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# The Phonological Features of Gairaigo

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## Abstract

(An Investigation of the Role Played by Phonological Features  
 in the Adoption of Foreign Words into Japanese.)

This preliminary proposal examines and speculates about the possibility that there is a link of some type between the phonological features of a lexical item in one language that makes its adoption into usage in another language more likely to occur. This is done with specific reference to the adoption and currency in Japan of foreign loan words known as “gairaigo” and their usage. It is speculated whether points of phonological resemblance between these foreign words and their alternate, or a proximate Japanese word or term, coupled with a degree of semantic similarity increases the likelihood that they will be adopted and attain any level of currency among the recipient language’s users.

**Key words** : gairaigo, phono-semantic matching, phoneme

## Language Change

Living language is in a constant state of decay and generation. The speaker of English 600 years ago would have a difficult time understanding the language as it is spoken now. Languages are made from and of other languages. The case where a language has evolved independently would be one where speech itself evolved independently. Languages meet, merge, share, exchange, appropriate, donate and divide in, to, and from each other.<sup>1)</sup>

While the currents of trade, conquest, and cultural interaction are responsible for much of this crossfertilisation of language, perhaps there are other deeper currents that attract and repel lexical incursions and facilitate or obstruct linguistic permeation. These forces may act at the almost chemical level of language, that of the phoneme. Language penetration is rarely even and there is always a residue of what went before. Why this is, is perhaps explainable at this level.

The most noticeable impulse for these lexical migrants is the advance of modern technology. However occasionally these additions might have

more to do with changes in the values, structure, political, and social economy of the society. In the stages of a society's evolution concepts and things can take up new places in the hierarchy of values. Something rare and valued can become plentiful and taken for granted, thereby deserving of a less honorific name. Behaviour that was taboo can become more accepted and require a less prejudicial referential.

However in cases where there is no obvious change in the status of the original term or expression why would there be any need to replace it? It is possible that the imported word is more succinct or in some way attractive. Also mere exposure can alter the language as is seen in the adoption of American English expressions into British English via television and other media. Equally the term can be adopted for its cachet or to differentiate itself from some more local or traditional concept.

Cultures often respond cautiously to these arrivals and see them as examples of enrichment or contamination, as perceptions of the dynamism of the target language vary. Examples of this caution can be seen in the activities of the Académie française and in those of the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics. Who, among other functions, assess the impact of foreign-sourced neologisms on their respective languages and often attempt to manage or ameliorate it. This phenomenon has also been noted by Zuckermann (2003) in the cases of morphemic and phonetic matching.

### **Absorption Strategies**

Since the industrial revolution and the consequent flood of technological invention and innovation, languages all over the world have had to find ways to accommodate these new products. In English for example it was found that construction of new Greek and Latin compound words was one way to create names for these innovations, eg. 'telephone' 'microscope' 'phonograph'. Once named these items then become 'possessed' by the namer's language. 'Telephone' is seen as English though it is a foreign compound. Some cultures accepted this as a loan word others sought ways to name it so as to express the meaning within or to reflect their own cultural tradition. Telephone thus becomes '電話' and is 'acquired' by the Japanese language. Another way is to accept the word by and large as it is and let the users shape it as they will.

Sometimes the effort to nativise the item is conscious and aimed at preserving the purity of the language and, at other times, to make the term more readily comprehensible or descriptive for the listener. Each of these strategies is born out of necessity caused by the arrival of the new word and is easily understandable.

### **Phono-Semantic Matching**

Zuckerman deals with efforts to manage words that are constructed so as to fit as seamlessly as possible into the target language through what he calls 'Phono-Semantic Matching' or 'PSM'. In this case the word is sourced into the target language via its sound and meaning. The previous target

language terms that are similar sounding and have a relatively proximate meaning are found and replace or preempt the entry of the foreign word. Zuckerman sees this as often being done by language purists who wish to fill a lexical void, a systematic borrowing, though there are of course ad hoc borrowings done by laymen (p8). These ad hoc borrowings are based on 'affinity'. This process being one where the foreignism is drawn into the language, that is there is more of a pull than a push, 'a special case of simultaneous importation and substitution' <sup>2)</sup>

### **The Influence of Apparent Lexical and Grammatical Similarity**

It is a truism that the more similar languages are to each other the easier they are to learn.

In fact one of the main obstacles to the acquirement of European languages for Japanese speakers is often felt to be their very different structure to Japanese, and conversely the greater similarity between their languages increases the incidence of multilingualism among European nations. Dutch speakers who share many words with English are known to show particular proficiency. Chinese-literate students of Japanese often hold an advantage over their western counterparts through their mastery of the written language. Western students can be aided by their familiarity with many of the meanings and concepts expressed as gairaigo in Katakana.

