

# Exploiting English Language – The Curious Case of English Language Contact in Japan –

英語の活用－日本における英語との新奇な言語接触事例－

Beverley Elsom LAFAYE

Keywords: Language Contact, Loanwords, Bilingualism, Appropriation

キーワード：言語接触、借用語、バイリンガリズム、適用

Abstract

*Few people would class Japan as multilingual, and fewer still would allow that language contact is a constant in the archipelago. For language contact is associated with language communities having a long and tight association with a second language – through an existing official language or extensive use of a language spoken by past colonial rulers, or both. Japan neither falls directly into these categories, nor is it considered a country with a strong bilingual tradition. Yet, after putting language contact in Japan in context, this paper will show that the Japanese are more ‘bilingual’ than is generally acknowledged.*

摘要

日本語を多言語社会であると言う人はほとんどいない。まして、日本列島の中で言語接触が起きているとする人は更に少ないであろう。言語接触は、第二言語との長く緊密な関係－たとえば、公用語として、または、植民地支配時代に広く使われた言語との接触を通じて－を持つ言語集団と結びついている。日本はこのような社会であるとはみなされず、第二言語を常用した伝統もない。しかし、本論は言語接触を日本の状況下において考察することにより、日本は一般に認識されている以上に“バイリンガル”であることを示す。

## Introduction

There is an unusual language situation in Japan, possibly unique, certainly rare. Japan has never been colonized, if one discounts the 7 years of occupation by the United States in the immediate postwar period from 1946. It has also experienced long periods of self-imposed isolation, which might have been expected to immunize it against ‘corruption’

of its language and identity. Yet, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century here is a country whose citizens' daily vocabulary includes over 10% loanwords – some 3000 to 5000 are in regular use, of which 95% come from English (Stanlaw, 2004: 12). And Japanese now has some 40,000 loans, (Hoffer 2002: 264), 10% of the lexicon in standard Japanese dictionaries are loans and over half of the new words absorbed annually are also loans, principally English items (Honna, 1995:45). English is pervasive in Japanese society, on road and subway signs, in train and department store announcements, on radio and television, in advertising, and, principally, in the mouths of the Japanese people. After an overview of the historical linguistic influences on Japan, I will show how English is now used and experienced in Japan, before reconciling the accepted view of language contact (Thomason, 2001, Clyne, 2003) and bilingualism, with the curious hybrid existing in Japan.

## 1 Historical Language contact in Japan: Main Strands

There have been two major foreign linguistic influences on Japanese over the centuries, the first being Chinese. Along with a great deal of its culture including its political and social order, religion and literature, Japan developed its writing system thanks to China. Major contacts with China first took place at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and although the contact was remote, without tangible ruler-ruled relations, Japan adopted Chinese as the language of the court, and was used as a High variety in administration, law, religion and literature through much of the Heian period (end of 9<sup>th</sup> century). By 10<sup>th</sup> century, however, (and through the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century) we see a situation where contact with Chinese is still diglossic but without bilingualism; without a community function; without direct contact with the Chinese. Five centuries of semi-seclusion followed with virtually no contact with China, but Chinese language use persisted.

English did not arrive in Japan until shortly before the Meiji period 1868-1912 when Britain replaced China as a superior model. Britain's imperialism was at its peak and Japan saw with consternation China submitting to Britain's might during the Opium Wars and showing weakness in its own military encounters with Japan. At the same time, the Americans' arrival in Japan (with Perry's Black Ships) looking for whaling

trade opportunities set the stage for a new era, one of intensive western influence. The Meiji Restoration was a time of intense change, when Japan made a conscious decision to modernize, for fear of being annexed and carved up, the fate of many other parts of Asia. It recognized, therefore, the need for a rapid, self-preserving, modernization, along with a need for knowledge of the dominant language. Thus followed a policy of compulsory education, and language learning was heavily promoted at this time. Previously it had been the exclusive domain of the civil servant, scientist and bureaucrat.

Though in the 1850s the Yokohama dialect, pidginized English, grew in this port area, because of its large concentration of foreigners and the international and local trade that goes with ports, standard English soon became more popular and highly regarded. This resulted in the elite beginning to code-switch in their everyday conversations, an early precursor of the present situation. Moreover, English was the language of instruction in many schools at that time, and there was discussion at the highest levels of replacing Japanese with the alphabet. While this language policy was never adopted (though the discussion was tabled again immediately after the second world war by American administrators in Japan and again in the 1990s by the late prime-minister, Obuchi), it was during this Meiji period that English became the established language of law and commerce, science and medicine (English usurping the previous position of Dutch then German), and of course technology. All aspects of modernity were now seen to be best-represented in English. The state began to support English teaching at this time, creating the 'Translation Office for Barbarian Literature' which offered English courses. (Loveday, 1996: 63)

Curiously, Japanese saw its greatest prewar influx of English words during the Taisho period (1912-26) though this was a time of growing nationalism with an effort to halt the adoption of foreign words and replace English loanwords with Japanese. Then, after the second world war English recovered its prestige, and enthusiasm for learning it rapidly grew.

