

# Vocabulary Borrowing

Hiroshi Nara

No language is an island; as long as there is language contact, words get borrowed. This is especially true when one language possesses a dominant, influential culture in relation to the adjacent culture. This section traces the history of lexical borrowing. We will then say a few things that relate to lexical borrowing and what they might relate to Japanese society.

## Chinese as the Main Source of Borrowing

Borrowing vocabulary began at the dawn of the historical period in Japan, when it began borrowing a large amount of vocabulary from China, a country which had an advanced civilization. Japanese borrowed all types of vocabulary to describe all domains of human activity, including social structure, government and politics, art and architecture, religion, law, food and food preparation, agriculture, math, etc. Of course, this is not to say that Japanese did not have its own vocabulary, but these new imports filled important gaps in the Japanese lexicon, gaps that became apparent when a huge infusion of knowledge made its way into Japan.

An example of borrowing that took place early is found in the numerical system. Anyone who has studied Japanese can attest that Japanese has two numerical series—one native (hi, fu, mi, yo, . . .) and other Chinese (ichi, ni, san, shi, . . .)—which coexist even today. The Chinese series was base-ten and capable of representing the notion of zero. It also allowed counting to sufficiently high numbers for all practical purposes, while the Japanese native numerals began at 1 and went only a few beyond 10 (14 was too amari yon 'ten with four left over')—not practical for mathematical tasks required for, for instance, collecting tax or keeping inventory, and practically impossible without a writing system. In addition to math, Chinese model was important for almost all spheres of activity, including city planning (e.g., the city of Kyoto and Nara were laid out using the Chinese civil engineering knowledge and city planning), building buildings (e.g., Hōryūji a temple in Nara built around A.D. 700), government and taxation structure, just to name the most obvious. It was not an overstatement to say that between 4th century and the end of the Nara period (710-784), China provided much of Japan's technology and advanced knowledge and, consequently, terminology in these areas. As we learn elsewhere, Chinese words (or any foreign words for that matter) borrowed by Japanese underwent change in sound so they would fit into the Japanese language structure and in meaning to suit relevant Japanese style of life.

Words that came into Japanese during this early period include daiji 大慈 'Buddha's compassionate love,' zizai 自在 'Goddess Siva' (Sanskrit Siva, Isvara), baramon 婆羅門 (from Sanskrit brahmana, 'highest Hindu caste'), rikizi 力士 'guardian god' (Chinese translation of Sanskrit Vajradhara), ruri 琉璃 'lapis lazuli,' riyaku 利益 'acts of charity benefiting others,' cha 茶 'tea,' kwa 菓 'fruit' (Modern Japanese ka), kau 香 'incense' (Modern Japanese kō), kū 功 'achievement' (Modern Japanese kō), kuwaso 過所 'permission to pass' (Modern Japanese kasho), gowi 五位 'Rank Five' (Modern Japanese goi), suguroku 双六 'a type of board game,' puse 布施 '(monetary) offering' (Modern Japanese fuse; Chinese translation of Sanskrit dana), housi 法師 'Buddhist monk' (Modern Japanese hōshi). In addition to Chinese, Japanese borrowed from Korean and Ainu as well. Korean borrowing included kasa 笠 'hat,' kama 窯 'kiln,' and hata 機織 'weaving machine.' From Ainu, we have emisi 蝦夷 (Modern Japanese ezo 'Ainu, Hokkaidō') and kaniha 桜皮 'cherry tree bark.' It is widely believed that words having word initial voiced consonants, CyV sequences (such as cha 茶 'tea'), and word initial liquid /r/ were not native to the Japanese language and were brought in from Chinese. This serves as an early example for language's sound structure being permanently altered due to the influence of borrowed words. We will have more to say on this at the end of this essay.

