー), although in Japanese this refers to a person who is licensed to take care of the elderly and physically challenged. In addition, one student said a *reji* (レジ) is a *cashier*, but it actually refers to the location where a shopper pays for his/her purchases (i.e., *the cash register*). There was also one incomplete English equivalent—*final burst* for *rasutosupaato* (ラストスパート) rather than *a final burst of energy to finish something*.

Shepherd (1996) noted that a katakana word may have a much narrower meaning than the original English word, but several students' word pairs demonstrated the opposite. For example, one student associated *beauty salon*, which in English refers to a place, with *esute* (エステ). However, in Japanese, *esute* also includes products and services such as those for hair removal, whitening of the skin, and weight loss. Similarly, the pairs for *sukinshippu* (スキンシップ), *attohoomu* (アットホーム), and *betaran* (ベテラン) lacked the full nuance of both languages.

In-class Discussion

During the class discussion the following week, students first talked about their lists with their partners. After that, an all-class discussion allowed students to talk about what they had discovered and give examples from their lists. During this discussion, one student expressed surprise that in English we say *gas station* in the United States and *petrol station* in the United Kingdom. Using this opportunity to expose students to lexicon from other varieties of English, the students were taught that Indians use *petrol pump*, people in Singapore use *petrol kiosk* or *fill-ups*, and Americans used to use *service station*, although the term is rarely used now. Students were surprised to learn that in none of the countries is *gas stand* a standard term, suggesting that without instruction students do not always realize that Japanese loanwords can vary from their English equivalents. However, because this was the exception rather than a problem with many of the word pairs, there was also evidence that a needs analysis is necessary to determine which words may cause difficulty.

The positive learning that resulted from the class was obvious in students' comments during and after class, and in the following weeks. One student, for example, wrote an e-mail saying that in the past whenever she had miscommunicated with foreigners, she had assumed the problem was the content, not word choice. She indicated that she realized she may have misused katakana English and was glad she now had another tool to use to try to overcome misunderstandings in the future.

Source of Miscommunication?

For the second homework assignment, students were asked to think about whether the loanwords they knew could affect their English communicative ability and answer the following questions.

1. Can katakana words cause miscommunication (when you speak in English)? Why or why not?
2. If they can cause misunderstanding, in what situations can miscommunication occur?

Three of the seventeen students asserted that katakana words do not cause miscommunication. One student noted, "I think that katakana is similar to English," while another student wrote, "I think katakana words doesn't cause miscommunication. But there are cases that I can't make myself understood. In such cases, we can get through by using body-language." When asked to clarify, she said, "Even though I am using katakana words, sometimes I cannot communicate, but it's because the other person doesn't understand, not because of miscommunication." Interestingly, this student differentiated a lack of understanding from miscommunication and also emphasized the interlocutor's culpability rather than personal fault in not being able to communicate. In contrast, the third student recognized the positive aspects of katakana words when reflecting, "I think katakana words can't cause miscommunication. Because, if I use katakana words, maybe I can communicate the meaning of the words. Though it may not be complete, I can convey my thought because real English and katakana words don't quite differ."

Like this last student, two students believed loanwords sometimes contribute to communication but also admitted they can hinder mutual understanding. These

students emphasized the possibility of using loanwords to aid communication. At the same time, they noted that the communication may not be completely accurate.

In contrast to these five students, two-thirds of the students believed loanwords can cause miscommunication, and some provided insightful examples. One student wrote, "When we shop in foreign country, we use katakana words (for example magic pen) as well as situations that we use it in Japan, the wrong thing communicate, so we must say in other words." The student went on to conclude, "In order to avoid like this case, I think Japanese people must use katakana words after careful consideration." Similarly, a student provided the following example of how katakana English could create misunderstanding.

"There were two people, one was a Japanese, the other an American. They rendezvoused at nine in the morning. A Japanese said, "Let's meet at the front in nine." Next day, they showed up on time, but they could not meet each other because a Japanese thought 'front' was hotel's front desk and he waited there, but an American thought 'front' was in the front of the hotel and he also waited there. If I say hotel's front is front desk or reception desk in English. It is important to make sure of rendezvous and time, and we will not have a misunderstanding."

