Katakana Is Tafu¹

By Fiona Dixon

During April of 1600 Will Adams was the first Englishman to arrive in Japan. Previous to the arrival of Will Adams and his Dutch shipmates, the only western traders in Japan were the Portuguese and the Spaniards. Adams eventually became a confidant of Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, and used his position to help open trade between the Dutch and the Japanese. Dutch replaced Portuguese as the language used to communicate with traders. After learning about Dutch trades with the Japanese, and of Adams’ position in Japan, the English also decided to begin trade with Japan.

These four European nations began to make an impact on the Japanese language. These foreigners were bringing products that had never been seen before in Japan. Naturally, the Japanese had no words for these products. Instead of creating new words, they often borrowed the words that were already used for those items. For example, the Japanese word for bread is “パン (pan).” This word was borrowed from the Portuguese “paô.”

Shogun Ieyasu’s son Hidetada disagreed with his father’s views on the westerners in Japan. Not only did western traders appear, but western missionaries as well. Shogun Hidetada feared that their teachings would undermine the traditional Japanese religion and morality, which in turn would undermine his authority. After the death of Ieyasu, Hidetada decided that the threat was not worth the benefits that foreign trade brought. He began to restrict trade and eventually forbade all western traders except the Dutch, who were restricted to Deshima (or Dejima), a small island off Nagasaki, Kyushu. From the mid 1600 until 1854 Japanese culture was scarcely affected by western influences.

¹ For beginning students of the Japanese language, loan words can be quite perplexing. Many of them sound like English words, yet are still quite (often unrecognizably) different. The following work has been meant to help beginning students of Japanese. It describes the structure of loan words, followed by some exercises and answers. This work has been carried out by Fiona Dixon with funding by the undergraduate research program at Wayne State University during the summer and fall of 2009. We thank Wayne State University for the funding. Please address any questions or suggestions to the following.

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In 1854 Commodore Perry and a squadron of American warships forced the Japanese to interact with the west once again. More than a decade later, in 1868, Japan went through the Meiji restoration. During this time Japan fully opened its doors and started its rise to become a world power. With this, the country experienced an influx of western culture and words.

During Meiji, public discussions on the new national language occurred as the Japanese realized the need for an efficient communication tool as part of the construction of the modern nation-state. In Kachru’s *The Other Tongue* James Stanlaw states that, “serious attempts to designate English the official language of Japan were made by public figures of such great prestige that their recommendations could not help having a considerable impact” (Kachru, 179). Although Japanese remained as the official language of Japan, English words have had a considerable effect upon the Language. Now English Loan words can be found throughout Japanese media, and conversation.

One would think that these words would make it easy for English speakers to learn Japanese; however English speakers often find these words unrecognizable after they go through some modifications. As a result of the changes made to English words while converting them into Japanese, students of Japanese often struggle with the correct spelling of loan words. There are various disparities between the two languages that contribute to this.

While English words are riddled with consonant clusters, Japanese speech is restricted to a strict consonant-vowel pattern as in “かぞく kazoku” (family). There is no way to replicate English consonant clusters within Japanese speech. In order to conform to Japanese speech patterns extra vowels must be added between consonants in loan words. For example, the consonant cluster /dr/ in “dress” is separated by the extra vowel /o/ in the Japanese loan word ‘ドレス doresu.” Other examples are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christmas</td>
<td>クリスマス</td>
<td>Kurisumasu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Album</td>
<td>アルバム</td>
<td>Arubamu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strawberry</td>
<td>ストロベリー</td>
<td>Sutoroberii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The strict consonant-vowel pattern of Japanese also means that no words may end with a consonant, except “ン n,” the only stand-alone consonant in the Japanese language. The most common vowel added to end of a word is /u/. Most consonant endings automatically adopt /u/ except for the consonants /t/ and /d/. /t/ is almost always followed by /o/, whilst /d/ varies between /o/ and /a/ with /o/ being the most common. For example,
The only consonant that deviates from this pattern is /r/. The English /r/ and /l/ phonemes are not present in Japanese. The Japanese equivalent is a mixture of the two sounds. At times this may create confusion because the two sounds are both converted as the Japanese /r/. Thus words like “right” and “light” both become “ライト” in Japanese. While /l/ is almost automatically converted to its equivalent on the ラ column of the Katakana chart (ラリルレロ ra, ri, ru, re, ro), the conversion of the /r/ phoneme depends on where it is located in a word.

