
Unlocking the encoded English vocabulary in the Japanese language

KEITH BARRS

Accessing the full wealth of English-based vocabulary in Japanese society

English in Japan

The Japanese linguistic landscape is a dynamically vibrant area with words and phrases appearing in a vast array of locations written in a wide range of scripts, fonts, sizes and colours, and all serving a complex and interconnected array of functions. This visual landscape of shop signs, street signs, advertising posters, information boards and vending machines is complemented by a similar vibrancy and dynamism in more private domains such as restaurant menus, product packaging, clothing, newspaper articles, magazine stories and TV advertising. Immediately striking an observer of these contexts is the fact that, although the Japanese language has a highly complex writing system incorporating an admixture of logographic, syllabic and alphabetic characters, a great many of the words and phrases in Japanese social contexts are transcribed in Latin alphabet characters. Because the vast majority of these lexical items are either direct imports of words from the English language (often termed ‘loanwords’ or ‘borrowings’) or domestic creations based on English vocabulary (often termed ‘*wasei eigo*’/ ‘Japan-created English’), those who are familiar with the English language are assisted in their orientation around Japan by this pervasive use of English-based vocabulary.

However, the English in Japan does not only appear in Latin alphabet characters. Encoded within the Japanese language, through the use of the phonetic *katakana* script, exists an enormous English-based vocabulary resource. An analysis of a dictionary of foreign words, published in

2000, found that of the 52,500 listed words, 45,000 were written in katakana with only 7,500 written in Latin alphabet characters (MacGregor, 2003), and an analysis of the constituent parts of a typical Japanese sentence found that on average 4 per cent consists of katakana words (Taylor, 1981). This shows the integral function of the katakana script within the Japanese writing system. Whilst words written in katakana are not exclusively English-based, but rather come from a mix of different countries, such as France, Germany, Portugal, Spain and Italy, over 90 per cent of non-Japanese, non-Chinese foreign vocabulary in the Japanese language (often termed ‘*gairaigo*’) is of English origin (Daulton, 2008; Stanlaw, 2004). This suggests that a vast majority of the katakana words appearing in the linguistic



KEITH BARRS currently teaches English at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Chiba, Japan. He lived, worked and studied in Japan for 5 years before returning to England to gain his MA in Applied Linguistics and TEFL from the University of Portsmouth,

and take up several English and Japanese teaching positions. Now back in Japan, his research interests include language-contact, language-transfer and contextually-appropriate language teaching, especially in relation to the Japanese-English context. Email: keithbarrs@hotmail.com

landscape and private domains in Japan are encoded English-based words. This article will discuss how knowledge of the katakana script can act as a key for unlocking this huge wealth of English. As such it will suggest that not only should visitors to Japan learn this script before visiting the country, but also that teachers working in the Japanese context, with predominantly Japanese learners, can benefit from a working knowledge of this script to enable them to better exploit the extensive English-based vocabulary resource which Japanese EFL learners have at their disposal.

An overview of the Japanese writing system

Although up to 15 different languages have been found written on signs in Tokyo (Backhaus, 2010), the Japanese social context consists primarily of five main scripts: *kanji* (a logographic script derived from Chinese, primarily used as the main writing script), *hiragana* (a syllabic script derived from kanji used mainly for writing grammatical elements of Japanese), *katakana* (a syllabic script derived from kanji used mainly for transcribing words of non-Japanese, non-Chinese origin), *romaji*¹ (a Latin-derived alphabetic script used mainly for transcribing Japanese words), and the English alphabet (also a Latin-derived alphabetic script but used for writing English words).

Within the general Japanese social context, because of the multi-functionality of each script, it is possible to see one word variously transcribed in all of the above five orthographies. For example, Table 1 shows how the English word ‘club’ appears in Japan in each of the five different scripts

and gives a specific example, found through a Google search, of the social context where each can appear.