Taken to its extreme, it is possible to say that someone who is said to speak two or more similar languages might merely be the speaker

of several dialects of the same language. Indeed it is maintained that much, if not most of the world's population is bilingual even though what constitutes a set of dialects or a family of languages remains a fraught issue in many regions.

That languages interact within the user's processing system is evidenced by the phenomenon of 'language interference'. In this case the user's various lexicons and grammars start to interfere with each other. This is seen in the case of residents in other-language speaking countries finding that their utterances become influenced by the surrounding linguistic environment. Not only through the adoption of specific vocabulary but by increased difficulty in producing sounds that are rarer in the communities they reside in.

### **Learners' Inbuilt Bias**

When we listen to a foreign language we look for similarities and patterns. The most readily noticeable and meaningful are those with which we think we are already familiar. This can be seen where foreign speakers substitute or select structures that more closely resemble the phrasing of their own language. For example "Bus is nothing" rather than "There is no bus." Someone from an English language background listening to a tonal language such as Chinese may neglect to pay attention to those subtle yet vital differences and focus on the aspects that are more important in their own language.

The contention that we do seek the sounds, or impose our own presumptions on contextualized imminent utterances is illustrated in Zuckermann's story of a Jewish immigrant arriving at Ellis Island on a fake passport. "When asked about his name by the immigration officer, he says to himself (in Yiddish) 'shoyrn fargesn' Of course he meant 'already forgotten' but the clerk who knew neither Yiddish nor German (cf. *schon vergessen*), heard him and wrote down Sean Ferguson" (Zuckermann p 27)

The desire to make such transitions is illustrated for example by the playful transitioning by the professional baseball player Johjima Kenji of his name to 'George McKenzie' Similarity in vocabulary is of course based on sounds. Words become similar when they contain the same sounds and more similar when those sounds are placed in similar order. Adjust length and pitch, and you arrive the same word in the phonetic sense.

It is possible that there can be compounded reasons for change that incorporate some or all of the above reasons. Of more interest to this paper is the adoption of terms that are already adequately catered for in the local lexicon. Terms that are seemingly unnecessarily added.

If these tendencies can be seen to exist, is it not possible that phonetic coincidence can also have influence on the acceptance of a word into another language?

### **Gairaigo and the Japanese Phonetic Context**

In the rapidly modernising context that Japan

has found itself since the 1860s, it has had to find ways of dealing with a flood of new lexical items representing artefacts and concepts that had no immediately obvious equivalent in the original language. These new lexical items have been categorised as "gairaigo". It has usually chosen the simple adoption of the immigrants via transliteration into its own phonetic system. The katakana syllabary is used, and the pronunciation of these terms comes to reflect Japanese phonology and subsequently the word is continually adjusted in various ways for the convenience of its users. The word is 'Japanned' with any 'hard on the tongue' features smoothed and glossed over.<sup>3)</sup>

As this has been an ongoing process throughout the history of the country some long resident lexical items have achieved almost native status especially those transmitted in the more distant past from Asia. Whereas most imported words since the middle of the 19th century are written in the syllabary known as 'katakana', nowadays most frequently seen in words where it is felt special emphasis needs be placed on sound or pronunciation. Some words, for example the imported word 'tobacco', as it is represented in English, has been present in Japan since at least the 16th century and is now commonly rendered into the the more graphic and visually oriented syllabary known as 'hiragana' as たばこ rather than タバコ as it would be in katakana. Rendered in the Roman capitals, this would be TABAKO. This rendering is in harmony with other structure of other words in Japanese and presents no phonemic deviation from the conventional. Thus

it must be remembered that rendering into either syllabary renders the word subject to Japanese phonemic orthodoxy. Thus the word is already ‘pronounceable’. In a sense it has been ‘prepped’ for use. Such words may be longer, or contain combinations that are unusual but at the phonemic level they are ‘Japanese’. The anecdote of Sada Masashi (2016) about older Japanese being prone to confuse the syllabic sequence of katakanised words of five syllables or more such as ‘ラベンダー’ (lavender) and ‘ベランダ’ (veranda) is illustrative. It is the order and, or length of the item rather than the constituents that are novel. Items that present this type of difficulty for the user base are then subject to truncation as in the words *aircon*, *wapuro* etc. (As an aside I would hypothesise that the more widely the word comes into use, the greater the tendency to truncate and transform, and that words that have more specialist uses appear to adhere to their initially adopted form for longer). Lexical items are not only truncated foreign words can be subject to some degree of epenthesis usually anaptyxis. Thus the word ‘trend’ is produced as ‘トレンド’ (*torendo*) etc.<sup>4)</sup>

The phenomenon is of course not a new one and has taken place throughout the country’s history and its associations with the rest of Asia and Oceania. It was only in the past 150 years that levels of technological and cultural disparity and rate of transmission have exceeded the rate of assimilation. Due to global convergences in levels of development and lifestyle it is possible that the transmission has slowed down, and will become more reciprocal or multi-sourced in the future as the West’s technological and economic

preeminence are eroded.