When /r/ begins a word it is converted using the ラ column, but when it is located at the end or often in the middle of a word, it follows a different pattern. In English words that end with /r/, as in “shower” or “elevator,” an elongated /a/ sound replaces the /r/. This replacement of the English /r/ also occurs in the middle of certain words. When /r/ precedes another consonant and is preceded by a vowel it is usually replaced by the elongation of the preceding vowel. The Japanese ear does not recognize the /r/ sound, because it is not available within Japanese speech. To the Japanese ear, /aa/ produces a sound similar to /er/, /ar/, and /or/. For example:

- ビネガー Binegaa Vinegar
- スチュワーデス Suchuwaadesu Stewardess
- ハンマー Hanmaa Hammer
- フォーク Fooku Fork
- シャワー Shawaa Shower
- ポータブル Pootaburu Portable

Indeed, the adaptation of English words into Japanese speech is no simple process. As well as figuring out how to separate English consonant clusters, it is imperative to consider which Japanese vowel best represents the English vowel in the original word. Prins lists 27 different vowels in his history of English Phonemes. However the number of vowels present in the English language fluctuates depending on the dialect used by different English speakers. Japanese has only five vowels. In order to replicate the English sounds within the range of Japanese speech, the vowels often reflect the sound, not the writing equivalent.

- テーブル teeburu table
In his article, Joe Pierce included this table of phonetic vowel equivalents between Japanese and English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/i/</td>
<td>/i/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɪ/</td>
<td>/i/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɛ/</td>
<td>/e/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɛ/</td>
<td>/e/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/æ/</td>
<td>/a/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɑ/</td>
<td>/a/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɔ/</td>
<td>/o/</td>
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<tr>
<td>/o/</td>
<td>/o/</td>
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<tr>
<td>/ʊ/</td>
<td>/u/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>/u/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɑ̃/</td>
<td>/ai/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/aw/</td>
<td>/au/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɔy/</td>
<td>/oi/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pierce’s chart shows Japanese vowel equivalents to some of the various vowel sounds in the English language. Some sounds cannot be represented by one Japanese vowel alone, and are thus represented by a combination of two vowels.

As we have already seen in some examples, another difficulty in the conversion of English words into Japanese speech is the translation of nonexistent phonemes. Besides /l/, and /r/, English consonants such as /l/ and /v/ are not available in the Japanese Language.
/l/ and /v/ are both labio-dental fricative functions of speech. However, the labio-dental fricative is not available in Japanese; instead, Japanese uses the bi-labial fricative function. The bi-labial function creates a sound similar to the original English phoneme. Although there are some noticeable differences; the /v/ sounds similar to /b/.

フットボール huttobooru football
バイオリン baiorin Violin
バニラ banira Vanila

/θ/ and /ð/ are also English phonemes not present in Japanese. These phonemes are dental-fricatives. /θ/ is most often replaced by /s/, while /ð/ is often replaced by /z/.

ザッツオール zattsu ooru that’s all
アスリート asuriito athlete
サンダー sandaa thunder

There are various countries where English is the primary spoken language. Although these countries all speak the same language they have different ways of pronouncing and sometimes spelling the same words. The differences in pronunciation are usually due to differences in vowel pronunciation. For example, “call” in American speech, the /a/ is pronounced /ə/ sounding similar to /bəl/. In British English, however, the /a/ sounds somewhat like /ə/. The same can be said for “ball.” When words are converted into Japanese they tend to follow the British pronunciation, which could explain why the word “ball” is converted into “ボール booru.” Another example of this is the word “leisure.” It is “レジャー rejaa” when converted into Japanese. American pronunciation puts heavy stress on the /l/, where as British pronunciation stresses the /el/. To an American it would be difficult to discern this word, because even when said out loud, it sounds foreign.

As Quackenbush states, “Most loanwords, whether derived from speech or from writing, and without regard to dialect of origin, are conventionally written and pronounced in Japanese as if they had been borrowed from a precisely articulated form of British English” (Quackenbush: 71)

Few members of the Japanese population have any say as to how the words are converted into Japanese. The words are generally disseminated throughout the population by media sources. Some of these words eventually become Japanese. They are used so often that even though the Japanese realize that the words are foreign, they might not know which language the word came from, nor do they care to pronounce it as it is pronounced in its language of origin.
As the words become more assimilated into Japanese speech, different spellings develop. Many Japanese speakers of older generations cannot pronounce the vowel consonant combinations of /di/ or /ti/. Speakers of younger generations, however, are much better at using these syllables in oral and written speech. Speakers of older generations are likely to replace the /ti/ sound with /chi/ and the /di/ sound with /ji/. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>More recently:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diesel</td>
<td>ディーゼル Diizeru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>パーティ paati</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, in the case of “team,” “チーム = chiimu” has been well-established, and “ティーム = tiimu” almost never occurs.