The functions of the katakana script

Katakana is a phonetic syllabary derived from simplifications of kanji characters, used primarily for transcribing words of non-Japanese, non-Chinese origin. Other uses of the script include representation of technical, scientific and onomatopoeic terms, the transcription of Chinese readings of kanji in a dictionary and also, because of its angular and striking design, for emphasis in advertising and manga comics. Each of the main 46 katakana characters in common use represents a mora rather than a syllable, a mora being a phonetic unit representing syllable weight: for example the Japanese word *kankei* (relationship) has two syllables, *kan* and *kei*, but four moras, *ka*, *n*, *ke* and *i*. These 46 characters are complemented by a range of compounds, which follow regular formation patterns, such as the fusion of *カ* (*ka*) and *ヤ* (*ya*) into the compound character *キャ* (*kya*).

Learning the katakana script

In the Japanese education system children learn both hiragana and katakana, along with a basic set of kanji, in the first grade of elementary school. Not only is katakana learnt for the purposes of reading gairaigo words in the Japanese language (and words such as technical terms, onomatopoeia and even Japanese lexical items, as discussed above) but also it is used as a tool when students approach the learning of English. English words

Table 1: Overview of the main scripts in the Japanese writing system

Script Name	The English word ‘club’ written in each script	An example context found through a Google search for the word in each script
1 kanji	倶楽部	The title of a TV programme: タモリ倶楽部 (<i>Tamori Club</i>)
2 hiragana	くらぶ	The name/logo of an origami website: おりがみくらぶ (<i>Origami Club</i>)
3 katakana	クラブ	The name/logo of a tourist organisation: クラブツーリズム (<i>Club Tourism</i>)
4 romaji	kurabu	The name of a website promoting the reading of picture books: 絵本コミュニティ kurabu (<i>Picture Book Club</i>)
5 English alphabet	club	The name/logo of an organisation related to chamber and commerce: ClubCCI (<i>The Club of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry</i>)

and phrases are often glossed with katakana to assist in their pronunciation. Because there are some distinct pronunciation differences between English and Japanese, such as the two sounds of English ‘r’ and ‘l’ being only one in Japanese and the absence of a ‘v’ sound in Japanese, the resulting ‘katakana English’ learnt by Japanese students is much criticised by Japanese and non-Japanese teachers and academics alike. Indeed, it is often referred to in the academic literature as a ‘pollution’ (Kirkup, 1971) and a ‘barrier to communication’ (Hirai, 1978), with Martin (2004) writing an article in *English Today*, entitled ‘The “katakana effect” and teaching English in Japan’, outlining the supposed negative effects that katakana can have on English learning in Japan. But such arguments, no matter how strong or weak their empirical basis, should not mask the fact that thousands of English-based vocabulary items exist in the Japanese lexicon and form a fully integrated part of the Japanese language.

Generally, website materials, coursebooks and teachers of the Japanese language suggest between one week and one month of focused study to become familiar with reading and using the katakana script. If the student is in Japan then any time spent formally studying the script is complemented by being able to see it frequently used in the social context, such as on advertising literature, restaurant menus (especially in relation to fast food) and product packaging. Because of the phonetic nature of katakana, the small number of available characters, and the wealth of freely available

online pedagogical materials such as articles, lessons and flash programs, it is a script that can and should be a fundamental aspect of preparation both to those visiting Japan and also to those embarking on English teaching positions in the Japanese context.

Katakana in the Japanese social context

An explanation of katakana in the Japanese social context is best illustrated with real contextual examples. An initial look at Figure 1 of a menu outside a small fast food shop shows that in this context the only use of English written in Latin characters is with the ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ letters (indicating the different set-meals which can be ordered). However, although not immediately apparent to many non-Japanese observers, there is a huge amount of English encoded on the menu, waiting to be unlocked by a person with knowledge of the katakana script. This English is shown in Table 2 in the katakana, romaji and English alphabet scripts.

Table 2 shows the wealth of English-based vocabulary contained within just this one small food menu. Virtually all of the food items are instantly recognisable to an English-user, with just three items maybe not instantly understandable (*soft cream/teriyaki dog/Mexican dog*) but still familiar. Figure 2 shows the use of katakana on an advertising board in a sports shop. In this context the

