

Modern Objections towards the Massive Use of Loanwords from English in Japanese

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Abstract—Loanwords, written in katakana in Japanese, mainly come from western languages, such as English, and these words are also known as *gairaigo* (外来語). They enrich languages and bring new ideas, gradually becoming essential in Japanese daily life. But several negative impacts have been exerted by the massive use of loanwords. Therefore, many Japanese people propose strong objections to the overuse of English loanwords. In response to the issue, this paper examines the application of *gairaigo*, the main reasons to fight against the massive use of these loanwords, and the drawbacks of existing suggestions, in order to find a more effective way to settle this debate.

Index Terms—Loanwords, *gairaigo*, objection, Japanese, English.

I. INTRODUCTION

Loanwords, which are written in *katakana* in Japanese language, mainly come from western languages, such as English, and these words are also generally called *gairaigo* (外来語). Nowadays, with the development and popularization of *gairaigo*, these loanwords have been heavily relied on in Japanese daily life and language learning. But the massive use of them also has bad influences on Japanese language, culture and society. Therefore, some Japanese propose strong objections to the massive use of *gairaigo*. In this proposed paper, the application of *gairaigo* in different fields, among different generations and different social groups are going to be examined, which apparently matters in how *gairaigo* will be valued. Then, it goes to figure out the main forces and reasons to fight against the massive use of English loanwords.

Based on the documents of “Suggestions for paraphrasing loanwords” (「外来語」言い換え提案) conducted by the National Institute for Japanese language and linguistics, this paper argues that the overuse of loanwords has indeed generated several undesirable effects, but the objections and the existing suggestions towards it contain subjective biases and inappropriateness. This paper points out the importance and necessity of *gairaigo* and suggests that the better way to settle this debate, to preserve traditional Japanese language while promote the unique function of *gairaigo*, is to avoid using only one solution for all problems, to adjust the current language education and use *gairaigo* to satisfy different requirements for different social groups.

II. THE INCREASING LOANWORDS

Japanese is a language with obvious evidence of borrowing large numbers of loanwords from other languages through a long historical period. Starting from as early as Nara Period (710-794), a great number of Chinese words were borrowed into Japanese to become ideograms and phonograms [1]. Afterwards, with the opening of Japanese ports to western powers around 17th century, Japanese started to absorb words from European languages, such as Portuguese, Dutch and German. In early times, loanwords were mostly common living words, and then they started to express new terms in medicine, art, technology and so on [2]. The speed of loanwords infiltrating into Japanese has accelerated after World War II and English has become the overwhelming predominant source of loanwords. *Gairaigo* literally means the words of foreign origin and is frequently referred as “loanword”. Different from the loanwords written in *kanji* 漢字 borrowed in ancient times, *gairaigo* are mostly from English or other western languages in modern times. This term is generally used in a narrower sense than “loanword” [3]. Considering the popularity and the great influences of English, this paper is primarily focusing on words that borrowed from English. By 1920 about 50% of loanwords from European languages were derived from English [4]. The rise of English *gairaigo* reflects the rising status of America and British as world powers, their importance as trading partners and sources of technology, as well as the spread of English language education in Japan.

From late Meiji onwards, *katakana* became the dominant method of writing foreign words and foreign names, which also makes loanwords easily recognizable in written language. The most obvious reason for borrowing words from other languages is to fill the lexical gap. Basically, the borrowing of words entered into Japan with the advent of new goods and technologies, as in the cases of *Shanpu* シャンプー (shampoo) and *Konpyuta* コンピューター (computer) [5]. *Gairaigo* also coexist with non-*gairaigo* terms to refer to a designate item, for example, *Biru* ビル (a contraction of “building”) is used alongside with *Tatemono* 建物 (building), and *Raisu* ライス (rice) coexists with the traditional terms *Gohan* 御飯 and *Meshi* 飯 [6]. Besides, *gairaigo* are also commonly used to replace existing terms and dominate a niche, for instance, *Kamera* カメラ has largely replaced the *Shashinki* 写真機 and *Konpyuta* has replaced *Denshikeisanki* 電子計算機 for convenience and the development of science and technology. Nowadays, *gairaigo* not only appears largely on the signs of the street, in television, newspaper and magazines, but also turns to be a

feature of speech among students and official reports. They have been heavily relied on in Japanese daily life.

III. THE NEGATIVE INFLUENCES OF THE MASSIVE USE OF *GAIRAIGO*

Although *gairaigo* has been utilized for a long period of time in Japan, it was not recognized as a linguistic issue until 1990s [7]. But after being used for several decades, the amount of unnecessary *gairaigo* is already excessive, and the massive use of *gairaigo* has exerted negative influences on Japanese language, culture and society as well.