## **2 The Position of the English Language in Japan**

The social pressure to learn English in Japan has been phenomenal, particularly since

the 1960s when as economic growth gained momentum. Again, a top-bottom directive is apparent. Immediately after the war, junior high schools started teaching English and presently most people in Japan have had 6 years of English. In addition, English was adopted as a criterion for university entrance examinations (irrespective of the subject the prospective student wished to read at university). Furthermore, young Japanese were indoctrinated with the idea that in order to get on in the world (personal advancement) and 'make Japan a great trading country' (Hoffer, 2002: 265) (group effort for the communal good) they required English. Therefore, since the second world war, there has been a race to learn English, and English language-teaching and testing has become a multi-million dollar business. Success in English has become synonymous with social and economic advancement and the structural support levels for the achievement of this are staggering.

Evidence of this is the fact that Japan has 4 daily newspapers in English, and a number of others published weekly. Japan is the biggest publisher of English-language books outside native-English countries. The magazine entitled *Nature* and published in English, for example, has a subscription level of 600,000 in Japan (personal communication, Macmillan executive). Japan also has bilingual television, bilingual information (written signs/recorded information) countrywide, a wide number of government documents circulated in English (at national and prefectural levels), and several multilingual radio stations.

Reinforcing the impression for Japanese citizens that English is a crucial life skill and adding further pressure to people to learn it, came the concept of internationalization as a policy, introduced by Prime Minister Nakasone in the 1980s and sustained by various governments subsequently (for a discussion of the Japanese interpretation of internationalization, see Maher 1991) . All the aforementioned elements have served to convince an entire nation of the importance of the global language; all have been directives from above.

Parallely, pop culture has stimulated a real interest in foreign language and culture, rather than the language as a social constraint, and this is one area where English contact takes on a different meaning. Moreover the innovating influence has changed

direction, this time from the bottom up.

### **Language Contact in Japan in Context**

An island state without land borders, and seen as a homogenous, monolingual country untouched by colonists, many would dismiss the claim that Japan is a country where language contact goes on. It is barely commented upon in works devoted to language contact (Clyne, 2003, Thomason, 2001). However, several scholars living in and writing about the language situation in Japan do categorize it as multilingual, (Maher and Yashiro, 1995) or as having a language contact situation (Stanilaw, 2004, Loveday, 1996). This study limits investigation to contact with English though there is extensive language contact in the Ryukus now predominantly bilingual (Matsumori, 1995). Moreover, language contact in Japan is going on with the established immigrant population of over 600,000 permanent Koreans and Chinese (1988 Gaimusho/Ministry of Foreign Affairs figures), and the most recent and growing influx of Brazilians and Peruvians in particular and smaller numbers of refugees (Vietnamese/Chinese) since the beginning of the 1990s.

## **3 Japanese Language Contact Analysis**

Thomason (2001: 3) states that while not requiring fluent bilingualism or multilingualism, 'language contact most often involves face-to-face interactions among groups of speakers, at least some of whom speak more than one language in a particular geographical locality'. A second definition offers that an influence on a language through language contact 'takes place typically when the languages are spoken in the same or adjoining regions and when there is a high degree of communication between the people speaking them.' (Richards et al, 1985: 200) The Japanese experience of the phenomenon, however, offers a counterexample to language contact situations in multilingual societies. Stanlaw (2004, p 9). It offers a language contact model unique both in terms of definition and consequences.