After the Nara period and through the Heian Period (794-1192) a flooding inflow somewhat lessened, partly because Japan became more and more its own and looked less at China for guidance in conducting the daily affairs of the governance. But steadily, vocabulary still filtered into Japanese from mainland China. During this periods words such as following were introduced: kandau 勘当 'punishment' (Modern Japanese kandō), kesau 化粧 'make up' (Modern Japanese keshō), henge 變化 'change, metamorphosis' (Modern Japanese henge, henka), kauji 講師 'instructor, speaker' (Modern Japanese kōshi), touso 屠蘇 'sake infused with spices' (Modern Japanese toso), byakusan 白散 'medicinal herbs,' kaizoku 海賊 'pirate', bouza 病者 'sick person' (Modern Japanese reflex would be byōnin 'sick person'), kaushi 格子 'window latticework' (Modern Japanese kōshi), boutan 牡丹 'peony' (Modern Japanese botan), to name a few.

Significantly, around this time, Chinese words began to be more assimilated into the Japanese language. Evidence for this found in fusions of Chinese and Japanese word elements. Examples are numerous (Japanese word elements in bold): akatuki 伽闕杯 'water vase' (aka- 'water' (cf. Sanskrit argha, Latin aqua, English aqua- 'water') + -tsuki 'vase, cup'), gakuya 楽屋 'music hall' (gaku 'music' + -ya 'room'), oihausi 老法師 'old Buddhist monk' (oi- 'old' + houshi 'Buddhist monk'). In the ensuing middle ages of Japan (roughly 1200-1600 A. D.), words from Chinese continued to be borrowed. Here the list includes undon 饅頭 'udon noodles' (Modern Japanese udon), noren 暖簾 'shop curtain, noren,' huton 蒲団 'futon' (now in common use in English), mandiu 饅頭 'bun, steamed

bun' (Modern Japanese manjū), yaukan 羊羹 'jellied sweets' (Modern Japanese yōkan). Many of these words were brought back from China by visiting monks or Chinese religious leaders who came to Japan to spread Buddhism.

## **Borrowing in the 16th Century and Later**

Chinese words continued to be brought in during this period. A noteworthy event took place around this time—a second influx of foreign vocabulary of a different kind. This began at the end of the 16th century, when Portuguese and Spanish merchants came to Japan for trade and for spreading Christianity. Along with these merchants a large number of new words came into Japanese from these languages. Words of Iberian origin from this period include kappa 'rain coat' (Portuguese capa 'cape'), karuta 'playing cards' (Portuguese carta 'card'), konpeitō (Portuguese confeito 'sweets'), juban 'undergarment' (Portuguese gibão 'undergarment'), pan 'bread' (Portuguese pão 'bread'), botan 'button' (Portuguese botão 'button'). Spanish contributed relatively few words—meriyasu 'a type of fabric' (Spanish medias 'socks').

Toward the end of the 16th century and at the beginning of the Edo period (1603-1878), Japan intensely persecuted Christianity, shutting out Spanish and Portuguese missionaries, who were the main source of foreign words. Also, from the 17th century on until about 1850, Japan sealed itself from outside during the Edo period, shutting down much of foreign trade, and, as a result, limiting infusion of words from the West. During this period of isolation policy, only the Dutch, Chinese, and Korean were allowed to come and go; international trade was limited to those handled by them. In terms of intellectual intercourse, only China and Dutch studies were sanctioned by the government, a fact that meant that only certain vocabulary having to do with Dutch learning and China studies came into Japan during this time.

Dutch examples from this period include: arukōru 'alcohol' (Dutch alcohol 'alcohol'), kanfuru 'campher' (Dutch kamfer 'campher'), supuito 'dropper' (Dutch spuit 'dropper'), mesu 'surgical knife' (Dutch mes 'knife'), madorosu 'sailor' (Dutch matroos 'sailor'), konpasu 'compass' (Dutch kompas 'compass'), ponpu 'pump' (Dutch pomp 'pump'), buriki 'sheet metal' (Dutch blik 'sheet metal'), zukku 'canvas' (Dutch doek 'canvas'), penki 'paint' (Dutch pek 'paint'), garasu 'glass' (Dutch glas 'glass'), giyaman 'glass, glassware, cut glass' (Dutch diamant 'diamond (used to cut glass)'), kōhii 'coffee' (Dutch koffie 'coffee'), biiru 'beer' (Dutch bier 'beer').