Firstly, the overuse of *gairaigo* brings difficulty of comprehension. According to a survey conducted in 1992, the majority of people (70%) thought that too many *gairaigo* were used in Japanese society; and then in 1995, in a survey of the comprehension of 15 English loanwords, the average recognition rate was 59%, whereas the comprehension rate was only 36% [8]. For example, ソリューション is transliterated from the English word “solution”, but many Japanese people think it is not necessary to use this loanword which makes them confused and the Japanese word 解決 is easier to be comprehended.

Besides, the massive use of *gairaigo* generates large potential threats to damage the Japanese language. The excessive use of *gairaigo* in mass media and daily life forces Japanese people to accept the replacement of traditional Japanese terms by *gairaigo*, and gradually the usage of *kokugo* 国語 has decreased, especially among the young generation. They turn to be more inclined to use *gairaigo* even in the situation that they should use *kokugo*, or they are accustomed to use *gairaigo* to replace the *kokugo* that they do not familiar with [9]. Scholars have rated the overuse of loanwords as a reason for the decreasing *kanji* usage, the loss of *keigo* 敬語 (literally “respectful language”) and regional dialects. Mizutani found the increasing usage of *gairaigo* alarming and predicted that in 30 years most nouns would be in *katakana*, which was definitely a sign of poverty in language life [10]. The excessive redundant loanwords in Japanese makes this language more international but less Japanese, which particularly confuses the foreign learners and reduce the attractiveness of modern Japanese language to them.

Then, the massive use of loanwords is also regarded as a cause of class division. One obvious division is between younger and older generations. The younger people are supposed to be glad to accept *gairaigo* for they have access to know and use these loanwords, and some younger people even regard it as a symbol of “cool”. On the contrary, the older often lack access and have unwillingness or inability to understand *gairaigo*. Besides, as Suzuki indicates that the massive use of *gairaigo*, except separating the Japanese language into young and old people’s language, also made language specific to certain groups and this damaged the classlessness and homogeneity of Japanese society [11]. The situation becomes even worse when it leads to discrimination according to knowledge between ordinary people and specialists, and between those who have knowledge of English and those who do not [12]. For example, when

government utilizes large numbers of *gairaigo* in official reports, those who cannot understand *gairaigo* will feel discriminated and excluded by society.

Furthermore, the retrogression of traditional language is also a reflection of westernization and cultural loss. The popularity of *gairaigo* is rooted in the popularity of western culture, technologies and ideologies, which also reflect the ignorance of traditional Japanese culture and thoughts. The anthropologist Yanagita Kunio regards *gairaigo* as an aspect of colonization by the western powers and notices that the way Japanese despises their own language is the first step in submission to western tastes [13].

IV. “SUGGESTIONS FOR PARAPHRASING LOANWORDS”

Because of the negative influences on Japanese language, culture and society, an increasing number of Japanese people started to propose objections to the massive use of loanwords from English. Since 2003, the National Institute for Japanese language and linguistics has established a special research committee on *gairaigo* and proposed the “Suggestions for paraphrasing loanwords” (「外来語」言い換え提案) [14] to solve this issue, which engenders strong social supports nationwide. Modern objections towards the massive use of *gairaigo* have called for various types of action, ranging from legally enforced prohibitions by governments to calls for greater attention by individuals. The main forces to fight against the overuse of *gairaigo* in modern Japanese society are two groups of people: linguists and scholars who have realized the dangerous of overuse of loanwords; and those who have unwillingness and inability to understand *gairaigo*, particularly the old and anti-foreign people.

Since this issue was posed in 1990s, various efforts have been taken over the past twenty years, but it seems that the situation is not improved, and the corresponding social objections are still strong and fierce. The four “Suggestions for paraphrasing loanwords” reports conducted from 2003 to 2007, clearly demonstrated the objectives and reasons for paraphrasing loanwords which are hard to be comprehended with authentic Japanese. In these reports, *gairaigo* firstly have been estimated by the level of intelligibility, and then the correspondent Japanese terms are presented with detailed explanation and practical examples. For instance, they suggest to use 独自性 or 自己認識 to replace the loanword アイデンティティー which has pretty low intelligibility [15]. The “Suggestions for paraphrasing loanwords” reports indeed are good guidance for helping people to replace *gairaigo* with Japanese terms. However, the report is lack in widespread utilization, which means those paraphrasing terms cannot be widely recognized and used by Japanese people. Besides, the target group of these reports is the whole society and they set the same standard for different groups who have different requirements of language usage. As an example, the word アクセス can be well understood by young people, but the suggested alternatives 接続, 交通手段 and 参入 [16] make this term more complex and difficult to be understood.

Although the rationalities strongly support the objections towards the massive use of *gairaigo*, people also suffer

certain biases in their negation to the function and effects of *gairaigo*. A large number of *gairaigo* were chosen with the development of Japanese language, and this is determined by the special function and practical applicability of *gairaigo*. Some scholars view the massive use of *gairaigo* as an inexorable trend because the extensive lexical gap need to be met by adapting existing words to encompass the new concepts, coining new words, or adopting words from other languages [17]. The nature of both Japanese culture and Japanese language requires advanced knowledge from outside world and modified imports to suit local conditions. The structure of the Japanese language makes it conducive to borrow and absorb, since foreign words can easily be inserted into Japanese syntax and converted into verbs and adjectives [18].