### **So, is Japan not a language contact country?**

According to the traditional definition of language contact, Japan does not fit the interpretation, as corroborated by the following facts: a. There is no dominant English

community in Japan. b. For the vast majority of Japanese, there is no need for English in Japanese society, beyond that required for predominantly grammar-based learning when one takes school or university entrance-examination tests, or for the TOEFL/TOEIC/STEP tests facilitating one's advancement in companies. c. As an island country, there are no frontiers which would set up a requirement in Japan for use of a foreign language, and the only strong community need for English in the whole archipelago could be said to be in Okinawa, because of its historical contact with the United States, continuing today because of the strong military presence of Americans in bases in the Ryukus. d. No pigeon/creole has emerged, except briefly in the case of Yokohama dialect in the Meiji period and Bamboo English during the American occupation of Japan. e. The influx of English into Japanese has not altered the national language grammatically – though see my comments on adjective use and the introduction of relative pronouns through early language contact (explored in Stanlaw, 2004: 48) – f. English has not threatened the Japanese language as some purists think, nor has the Japanese identity been endangered by it, as is thought to happen when a dominant language dramatically influences another.

#### **Or is there language contact here?**

The fact that there is no dominant English community in Japan, no border contact, indeed no tangible need for English, in no way precludes language contact taking place. It is taking place both directly and indirectly in each of the 7 following areas:

- 1a. Publishing: Japan is the biggest English language publisher outside of English-speaking countries.
- b. English language newspapers have a wide circulation in Japan. English dailies have a combined circulation of over 200,000 with the specialized, economic Nikkei Weekly 35,000, and the daily, specialized, Shipping and Trade News having a circulation of 35000 and 16000 respectively. The dailies are largely consumed by the Japanese themselves, witness the large number of letters to the editor drafted in English.
- c. Academic abstracts are required to be written in English, at universities countrywide. Hundreds of academics present their papers in English at home and abroad.

2. Signs / Public Announcements / Menus: Japan has a policy of internationalizing signs in transportation. Road signs, train and subway stations and other information for travelers appear in the Roman alphabet, as do signs in hospitals, post offices, administrations and other public places. Cash machines often have English prompts. Public announcements on planes and trains are given in English, and shop signs are often English. Shop customers are also given information in English. A large number of restaurants, ranging from modest to world-class, offer menus in English.

3. Broadcasting and Advertising

a. Japan has a tradition of bilingual TV, and news programs, documentaries, and film aired on the TV can be heard in English (or other languages).

b. Language education has an important place in broadcasting and the channel, NHK, offers radio and TV language instruction, the latter followed daily by 1 million Japanese (Sabouret, 1988: 233).

c. TV, radio, billboards, newspaper and magazine advertising have a large number of loanwords in English, from single lexical items through full sentences, written renderings either being written in katakana or in a romanized form. The kind of loans used will be explained further in the discussion about language use below.

4. Pop Music and Film: Pop music and to a lesser extent film (since subtitles make understanding of the original language version unnecessary) have presented the Japanese with multiple opportunities for using and acquiring English. Interestingly, marking the desire for English contact by the public, video shops offer dubbed or original version video materials in a ratio of about 1:10. In addition, Japan is a big market for pop musicians from abroad, singing in English, and Japanese pop musicians regularly use English in their lyrics. The widespread enjoyment by Japanese of singing 'karaoke' provides further contact with English through pop.

5. Government documents: Documents ranging from health-related publications, tax information and social directives are produced in English (and other languages including Korean and Chinese, and Portuguese) as a matter of course, illustrating an accommodation of the immigrant population. A pertinent example is the extensive information distributed when the refuse collection rules changed in 2001. Information

was published in 5 foreign languages to facilitate a smooth transit from 3 different garbage categories to the present 8 as Japan moved towards a more environment-conscious policy and began its recycling efforts. Presently, the bags sold to separate garbage have their descriptions written in 6 languages.

6. Multilingual radio: Japan has several multilingual radios, 4 of which have a special licence compelling them to provide a public information service for foreign citizens in Japan and give Japanese a window on foreign language and culture. Radio i in Nagoya is typical of such radio stations. Bilingual and multilingual DJs codeswitch between a minimum of 2 languages and offer listeners a passive contact situation (though sometimes active when there is direct contact with the DJs) as shown in a recent Tsuda/Lafaye case study (IALIC, 2004). Clyne (2003: 17) cites Australian government-funded multilingual radio as an opportunity for members of a language community 'for active as well as passive maintenance'. While multilingual radio in Japan caters mainly to a Japanese audience who use it to maintain and improve their English fluency not their Japanese, the similarities are tangential but not to be ignored.

7. 'Katakana' Dictionaries: Every year, katakana dictionaries, housing loanwords in use in Japan, are revised. Thus the continuing rise of English words being used by the Japanese can be noted, some 60% to 70% now annually hailing from English and Japanese now having 40,000 words of English in its lexis. For a description of how such words are used please see below. It should be noted that, as Thomason states, 'thousands of loanwords cannot get into a language without contact' (ibid: 11).