## **Borrowing toward the end of the Tokugawa Era through the End of Taisho**

A third and very vibrant period of vocabulary borrowing came about at the end of the Edo period and extending through the first quarter of the 20th century, roughly 1850 through 1925. The floodgate of borrowing first opened in the 1850s and 1860s when

Japan began participating in international commerce with the United States, England, and other countries. Along with the foreign good and foreigners of all stripes came additional vocabulary. Also in the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912) the new fledgling modern nation invited a large number of foreigners to help build its infrastructure in all governmental, industrial, commercial, and academic sectors. Teaching of these foreigner (called oyatoi gaijin 'foreigners for hire') touched on virtually every aspect of modern life in the West. These foreign employees naturally brought their own specialized terminology into the Japanese language. Concurrent with this development, many Japanese citizens went to the West to study in all types of disciplines, experience a different lifestyle firsthand, absorb knowledge, and bring back newly acquired knowledge to Japan, all in a feverish effort to modernize Japan quickly.

The spectrum of new vocabulary and their origins brought in during Meiji (1868-1912) are emblematic of the countries that had strong influence on Japan in certain fields at that time. Spanish and Portuguese were no longer common sources of borrowing; instead common source languages were English (England and the United States), Italian, French, and German. A relatively small number of words came from Russian. Examples from this period are numerous. English offered a lot in the food department and in other daily vocabulary: harashiraisu 'rice and beef hash' from hashed rice, bihuteki 'beefsteak' from beef steak, karee 'curry and rice' from curry and rice, ramune 'lemony sweet soda water' from lemonade, tomato 'tomato', faazaa 'father', annachuraru 'unnatural', bukku 'book', redikyurasu 'ridiculous', to name just a few. Some of these died out quickly, such as the last four in this list. German loanwords relate to medicine, philosophy and outdoor sports and they include purusu from Puls 'pulse', karute 'medical file' from Karte 'medical file', gaaze from Gaze 'surgical gauze,' teez 'thesis' from These 'thesis', zairu 'climbing rope' from Seil 'rope', hyutte 'cabin' from Hütte 'cabin', to name a few. French contributed such words as atorie 'atelier' from atelier 'artist's studio', puretaporute 'ready to wear' from pret à porter 'ready to wear', abekku 'pair of man and woman lovers' from avec 'with', ankōru 'curtain call' from encore, konkūru 'competition' from concours. Many Italian loans relate to music, as in tenpo 'tempo' from tempo, areguro 'allegro' from allegro, just to name two. Russian contributed pechika 'fireplace' (from Russian pechka), interi 'intelligentsia' (from Russian intelligentsiya).

Some interesting lexical phenomena took place in the mid-19th century. Pronunciation of certain words from the pronunciations used in China's Tang Dynasty (618-907) with which these words had been associated changed for some unknown reason to the those imported into Japan from the state of Wu, an area near Shanghai that flourished during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period (ca.317 - ca.589). Examples of such changes are syōzyō 'clean' 清淨 to seizyō, syozyaku 'books' 書 to shoseki, rutsū 'circulation' 流通 to ryūtsū. In other cases, the elements in compounds were transposed

but retaining the same meaning, as in *kōtei* 'resistance' 抗抵 to *teikō* 抵抗, *renjuku* 'skill' 練熟 to *jukuren* 熟練, and *tankan* 'simplicity' 單簡 to *kantan* 簡單.. No one has been successful in explaining why this happened. Some underwent change in meaning, as in *gaijin* 'other people' 外人 to 'foreigner', *geijutsu* 'technique' 芸術 to 'fine arts', and *jiko* 'reason' 事故 to 'accident', all no doubt reflecting the quickly changing cultural landscape.

During the interwar years, a policy was enacted to prohibit using English words--words of the enemy. To accommodate this language policy, new translated equivalents were replaced Japanese copies--such as *yakyū* (for *beesubōru* 'baseball'; even today the word *yakyū* is the most common word referring to this sport), *yoshi* (lit. 'good' meaning strike), *dame* (lit. 'no good' meaning ball).