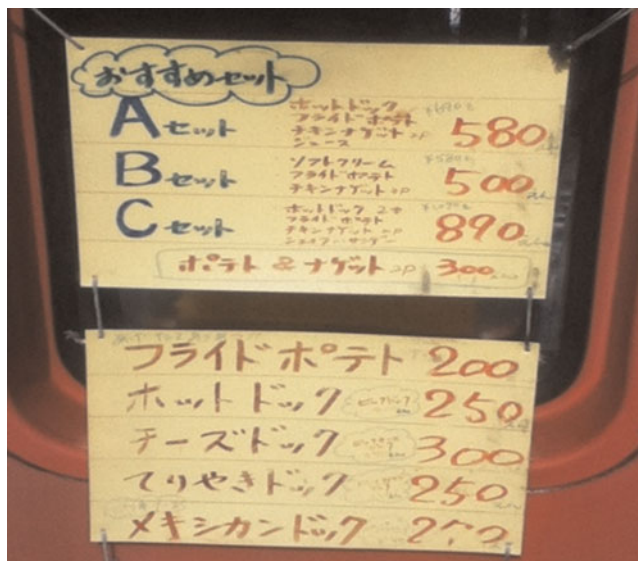


Figure 1. A fast food shop menu

Table 2: Katakana on a food stall menu²

Area on the menu	Katakana	Romaji	English alphabet
Set A	ホットドッグ	<i>hotto doggu</i>	hot dog
	フライドポテト	<i>furaido poteto</i>	fried potato
	チキンナゲット	<i>chikin nagetto</i>	chicken nugget(s)
	ジュース	<i>juusu</i>	juice
Set B	ソフトクリーム	<i>sofuto kuriimu</i>	**soft cream (Japanese version of soft serve ice cream)
	フライドポテト	<i>furaido poteto</i>	fried potato
	チキンナゲット	<i>chikin nagetto</i>	chicken nugget(s)
Set C	ホットドッグ	<i>hotto doggu</i>	hot dog
	フライドポテト	<i>furaido poteto</i>	fried potato
	チキンナゲット	<i>chikin nagetto</i>	chicken nugget(s)
	シェイク/サンデー	<i>sheiku/sandei</i>	shake/sundae
Bottom of 1 st board	ポテト & ナゲット	<i>poteto & nagetto</i>	potato & nugget(s)
2nd Board	フライドポテト	<i>furaido poteto</i>	fried potato
	ホットドッグ	<i>hotto doggu</i>	hot dog
	チーズドッグ	<i>chiizu doggu</i>	cheese dog
	*（てりやき）ドッグ	<i>(teriyaki) doggu</i>	**（teriyaki）dog (teriyaki style hot dog)
	メキシカンドッグ	<i>mekishikan doggu</i>	**Mexican dog (Mexican style hot dog)
	*てりやき = hiragana script		** English is used for these food names but they may not be immediately understandable

product on offer (sports socks) is immediately apparent because of its placement under the board, even without any of the information on the sign, but the English vocabulary encoded in katakana gives the reader more detailed information about the product; in this case the different types of socks on sale and the relevant sizes for each age group.

Encoded English in the katakana script, such as in these contextual examples, is an established and integrated part of the Japanese writing system and can be observed throughout Japanese society. Consequently, it is difficult, although certainly not impossible, to find any product packaging, a piece of advertising, a newspaper or a magazine which does not have any English vocabulary encoded in katakana. Indeed, even on the

traditionally and culturally ‘Japanese’ item of seaweed, where it might be expected that English vocabulary is not needed or even desired on the product packaging, words such as カット (*katto*/cut) and パック (*pakku*/pack) can be found integrated into the descriptions of the product. Because English vocabulary in the katakana script is so pervasive in Japanese society, knowledge of this script holds distinct advantages both for those visiting Japan and those working within the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry in the Japanese context.

Katakana for travellers in Japan

Because of over four hundred years of contact between Japan and English-using countries,



Figure 2. A sportswear advertising sign

through links such as trade, politics, the military, English language teaching and mass media, thousands of English-based words and phrases have entered into Japanese society and are available for use by both the Japanese and non-Japanese populations. Whilst some of this English appears in Latin alphabet characters, a vast amount of it is encoded in katakana which means that, for the traveller to Japan, after only approximately one to four weeks of study, assistance is provided in decoding restaurant menus, interpreting information signs, reading advertising posters and understanding shop signs and products. Of course, knowledge of this script is not a prerequisite of a trip to Japan and the traveller is often adequately assisted not only by a basic competency in English by many Japanese people but also by the caring and helpful nature of the Japanese culture.