In addition to discussing whether loanwords can cause miscommunication, the students also expounded on the potential areas for misunderstanding. Three students emphasized the fact that the loanwords are not English, or not always English. One student gave the example of cream puff. "We call it 'shu-cream'. Shu-cream comes from French. So we tend to think all foreign languages are English." The second student reasoned, "Katakana words are a kind of Japanese, so in Japan they don't cause miscommunication. But in English, some words often get through to English-speaking people, others often cause miscommunication because they are different from English words."

Twelve students also mentioned differences in meaning as a source of miscommunication. One student, for example, wrote, "In English, 'smart' means 'clever.' But in katakana words, 'スマート(sumaato)' means 'slim.' So, even if we use 'smart' as 'slim,' it means actually 'clever.' In such this case, the difference of

meaning cause to miscommunication." Similarly, two students gave the example of Japanese *manshon* (マンション), which sounds like *mansion* but is *a condominium* in English. One of the students noted, "So if you say to your friend 'I live in mansion' he (or she) may think you as a millionaire!"

Simon-Maeda (1995) stressed the fact that students at her school would readily use loanwords in English sentences, not realizing that the meaning was different and the usage was unacceptable, but an examination of the current study's students and their examples suggests that many of the students were aware of at least some of the differences between loanwords and their English equivalents. Additional research is necessary to determine whether this would still be the case if the students did not generate the examples themselves.

In-class Discussion

The next week during the class discussion, students were first told how their classmates had responded and then given some of the students' examples. The front desk example was particularly helpful, and some students indicated they did not realize this type of miscommunication could occur. After this, however, it was emphasized that although it is possible that loanwords will inhibit communication, loanwords can, potentially, contribute to communication. Students were reminded that when they are speaking with foreigners, particularly in Japan, and do not know the word for something, they can try using loanwords since the loanwords could help the interlocutors deduce what the students are trying to say. A comical demonstration emphasized the point that because it is also feasible that the interlocutor will misunderstand, students need to watch the interlocutor's reactions as well as listen to the responses and other utterances.

Evaluation

Students were asked to reflect on what they had learned, and one student exclaimed, "There are many 'original' katakana words that only Japanese people can understand, so the nuance would not be the same for a native English speaker and a Japanese person." This comment suggests that by increasing students' awareness of loanwords and their potential impact on communication, students

may have become more conscious of differences between English words and Japanese loanwords. Students will be able to use this knowledge when they communicate in English in the future.

Conclusion

Because loanwords are modified to follow the phonological rules of the Japanese language and are often spoken with a Japanese accent, some researchers have suggested that loanwords which regularly occur in everyday conversations are often not viewed as loanwords by the Japanese (e.g., Nakagawa, 1996; Yamaguchi, 2002). The results of the current study indicate this is not always true, but because the students in the current study supplied the words that were discussed, it may not be surprising that most of the words were not problematic. Out of the 120 word pairs that students provided, the number of correct pairs (93.3 percent) far outnumbered the indefinite nuances and mistakes (6.7 percent), indicating students are aware of how some borrowed words differ from their English equivalents. The study does suggest, however, that certain vocabulary, such as *gas stand*, is less straightforward.

Simon-Maeda (1995) noted that most students are surprised to learn that loanwords cannot be used in English in the same way that they are used in Japanese. The current study found, however, that two-thirds of the students felt katakana words might cause miscommunication, with two more students recognizing both the potential help and possible pitfalls of using loanwords in English conversations. In addition, the students' examples were both specific and insightful, providing some evidence that the current generation of students may be more aware of loanwords than Simon-Maeda inferred.

As the feedback from the in-class discussions demonstrated, a process of guided activities and discussions can be effective in helping students realize potential disparities between loanwords and English vocabulary and at the same time allow students to deduce areas with potential miscommunication. Further research is necessary to determine which loanwords must be specifically taught. In addition, studies with a wider variety of students, including non-English majors, should be undertaken.

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