## Post-war period

After World War II, the most dominant source language in lexical borrowing became (American) English. Many thousands of words were borrowed into Japanese beginning with *gamu* 'chewing gum' and *chokoreeto* 'chocolate' American GIs brought to Japan. A list of borrowing from English and from other western nations since 1945 will easily fill a book; in fact the number of borrowed words is enormous, so much so that one can see many choices for a dictionary of borrowed words in any bookstore today.

## Do the Japanese Understand Borrowed Words?

Today, according to one statistic, about 10% of words in the Japanese vocabulary is foreign (excluding Chinese). Does everyone understand all these foreign words? The answer is, surprising, "no." According to a recent survey of the National Institute for the Japanese Language, a quasi-governmental research organization, there are many foreign words encountered daily in Japan that are not understood readily (such as *infōmudo konsento* 'informed consent (for medical care)', *maruchimedia* 'multimedia')). The organization is promoting another way of saying the same in Japanese (e.g., *nattoku shinryō* for *infōmudo konsento*.) Published materials in certain disciplines and interest areas certainly count on a good knowledge of field-specific vocabulary (some borrowed) on the part of the audience. The same can be said about other forms of media such as TV and radio programs. To particular groups, foreign borrowing makes sense, but outside of these groups, it fails to conjure up any meaning. Recent newspaper articles point out how some Japanese people feel that their own language has been taken over by English and become incomprehensible. Even if these words may not make much any sense to them, many use them.

Why? Language is by nature socially defined. Using borrowed words have their functions in society. Let us name three. First, these words are often impart the image of

erudition and knowledge. When someone uses a lot of words from English and French that not many people can understand one can sound rather impressive. Also the image one projects is, beyond being incomprehensible, being hip and abreast with the times. Being with the times is always fashionable.

A third reason may be that, by using these words not readily understood by the public, the speaker may achieve a clandestine purpose obfuscating his message, a tool that may prove useful in certain situations in politics or academia!

### **Do We Need All These Words?**

One may wonder why so many words can be borrowed into Japanese. Aren't there duplicates? Are they needed? In the case of Chinese numerical series mentioned above, there was a functional reason for adopting the Chinese system. But what about words like, say, *sutekki* "walking stick," borrowed many decades ago? Japanese had a perfect word for it already: *tsue*, which means exactly what *sutekki* means. But *sutekki* is an imported walking stick, crafted with western material and workmanship.

Fashion-conscious people sport it, not always because they are old and needed something to prop them up. *Tsue* is natively Japanese, imbued with the image of wobbly old men and women; it lacks modern (i.e., foreign) flavor of *sutekki*. As one can see from this example, newly acquired words usually have a different (most often narrower) semantic coverage so they rarely, if ever, have the same range of signification as the Japanese counterparts. In fact a phenomenon such as this points to an important generalization about vocabulary, that in a language there are no true synonyms. *Sutekki*'s meaning is narrower and *tsue* broader and more general.

A similar example--consider the case of *basu* 'bath, bathtub' (incidentally, not to be confused with *basu*, which means 'bus'). This sounds more modern and therefore more useful when such connotation needs to be transmitted to the reader in certain situations (e.g. copyediting a newspaper ad for a modern, western style home or advertising a western-style spa where one can luxuriously relax in a tub). *Basu* is also free of traditional range of signification that Japanese has with (o)*furo* 'bath'. *Furo* conjures up at least for some Japanese people the idea of relaxing in a large rocky pool at a hot spring or in a tub made of perfume-y hinoki (Japanese cypress). As one can see, (o-)*furo* and *basu* are not synonymous.

Thus to answer to the question "do we need them?", we say yes. These words perform an important linguistic and social function.