Primary research can be found on the following pages.

End of word Patterns

**Ant, ent**

Words with these suffixes are likely to be shortened.

- アパート apaato apartment
- デパート depaatode partment store

**ar, er, or**

When preceded by a consonant, these suffixes are replaced by an elongated a sound (aa). In the case of er; when it is preceded by an e or an i, it takes on an ia ending.

- スニーカー suniikaa sneaker
- ドア doa door

**Ate**

The letter A will be replaced with the Katakana E [エ] equivalent of the consonant previous to the letter A. Te will be replaced by to.

- チョコレート chokoreeto chocolate
クラスメート  kurasumeeto  classmate

Ce
The ce ending will usually be represented by the katakana su [ス].

バランス  baransu  balance
ダンス  dansu  dance

Ine
The I will be a part of the previous katakana syllable and the ne will be represented by the katakana n [ン].

ガソリン  gasorin  gasoline

Ian, ion
The ion ending of a word will drop the letter I.

ファッション  fasshon  fashion

Le
Le is usually replaced by ru [ル] when positioned at the end of a word.

サークル  saakuru  circle
セール  seeru  sale

Single Consonant word Endings

C
The letter c is usually replaced by the katakana ku [ク].

クラシック(おんがく)  kurashikku  classical music
オリンピック  orinpikku  Olympics
D

When /n/ precedes D it becomes do[ド]. When d is preceded by the vowel A it becomes da[ダ].

ガールフレンド gaarufurendo girlfriend
エッグサラダ eggusarada egg salad

F

Most often replaced by fu [フ].

ゴルフ gorufu golf
シェフ sheffu chef

G/K

K and G are most often replaced by ku[ク] and gu[グ], but there are some exceptions. K is also sometimes replaced by ki[キ].

ボクシング bokushingu boxing
フォーク fooku fork

L

L is usually replaced by Ru[ル] during katakana conversions when L is placed at the end of a word.

カジュアル kajuaru casual
カクテル kakuteru cocktail

M

M is usually replaced by Mu[ム] during katakana conversions when M is placed at the end of a word.

フィルム firumu film
ハム hamu ham

N
N has a very similar katakana equivalent and will remain as n[ン].

グリーン     guriin     green
キッチン     kicchin     kitchen

P

P will be replaced by pu [プ].

ケチャップ     kecchappu     ketchup
コップ       koppu       cup

S/ss

S/ss will be replaced by su[ス], and in some situations zu[ズ]. When t precedes the letter s it is replaced with tsu[ツ].

ブーツ       buutsu       boots
チェス       chesu       chess

T

The t endings of words are most often replaced by to[ト]. It is replaced with tsu [ツ] in some situations.

ダイエット     daietto     diet
シャツ       shatsu       shirt

W

Words that end in w usually result in an extended vowel when translated into Katakana.

シチュー       shichuu       stew
ショーウィンドー shoouindo       show window
Compensation for Nonexistent sounds/syllables

X

When located in the middle or at the end of a word, X is represented by combining two sounds. Most often ku[ク] (sometimes ki[キ]) in combination with a sound from the サ column of the katakana chart that corresponds with the vowel following x [e.g. mix ミックス mikkusu or taxi タクシー takushi]. When the X is found at the end of a word it is followed by su[ス].

TH

/θ/ is most often replaced by /s/, while /ð/ is often replaced by /z/. /Th/ can also be represented by /t/. this most often occurs when the /th/ sound does not produce /θ/ or /z/ as in “Thomson.” In this case, the /h/ is silent. The katakana equivalent of “Thomson” is タトムソン (tomuson).

Tu

The nonexistent sound tu is usually converted into katakana as tsu [ツ] or chu [チュ]. Tsu is usually found in the beginning of a word. Chu can be found both at the beginning and middle of words.