There is no doubt that the influx of loanwords is closely related to the wide spread of western culture. But it is hard to consider the use of *gairaigo* as a main reason for the loss of traditional culture. Cultural collision is an inevitable process in international communications. The massive use of *gairaigo* is not only a necessary and effective way for internationalization and information influx, but also reflects a positive attitude to foreign influences. With the popularity of English language education in Japan, the English *gairaigo* would become more understandable and usable for more people.

And, the study of *gairaigo* is not limited to linguistic field, but also social science. Scholars who support *gairaigo* concentrated on its enrichment of the corpus, imagery, nuance, and its internationalizing effects [19]. *Gairaigo* is usually associated with fashion, elitism and innovation, therefore using loanwords is an approach to seek for the identification of a fashionable, elite and innovative group. Since *gairaigo* integrated into Japanese language with the importing of advanced technologies and ideologies from the western world, it has permeated into every corner of society and become an indispensable part of Japanese language. Obviously, people who engage in some modern careers, like international business and fashion industry, are more inclined to use *gairaigo* for they are heavily influenced by English counties. The massive use of *gairaigo* is conformed to the requirements of social development to some extent, and it also meets the individual's needs of social classification.

順位	分野別	語数 (%)	語例
1	服装 美容	122 (15.7)	アパレルデザイン：既成服のデザイン サクシヨンマシン：真空脱水機
2	機械 器具	74 (9.5)	デュアルスポーツ：二人で行うスポーツ
3	スポーツ 娯楽	66 (8.5)	
4	経済 経営	64 (8.3)	インデクセーション：物価スライド制
5	食生活	59 (7.6)	カレーソース：カレーで調理したソース
6	文化 教育 芸術	50 (7.6)	
7	動植物	43 (5.5)	ネグリチュード：黒人文化
8	物理 化学 医学	36 (4.6)	サンドスネック：砂漠に住む蛇
9	工学	33 (4.3)	ノーベリウム：人工放射性元素の一つ
10	広告 マスコミ	31 (4.0)	ダッチドア：上下別々に開くドア
11	政治 組織 軍事	30 (3.9)	メディアレブ：媒体販売代行業者
12	交通 輸送	20 (2.6)	パーソナルディプロマシー：個人外交
13	写真 印刷	17 (2.2)	エクスプレス：急行。急行列車
14	宇宙	13 (1.7)	スーパーバソクロ：超整色性フィルム
15	宗教	7 (0.9)	アジェナ：アメリカの宇宙ロケット
16	その他	110 (14.2)	スーファイ：回教の一派 クレバー：賢い。利口な。

Fig. 1. Loanwords in Japanese and the classification.

We cannot paint everyone with the same brush, the positive influence of the usage of *gairaigo* should be noticed, and there would not be only one solution to solve all problems brought by the massive use of loanwords.

V. CONCLUSION

The National Institute for Japanese language and linguistics suggested replacing *gairaigo* with beautiful traditional Japanese. Paraphrasing incomprehensible and redundant *gairaigo* with appropriate Japanese words is reasonable and applicable; but it should be noticed that *gairaigo* has unique functions in Japanese and these words are hard to be paraphrased in a short period of time.

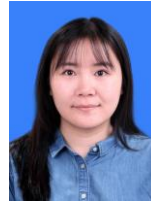
The key to successfully solve the controversial issue about the massive use of *gairaigo* lies in two fundamental rules: one is to build the standardized system of using loanwords in the government and mass media. Government is responsible for making policy, although government is not able to force everyone to stop overusing loanwords in his or her normal life, it should formulate some regulations to standardize the use of appropriate Japanese language in government documents, speeches, broadcasts, newspapers, textbooks and so on. Mass media is in charge of guiding people to paraphrase inappropriate *gairaigo* in their daily life. Mass media need to play a significant role in affecting the public opinion on protecting traditional Japanese language and reasonably make use of *gairaigo*.

The other one is to acknowledge the different functions of *gairaigo* to distinct groups of people, to allow but regulate their usage of *gairaigo*. The policy makers ought to understand the different requirements of *gairaigo* of different social groups and try to stratify them with different strategies. For example, because young generations are easily fascinated with foreign and fresh culture, it is reasonable for them to demand a large usage of *gairaigo* in fashion magazines; whereas some official reports from government should avoid overuse of intricate *gairaigo* terms because the older generation will be confused or even feel discriminated by this situation. Based on preserving traditional Japanese language and promoting the unique function of *gairaigo*, it is essential to adjust the current language education and usage to satisfy different requirements for different people.

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