### **Is Japanese Deteriorating? Shouldn't There Be a Policy Regulating Language Use?**

Many Japanese critics and government officials in Japan fear that Japanese is in danger of losing ground to foreign languages and wonder if the language can continue to perform its main function as Japan's cultural icon. Officially appointed government commissions do recommend using "Japanese" words rather than English import. They fail to recognize several important characteristics about language. First, it is near impossible to control language use; attempts in this vein in the past have failed. Second, language is dynamic, possessing synergy with society and people. Language follows its own life and no one has successfully controlled its destiny. Third, the perception that the Japanese language is in the state of flux and is "moving in the wrong direction" has always been there. This serves as a testimony to the second point above that language is dynamic. So the fact that many have this perception is not a just source of concern. Fourth, the use of foreign words is self-regulating and has its automatic feedback mechanism, that is, if use is excessive and not achieving desired sociolinguistic effect (mentioned above), it will be used less. On the other hand, if it is not used enough and language seems to lose its freshness, then the use will increase. It seems to best to leave language be and let it do what it wants to do.

## **Linguistic Archaeology**

Like many other types of words, borrowed words have their life cycles; some come into use like a supernova and fall into obsolescence quickly (e.g., above-mentioned *biriibu-suru* 'believe' and *pashueedo-suru* 'persuade' quickly went out of style). Blue pants made of special fabric came from the United States into Japan and these were called *jiipan* 'jeans, jean pants,' which came into popular use in the 1970s. Now this word may be a cause of raucous laughter among some youngsters. In their lingo, they are now called *jiinzu*. Here we see, in the last few decades, *jiipan* is being replaced by *jiinzu*. By tracing how words like these develop, one can do a type of linguistic archaeology, enabling one to guess at the speaker's age.

## **Use of Katakana**

Katakana is now used to write onomatopoeic words, non-Chinese loanwords, and names of fauna and flora. Words borrowed from non-Chinese sources have historically been written in katakana. "Historically" may not be the right word since this practice did not begin with any consistency until about late-19th century. This use of katakana generally holds true but borrowed words many centuries back have been totally assimilated into Japanese so much so that their foreignness was lost and began to be written in Japanese. Words like [tabako](#) (Portuguese *tabaco* 'tobacco'), *tempura* (Portuguese *temperado* 'spiced' or *tempero* 'gravy, sauce' for a type of deep-fried dish), *juban* (Portuguese *gibão* 'undergarment') are frequently written in hiragana (or even in

kanji) as in 煙草, 天婦羅, and 襦袢. Of interest is the word 煙草, which is the Chinese word for tobacco and is written precisely in this way and read in Japanese as tabako.

## **Kango and Wago and Lexical Stratification**

One way to think of borrowed vocabulary and "native" Japanese vocabulary is to think of them as constituting layers, Japanese on the bottom and new additions on top. Native vocabulary and borrowed vocabulary perform different roles. It was noted earlier that the idea of the use of foreign words relates to erudition and authority. Borrowing from Chinese illustrates this principle nicely. Kanji compounds, either made in Japan or originally borrowed from China (called kango), account for more than 40% of today's Japanese vocabulary (about 50% of words in newspapers), making it the single largest category. Since China was a source of much advanced technology up until the mid-19th century, Chinese vocabulary is associated with technical fields, advanced education, high formality, etc. On the other hand, native Japanese vocabulary (wago) lack these attributes; it pertains more to daily life, informality, and low technical sophistication.

The status of Chinese influenced Japanese vocabulary much like that of Norman French (its vocabulary drew from Latin) which influenced the vocabulary of English. As a result of this French infusion, the lexical makeup of English changed dramatically in the 11th century. To appreciate the difference in flavor between homey Japanese (wago) and its formal, educated equivalent (kango), examine aruku 'walk' and hokō-suru (Chinese 'walk'). As a point of contrast, consider the difference in meaning and flavor between such pairs as walk (from wealcan 'wander' of Germanic origin) and ambulate (Latin ambulare 'walk').