Instead, knowledge of the katakana script should be considered something like a ‘key’ which can be used to ‘unlock’ a treasure trove of hidden English vocabulary in Japan, further assisting the traveller in their orientation around the country.

Katakana for English teachers in Japan

Daulton (2008) calls the English which exists within the Japanese language an ‘in-built lexicon’ which acts as a linguistic resource available to the Japanese learner of English. He argues that because many of these English words in the Japanese language correspond to high frequency words in English, the learner is facilitated in their acquisition of English vocabulary. Similarly, Nation (2003) argues that the ‘learning burden’ of a word is reduced when similarities can be perceived between the L1 and L2 vocabulary, and the English in the Japanese language is a prime example of such similarities. It seems pedagogically justified then, especially as English-based vocabulary forms such an integral part of the Japanese language, to exploit this ‘in-built lexicon’ when teaching English in the Japanese context.

As a great amount of this vocabulary appears in katakana in both the linguistic landscape and in private domains, the teacher working in this context (with predominantly Japanese students) could draw students’ attention to the English encoded around them, exploit examples of this English in

Table 3: Katakana on a sports shop sign

Katakana	Romaji	English Alphabet
キッズ	<i>kizzu</i>	kids
ジュニア	<i>junia</i>	junior
レディース	<i>lediisu</i>	ladies
メンズ	<i>menzu</i>	mens
スポーツソックス	<i>supootsu sokusu</i>	sports socks

the language classroom and raise awareness of similarities and differences between the usages of the English vocabulary in the two languages. This would involve the ability on the part of the teacher to read, write and understand the general principles of the katakana script, not only allowing them to pedagogically exploit the encoded English-based vocabulary in Japanese society, but also enriching their own cultural and linguistic knowledge of Japan.

Conclusion

The admixture of scripts in modern Japan is the outward reflection of a long historical tradition of interactions and absorptions from foreign sources. Newspapers, magazines, advertising boards, traffic signs, junk e-mails, product packaging, clothing and websites rarely are restricted to the use of only one or even two scripts, but more commonly are seen covered with an amalgamation of kanji, hiragana, katakana, romaji and the English alphabet. In terms of the wealth of English vocabulary within Japan, many words and phrases are immediately apparent to English users because of the prolific use of Latin alphabet characters, but there is also a huge amount of English-based vocabulary 'locked up' in Japanese society in the form of katakana encodings. Because of the range and depth of this vocabulary in Japan, knowledge of the katakana script should be considered an extremely useful 'key' which can 'unlock' a great amount of English-based linguistic items,

particularly for travellers and those who are teaching English to Japanese students.

Notes

1 The word 'romaji' can be written with a single or double 'o', depending on the preferred pronunciation. If written with a double 'o', this is usually represented by a macron.

2 I have written the romaji in each table by transcribing each mora into the most appropriate Latin alphabet character, and long vowels are represented by doubling the Latin alphabet character rather than using a macron.

References

- Backhaus, P. 2010. 'Multilingualism in Japanese public space: reading the signs.' *Japanese Studies*, 30(3), 359–72.
- Daulton, F. E. 2008. *Japan's Built-in Lexicon of English-based Loanwords*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Hirai, M. 1978. *Henna kotoba, tadashi kotoba: hanashi kotoba ni seki-suru 40 shuu*. Tokyo: Shuppan Kabushiki Kaisha.
- Kirkup, J. 1971. 'Language pollution.' *Jiji eigo kenkyuu*, 25 (15), 17–22.
- MacGregor, L. 2003. 'English in Japanese TV commercials.' *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 6, 147–63.
- Martin, A. 2004. 'The "katakana effect" and teaching English in Japan.' *English Today*, 20(1), 50–5.
- Nation, I. S. P. 2003. 'The role of the first language in foreign language learning.' *Asian EFL Journal*, 5(2), 1–8.
- Stanlaw, J. 2004. *Japanese–English Language and Culture Contact*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Taylor, I. 1981. 'Writing system and reading.' In G. E. Mackinnon and T. G. Wallers (eds), *Reading Research: Advances in Theory and Practice (Vol. 2)*. New York: Academic Press, pp. 1–51.