Gairaigo are now highly visible in society and are said to comprise a significant percentage of the daily vocabulary of the average user. Generally the less traditional the context and the younger the speaker, the greater the proportion of gairaigo. Whereas most people take these developments in their stride, there is a concern to maintain the expressive power of the more long established lexicon.

I select the term ‘gairaigo’ even though it is often referred to as ‘katakanago’ as gairaigo distinguishes the origin of the word whereas ‘katakanago’ emphasises the sound. This can be seen in works where non-native speaker Japanese utterances are graphically represented in katakana for example, “コンニチワ” or “スゴイ”. I do this aware that it is possible that the Japanning of a word might render the term ‘neologism’ more appropriate than loanword and that the expression ‘katakanago’ may already convey this perception. However I am trying to outline a process whereby a loan word develops into a neologism.

### **Gairaigo as Part of the Language**

The degree of everyday usage in casual language of English words by people in ordinary situations is a point of interest to the foreign observer. To hear concerned mothers calling to their children to ‘ストップ!’ and finding people referring to their ‘ショック’ is quite intriguing. One is led to wonder what has led to this situation. Was the language so impoverished and unexpressive that

it did not have perfectly good words of its own for these situations? These were not new concepts, nor had there been a change in their value relations with society. The native equivalents were also perfectly succinct and servicable. What had led to this shift? I took as an indication of a possible cause when I noticed that many of students had a decided tendency to translate the phrase 'sentaku suru' as 'select' and understand it more readily than the slightly more colloquial 'choose'. They also appeared to be more likely to be familiar with it when hearing it spoken. It is also common to hear younger children almost invariably say 'see you' rather than 'good bye'. The crude hypothesis to explain these preferences being that the sound similarities between these expressions and the equivalent Japanese term helped them to be remembered more readily than the other possibilities available. That is to say that the English word 'select' possessing some similar phonemes to the Japanese 'sentaku'; starting with 'se' and possessing both 't' and 'k' sounds is retained more readily than the less similar combination of sounds found in 'choose'. (This greater readiness may also be due to there being a greater number of sounds in 'select' that conform to the Japanese syllabic system rather than to any phonetic sharing). Similarly but perhaps less convincingly 'see you' carries some sounds in common with 'sayonara' 's' and 'y'. It is true that the exact equivalent of 'see you' might be 'mata ne' or some such phrase, however 'see you' was used indiscriminately regardless of whether there was a likelihood of another meeting or not, whereas 'sayonara' appears to me to signal a more final valediction.

In the same vein, there seemed to be a tendency to choose the word 'admit' as the English translation of the expression '認める'. This preference also seemed to be perhaps explainable as being due to the similarity of the common 'mit' element in both expressions.

### Cuckoos in the nest?

Once the possibility had been perceived, it then becomes necessary to see if it is possible to find other examples. Here is an initial list of superficially similar incidences.

チャレンジ	挑戦
ショック	衝撃
ゴージャス	豪華な
モノクロム	黒
アタック	攻撃, 圧迫
アップ	上がる
チェック	確認
スピード	速度
デビュー	出番
ガッツ	がんばれ・がまん
ジューシー	汁
グロテスク	異形
ラッキー	楽 楽観
トラブル	こまる
ダッシュ	走る, 発, 出す
スムーズ	スルスル, 進む
ハッピーニング	発生, 発す
リラックス	楽する
エロ	色っぽい
ユニーク	唯一
グループ	組

It will be noticed that there are comparatively few nouns in the set. (Though whether Japanese

and English grammar share exactly the same boundaries between grammatical concepts may be debatable). However this is what makes the widespread adoption and currency of these terms surprising as they did not fill any 'lexical vacuum' in the target language.

As can be seen, many of these items do share similar initial sounds which may help them to spring more easily to the lips. It might be that the phonic similarity coupled with the semantic similarity acts as a hook and tricks the linguistic procession into filing the term in a more immediately accessible location. To use the image of a computer, on the RAM equivalent rather than on the hard disk with other foreign words that would have to be located, transferred to the active registry, and then activated.<sup>5)</sup> It may be interesting to see whether the abbreviations that occur, occur around the common sound or whether it too is sometimes

elided or deleted.

If this hypothesis is at all founded in reality it could have implications for the likelihood for predicting the comparative ease students can absorb, retain, access and enunciate different lexical items. For example numerous English adjectives end with a 'y' e.g. windy, rainy, happy etc. If we can posit that there is a tendency for standard sounding lexical items to gain superior access to the learner's language processes than we can assume that they could be more readily learnt by Japanese speakers who already have an adjectivisation mechanism using the similar 'i' sound ending.

If this tendency exists it might be possible to map out a path of least resistance in lexical acquisition for the average Japanese -speaking student by composing lists of vocabulary for production that match the expectations of their language processes.

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