## **Exporting Japanese into Other Languages**

In comparison to words Japanese adopted from outside, a comparably small number of words were exported to other languages. Today English words with a Japanese source include kimono, tsunami, and more recently karaoke, anime. It might be interesting to know that how some Japanese words were exported back into Chinese. In the late 1800s, Japanese intellectuals translated works of western social and political theories. This necessitated creating new words for alien theoretical and philosophical concepts. Japanese did not have words such as "freedom," "right," "individual," "philosophy," and so on, and had to create from scratch using Chinese (and Japanese) kanji compounding rules. Words like shizen 'nature' 自然, sonzai 'existence' 存在, kare 'he' 彼, kanojo 'she' 彼女, jiyū 'freedom' 自由, kenri 'right' 權利, kojīn 'individual' 個人, tetsugaku 'philosophy' 哲学, chūshō 'abstract' 抽象, ginkō 'bank' 銀行, kokkai 'congress' 国会, denki 'electricity' 電氣, risō 'ideal' 理想, and taiiku 'physical education' 体育 were created



at this time. Some of these found their way into Chinese and Korean publications as well and then became adopted as their own in these languages.

## **Do Borrowed Words Become Japanese Words?**

The short answer is yes. Let us examine why this is so. It is easy to see how a foreign word is useful and borrowed when the concept or meaning is not endowed with meaning in the host language. For instance, the word anime was borrowed into English because what this signifies represents a new genre of animation, different from cartoons. So this is a case of a new word filling a gap. Generally, when foreign words are borrowed even when Japanese (or any other language) has "synonyms" for them, the new words are very often narrower in meaning. This is illustrated by the example of sutekki above. Another case of semantic specialization is raisu 'rice' (from English 'rice')—to be differentiated from gohan 'cooked rice, meal.' Raisu and gohan may both refer to cooked rice, but the former is used for rice served in a non-Japanese context (e.g., served on a plate, as a part of a non-Japanese meal, etc.). Thus the Japanese favorite picnic food onigiri 'rice ball' is a type of gohan but can never be called raisu. In a few cases, the meaning is broadened, as in the case of toreningu pantsu 'pants worn by athletes when exercising,' probably from English 'training pants'. This may also be a Japanese innovation. In addition to the changes in semantic domain, other things may happen when borrowing words. First, their pronunciations change so that the Japanese can pronounce them (e.g. see the above example sutekki for English "(walking) stick"). The same word can be borrowed into different semantic domains, each pronounced differently (e.g., sutoraiki or clipped equivalent suto for 'walkout, strike' and sutoraiku 'strike' in baseball). Sometimes meaning is totally different from their original. For instance, sunakku (English 'snack' or 'snack bar') refers to a cozy bar-like late night place which serves food and liquor. In other cases, clipping, e.g., konbini from unwieldy konbiniensu sutoa 'convenience store,' occurs too. Clipped forms can be combined to make another word, as in the case of dejikame 'digital camera' from the combination deji- 'digital' and -kame 'camera'.

This clipping followed by combining is not limited to borrowed words; it occurs with unwieldy kanji compounds. An example is kokuren "U.N."(from koku kokusai "international" + ren rengō "union").

There are all sorts of words that the Japanese may think they borrowed from English but are in fact not. They are products of their doing. Some examples follow: sukinshippu is an analogical creation from English skin and the noun-maker -ship (as in ownership) and roughly refers to intimate, skin-to-skin contact (thus skin) with one's small children when rearing them. Rūmuchaaaji, probably from English room and charge, refers to the hotel's charge for a room. Reberuappu means to improvements of all

sorts--improvement on one's image, upgrading of one's computer system, dating more desirable person, or moving into a higher income bracket. This item comes from the combination of English level and up. The antonym that denotes a situation to be avoided at all cost would be reberudaun (from English level and down). A peepaa doraibaa is someone who has a driver's license but does not drive, from the combination of paper (with the sense that something that is officially documented but has no real existence or use) and driver. Haikara 'fashionable' is now obsolete or used in jest; it comes from English high and collar, which epitomized the clothing fashion in the early 1900s.