### **Responding to Loans – The Japanese Experience**

We can see from the data above that exposure to English is constant and far-reaching. However, what makes the Japanese experience of contact remarkable is the way in which English is accommodated. While there exist many examples of words borrowed from English which keep their original meaning and form, though most often conveyed in katakana, (apple, koala, rose, designer, clone, diet global warming, ozone), there are a number of other ways in which the Japanese borrow and adapt words. Illustrative examples from different categories of borrowing are shown in the table above.



Standard Borrowing	Nuancing	Modifying	Shortcuts	Initialling	Code-mixing
Present	Veteran	Feminist	Kyodai	JR	Asashan
Recycle	Mansion	Base-up	Remokon	(Japan Rail)	(morning
Bed	Claim	(annual salary	(remote control)	JTB	shampoo)
Motorbike	(complaint)	increment)	Rehabiri	(Japan Travel	Karaoke
Tennis	Live	Price-down	(rehabilitation)	Bureau)	(empty orchestra)
Video	(a concert)	(discount)	Infure	PKF	Retoro -chic
AIDS		Paper-driver	(inflation)	(Peacekeeping	(retro-like)
Prozac		After service	Ama (amateur)	Forces)	Now-i
Tour		Time service	Compa	OL	(trendy)
Research		(special price at	(student party)	(office lady)	Gro-i
New		a given time)	Arubaito	OB	(grotesque)
Best			(part-time job)	DK	Tough-na
Message			Sekuhara	(dining kitchen)	Big-na
			(sexual harassment)	3H	Date-suru
			Brapi (BradPitt)	(high quality	(go on a date)
			Eakon	points)	Live-suru
			Passokon	3K	(give a concert)
			Ensuto	(dirty work)	Pachinko Parlour
			(engine trouble)	CM	(slotmachine
			Conbini	(commercial	arcade)
			(corner shop)	message)	

Table 1 English lexical transfer: Patterns in Japanese borrowing

All the lexis in Table 1 are in common use and illustrate classic patterns in borrowing. They offer good examples of the unique approach to word loans in Japan.

Honna (1995) gives a comprehensive account of borrowing and proposes a more delicate classification of loanwords. My own categories can be explained as follows:

- a. Standard borrowing: words that are not altered, keeping their semantic value and form. Although pronunciation of the items may differ from standard English, the words are easily understood by speakers of English.
- b. Nuancing: Words in this category take on a different sense from the lexical item they come from. A mansion is a large block of flats, more luxurious and prestigious than one alternative, the 'apaato' (apartment block). A veteran becomes anyone with expert knowledge and experience.
- c. Modifying: An English word is 'appropriated' and modified, and items in this category will usually be inaccessible to speakers of English. A paper-driver is somebody who holds a licence but has never driven. A feminist is a male who is

good to women. Base-up is the increment by which a salary rises after the wage-bargaining period in the spring.

- d. Shortcuts: Items in this category reduce words to their shortest possible, recognizable unit, 'superfluous' syllables being cut away after the first two or three. They become new words often incomprehensible for speakers of English. 'ama' (amateur), Kyodai ('KYOTO' 'DAI' gaku//University).
- e. Initialling: the shortest abbreviation, often used to convey the meaning rather than using the word that the initials stand for. OL means a female office worker. 3DK is the terms used for housing having 3 rooms and a dining-kitchen. More creatively, 3K however designates the three jobs that Japanese associate with dirty work and prefer to avoid. 3H are the desirable qualities a woman looks for in a man: height, high level education, and high salary.
- f. Codemixing: items in this category combine Japanese and English, making the words inaccessible to those who do not understand Japanese: asa-shan (morning shampoo), kara-oke (empty orchestra). Some items combine 2 nouns, others join English words with a Japanese adjective or verb: now-i joins now with the i-adjective form to convey something trendy, date-suru joins date with the verb 'to do' to mean go on a date, live-suru means to give a live concert.

The preceding examples show the imaginative way in which the Japanese absorb lexis into their native language. But perhaps the most interesting observation, which characterizes the way the Japanese accommodated English in their language and lives, is the creativity with which English is employed. This is often used in advertising to good effect and advantage, of course, for example 'ski-suki' on an advert for a skiing package (I like skiing).