Si

Si is usually converted into Katakana as shi 「シ」. Sy, Ci, and Cy are all pronounced the same.
Sounds not available in Japanese

TH

アートシアター art theater
アスリート athlete
シソーラス thesaurus
サード third
サーモスタット thermostat
サーズデー thursday
サーティーン thirteen
サンダー thunder
サンキュー thank you
サウススター south star
スリリング thrilling
スリー three
スレッド thread
スロー throw
セラピー therapy
ザッツオール that's all

X

エキサイト excite
エキササイズ exercise
Words with multiple meanings.

サッカ = (soccer, sucker)

スロー = (slow, throw)

ライト = (right, light)

ライター = (writer, lighter)
ライム  (rhyme, lime)

nonexistent syllables.

Ti
アンチセミテシズム anti-semitism
インティメート intimate
エチケット etiquette
エディティング editing
エバ（一）ラスティングス Everlastings

Di
ジレンマ dilemma
インディビジュアリティー Individuality

tu
チューリップ tulip
ツナサラダ tuna salad
シチュエーション situation

Du
インダクション induction
デューク Duke

Sc
シナリオ Scenario
シーン Scene
サイエンス science

Si
シベリア Siberia
シンプル simple
シンガポール Singapore
シング sing
シールド shield
シグナル signal
シルク silk
シルバー silver
シスター sister
シチュエーション situation

Sy
シンボライズ symbolize [Replace with シンボル]
シンメトリー symmetry
シナゴグ synagogue
シンクロ synchro
シンフォニー symphony
シルビア Sylvia
シラブル syllable
シロップ syrup

Zi
ビジンク zink
ビジッパー zipper

Ci
アプリシエーション appreciation
ア(ッ)ソシエーション association
シンデレラ Cinderella
シネマ cinema
シナモン cinnamon
シガー cigar
シビック Civic

Cy
シニカル cynical
シリンダー cylinder
Activities

1. Practice saying the following English words out loud and write them down.

アイコン Aikon ______________
アイオワ Aiowa ______________
アイロン Airon ______________
アイス Aisu ______________
アイテム Aitemu ______________

2. Figure out these English words using the tips provided and write them down.

アーノルド Aanorudo ________________ ビジョン bijon ________________
アドレナリン Adorenarin ___________ アーサー Aasaa ________________
ベール beeru(viel) ________________ バルセロナ baruserona ________________

Hint 1. Vs are also pronounced as Bs

Hint 2. Rs in the middle or at the end of words are often represented by elongated vowels. Most often As.

Hint 3. Th sounds are often represented by S.

3. The following loan words are commonly used loan words. Write the original English word for each word. Answers are found at the end.

カリフォルニア ________________ アスリート ________________
オプション  ___________  サービス  ___________
デパート  ___________  ピックアップ  ___________
フィラデルフィア  ___________  リンカーン  ___________
デジタル  ___________  フットボール  ___________
米[i.e., US]ドル  US_________
ユーロ  ___________
ハイ・レスポンス  ___________

4. Convert the following English words into the standard Japanese loan word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piano</td>
<td>ピアノ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solo</td>
<td>ソロ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melon</td>
<td>メロン</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miami</td>
<td>マイアミ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>ミルク</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft</td>
<td>ソフト</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List</td>
<td>リスト</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>ミックス</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookend</td>
<td>本立て</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guitar</td>
<td>ギター</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car</td>
<td>カー</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxi</td>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road</td>
<td>Coffee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Half</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edge</td>
<td>Watch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Figure out these country names

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>イエメン</th>
<th>ジャマイカ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>スリランカ</td>
<td>シンガポール</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>バングラデシュ</td>
<td>メキシコ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>アゼルバイジャン</td>
<td>モルドバ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ノルウェー</td>
<td>イギリス</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>モンテネグロ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Icon, Iowa, Iron, Ice, Item
2. アーノルド Arnold, アドレナリン Adrenaline, ベール Veil, ビジョン Vision, アーサー Arthur, バルセロナ Barselona
4. ピアノ、メロン、ミルク、リスト、ブックエンド、ギター、ソロ、マイアミ、ソフト、ミックス、カー、リサーチ、タクシー、ロード、カルチャー、エッジ、レコード、シティ、コーヒー、ハーフ、ウォッチ
5. イエメン Yemen, スリランカ Sri Lanka, パングラデシュ Bangladesh, アゼルバイジャン Azerbaijan, ノルウェー Norway, モンテネグロ Montenegro, ジャマイカ Jamaica, シンガポール Singapore, イギリス England, モルドバ Moldova

Works Cited