A particularly opaque one may be a word used commonly in the 1950s--bijiji, written BG and short for English business girl referred to women clerical workers in corporations. As this job attraction decreased and this word dated, a new word, meaning roughly the same thing, ōeru, written OL, came into use a few decades later. This is an acronym for office ladies, the ubiquitous women workers of Japanese corporations who performed clerical tasks. Each time a new word is put into use, it not only has a pristine and clean image but is free from the association with drudgery and career immobility that these jobs signified. Now at the turn of the 21st century, a new word was given birth to. The word is sutaffu (from English staff), which refers to men and women clerical workers of all sorts. Again this word fresh and inviting; it is not tainted by imagery of BGs, OLs, workaholic sarariiman of the yesteryear.

## **Words Borrowed into Japanese Turn into Nouns**

When words are borrowed into Japanese, their word classes to which they belonged in their original languages are ignored. All borrowings from abroad, and this include China, except just a few, go into the noun class. So to make Japanese verbs out of borrowed verbs, Japanese attaches a verbalizer---suru 'do' to the end, as in setsumei-suru 'explain, make an explanation' (made from borrowed Chinese setsumei 'explanation' 説明), and more exotic but obsolete pashueedo-suru 'persuade' (English 'persuade' and -suru), biriibu-suru 'believe' (English 'believe' and -suru). These last two items are attested in a book published during early Meiji. Adjectives turn into nouns too, so their use must follow a rule for nouns in Japanese grammar (e.g., guriin no kuruma 'green car'). Considering the semantic adjustment made, word formation rules followed, pronunciation changes made, and other linguistic factors, we can safely say that these words are just as Japanese as native words. They are no longer words in their original languages; they began to "live their own lives" as soon as they were taken into Japanese.

Only a few words actually become assimilated into other word classes. Kiiri is a nominal borrowed from Chinese meaning 'yellow color' but may now be conjugated as if

an adjective, as in *kiroi doresu* 'yellow dress.' A commonly used verb *saboru* 'skip work or class, dally' comes from a combination of *sabo*, a clipped form of French *sabotage*, and verbal ending *-ru*. Fusions of this sort are comparatively rare.

## **Borrowed Words Bring an Impetus for Language Change**

We should point out that foreign words can serve as an impetus to bring about a change in the sound structure of the borrowing language. We noted earlier that when words are borrowed, their pronunciations change, so that they are pronounceable to the speaker of the borrowing language. In our discussion above about an early history of borrowing from Chinese, we noted that certain consonant and vowel sequences (Cy, words starting with /r/, etc.) did not exist in Japanese before they were brought into Japanese. These foreign combinations of sounds and the placement of the /r/ consonant in the word-initial position violated language rules in Japanese (so-called phonotactic rules). Now, fifteen hundred years hence, these new phonotactic rules are completely assimilated into Japanese, so much so that no Japanese now feels strange about the pronunciation of these words.

Something similar is happening today. Many Japanese, younger ones in particular, pronounce the sound sequence /ti/ in words such as *tii* 'tea' and *miitingu* 'meeting' like original English. This, up until a few decades ago, had no place in Japanese phonology, because /ti/ must always be affricated (i.e., tuned into [chi]). In fact, borrowings from English not too many decades back such as *chiimu* 'team', *suchiimu* 'steam' follow this affrication rule. It is therefore quite possible these new words from various foreign languages changing the phonological structure of Japanese.

---

### **Hiroshi Nara**

Hiroshi Nara is Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages & Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh. His research interests are 20th century Japanese intellectual history and modernity, particularly the development of aesthetic categories and their political implications before World War II.

---

### **Suggested Reading**

Iwasaki, Shoichi. *Japanese*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 2002.

Kindaichi, Haruhiko. *The Japanese Language*. Tokyo: Tuttle. 1988.

Miller, Roy Andrew. *The Japanese Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1967.

Miura, Akira. *English Loanwords in Japanese*. Tokyo: Tuttle. 1979.

Shibamoto, Janet. *Japanese Women's Language*. New York: Academic Press. 1985.

Shibatani, Masayoshi. *The Languages of Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.