And another for a trip to Hawaii – 'Hawai-i' (Hawaii is 'good'). But the man in the street is equally as creative as his professional advertising peer. For example a coin has been made of 'shinjaburu' joining 'shinji' (believe) with a Japanized form of the suffix 'able' to make 'unbelievable'. Another example is 'freeter'. *Arbait* which comes from German and has come to mean part-time work has been added to freelance and abbreviated to mean a freelance part-time worker, or long-term part-time worker refusing to or unable to join the permanent workforce. A further example is *Jomo*, (a

petrol station - JOy of MOtoring). Finally, Circle K, an import, is an established and famous convenience store in Japan, but a newer addition to the prolific increase in convenience stores has been Sun K Us, baffling to foreign readers of the shop sign but clear to Japanese: 'Thanks'. Was the proprietor thinking of Circle K when he founded his shop, or thanking prospective customers for business? Irrespective of possible answers, this is a pertinent example, indicative of how comfortable the Japanese are with English. So much so that they constantly play with English, and create with language.

### **The Socio-cultural Dimension of Language Contact in Japan**

The role of English as an agent of social development in Japan should not be underestimated and is certainly one of the clearest proofs of language contact illustrated by its influence on the Japanese population. The following three points illustrate this but see an inventory of language-contact functions in Loveday 1996:190.

- a. The young use English to distinguish themselves from older generations or for reinforcing in-group relations: 'compa' for student party /puraibeto-suru for 'to go on a date' /supagetti for 'mixed up'.
- b. Women use English for emancipatory ends, for example avoiding the requirement for using honorifics and other hierarchical constraints by way of English use.
- c. Administrators and businesses use English for social reasons, for example preferring 'loan' to the word 'shakkin' with its negative connotations, preferring 'terminal care' over the harsher alternative in Japanese which would include the character for death, favouring rojin-home (old people's home) since use of the word 'home' softens the change from a society in which the eldest son took care of elderly parents at home to an occidental model in which the elderly end their days in care.

## **4 Conclusion**

As we have seen, language contact in Japan displays some unique features. Loveday (ibid) points out that this special contact tradition and the ability to absorb foreign cultural elements without a loss of identity can be traced back to its early indirect contact with China. By the eleventh century, contact with Chinese was regarded 'less

as a matter of interaction with a foreign language and more as a question of dealing with a special type of prestigious Japanese 'style'. (ibid: 36) Today, the situation has evolved and the Japanese now have the choice of three types of lexis:

Japanese, Chinese and English. This permits a sophisticated kind of codeswitching. With the exception of short periods in history, Japanese contact with English has largely been passive, through literature, radio, television, and popular music, rather than physical contact with English-speakers, but the sheer volume of loanwords and their effect on the Japanese language and as a corollary, on Japanese society, have been far-reaching and more akin to what occurs when a minority or immigrant population comes into contact with a dominant language. Today, the use of English is needed, from a socio-cultural point of view, in Japan, and it is used by even its most staunch critics, in spite of themselves. It also serves as a natural outlet for the English study in which the majority of the population have invested so much effort. The top-down directive was that English was essential in life. The Japanese masses, however, found the reality to be different, there being little direct need locally for it in business or the community. They have therefore created a need and creative use for the language and have successfully appropriated the English language for national consumption and exploitation. Finally, by giving importance and allegiance to the dominant power, of the time, (and its language,) the Japanese have been able to benefit from contact without social and linguistic 'collateral' damage. They have successfully kept their identity intact.

## References

- Clyne, M. (2003) *Dynamics of Language Contact*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Donahue, Ray T. (ed) (2002) *Exploring Japaneseness*. Westport: Ablex Publishing
- Hoffer, B.L The Impact of English on the Japanese Language. In Donahue, Ray T. (ed) *Exploring Japaneseness*. Westport: Ablex Publishing
- Honna (1995) English in Japanese Society, in Maher, J.C. and Yashiro, K. (eds) (1995) *Multilingual Japan*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Lafaye, Elsom, and Tsuda, Sanae (2002) Attitudes toward English Language Learning in Higher Education in Japan, and the Place of English in Japanese Society. *Intercultural Communication Studies* XI:3, pp.155-172.
- Loveday, L. (1996) *Language Contact in Japan*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Maher, J.C. and Yashiro, K. (eds) (1995) *Multilingual Japan*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Maher, J. C. (1991) *Masu Media no Eigo (English in Mass-Media)*, In Maher.J.C. and Yashiro, K. (eds.) *Nihon no Bairyungarizumu (Bilingualism in Japan)* (pp.17-34). Tokyo: Kenkyusha.

Sabouret, J-F, (1988) ed *L'Etat du Japon (The State of Japan)*, Paris: Editions La Découverte

Thomason, S.G. (2001) *Language Contact*. Washington: Georgetown University Press