

# Loanwords in Japanese

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**A**s the last article was a little heavy, and even somewhat controversial, I'll make today's article more light and entertaining.

Just as the French Academy, the academic overlord of the French language, does not like English words to be adopted into French, there is an underlying opposition to foreign words—especially English ones—being used in Japanese.

From time to time, a list of foreign words whose use is discouraged is published by the national Institute for Japanese Language, and alternative existing Japanese words are recommended instead. Despite such efforts, plenty of foreign words continue to be used.

Generally, this is because the foreign words either sound trendier or imply meanings not covered by existing Japanese words.

Certainly, the adoption of foreign words into the Japanese language is not a modern phenomenon. Starting with Japan's initial contact with China around the fifth century, numerous Chinese words have been absorbed. These are called *kango* (*kan* stands for an ancient Chinese dynasty and *go* for word), as opposed to *wago*, words of genuinely Japanese origin. *Kango* have been used for so long, and become so integral to Japanese that people do not realize that they are in fact "foreign." The situation is comparable to the great number of English words that are, in fact, of Latin and Greek origin.

In addition to Chinese, a number of Portuguese words were adopted here because of visits by the Jesuits. *Pan* (bread) and *Iesu* (Jesus) are two such words in common use. But most of the words have long since disappeared.

In modern times, after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, many scholars and officials were dispatched to Europe and the United States to learn modern institutions, ideas and technologies. New Japanese words were often created to represent new notions, and it was at that time that a number of important words still in use today, including 自由, *jiyu*, "freedom," 社会, *shakai*, "society," 郵便, *yubin*, "postal system," 会社, *kaisha*, "company," etc., were invented. Virtually all of these carefully created Japanese words are written with *kanji*; they are called *waseikango*, "Japanese-made *kanji* words." (Interestingly, many of these words were then reexported to China, adding to China's vocabulary in the course of its own modernization.)

At the same time, many words were adopted as they were, meaning without translation into *kanji*. These borrowings reflect the country of contact. As modern medicine was mainly brought to Japan from Germany, many German medical terms became a part of Japanese. Today, doctors still use word such as *karute* (Karte, medical chart), *kuranke* (Kranke, patient), *mesu* (Messer, scalpel), etc.

Many skiing and mountaineering terms came into Japanese through introduction by Austrians; hence words such as, *gerende* (Gelaende, ski slope), *sutokku* (Stock, ski poles), *zairu* (Seil, rope), *pikkeru* (Pickel, ice pick), are used. Like English, many fashion and cosmetics terms came from French.

Nowadays, as the result of an overwhelming U.S. influence, most foreign words come from English and are largely adopted as they are, without the creation of new Japanese equivalents, although pronunciations are obviously distorted to fit the Japanese language.

In this fast-moving age, with its constant innovation and invention, new words are always emerging. Understandably, many new words are short-lived, and may not be worth the trouble involved in creating good equivalents.

Some readers may have noted the rarity of foreign words used as verbs or adjectives. This is because Japanese is form-based—i.e. "form illustrates function." For instance, all verbs have a (*r*)*u* ending and all adjectives end in *ai*, *ii*, *ui* or *oi*. With such strict form requirements, we cannot expect foreign words to conform. So all loanwords inevitably fall into the noun category, as it is the only word class without form restrictions. This is why, when English verbs or adjectives are adopted into Japanese, they are treated as nouns.

What happens then if you want to use the English verbs "mail" or "fax" in Japanese? You add the most versatile Japanese verb, *suru*, to it; hence, *meeru-suru* (literally, do (e)mail) or *fakkusu-suru* (do fax). This is similar to English, which has no form restrictions on words, and therefore can use nouns as verbs, as in "I'm *mailing* it to you," "She has just *faxed* it to them."

Nevertheless, there is no rule without exceptions. There are a few loanwords that have become Japanese verbs without the addition of *suru*. So, here is a quiz for you: Try to guess the meaning and original English word for the following dozen Japanese verbs. (Answers are at bottom of page)

- |                         |                          |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. ダブる <i>daburu</i>    | 2. ハモる <i>hamoru</i>     |
| 3. ネグる <i>negoru</i>    | 4. ネグる <i>neguru</i>     |
| 5. トラブる <i>toraburu</i> | 6. バブる <i>baburu</i>     |
| 7. タクる <i>takuru</i>    | 8. バグる <i>baguru</i>     |
| 9. ヘジる <i>hejiru</i>    | 10. ダブる <i>dafuru</i>    |
| 11. サボる <i>saboru</i>   | 12. パニクる <i>panikuru</i> |

## Original word

## Meaning

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 1. double    | double up; make a double fault in tennis |
| 2. harmony   | achieve good harmony in concert          |
| 3. negotiate | conduct a (business) negotiation         |
| 4. neglect   | neglect                                  |
| 5. trouble   | become a problem                         |
| 6. bubble    | have a bubble economy                    |
| 7. taxi      | grab a taxi cab                          |
| 8. bug       | (a computer) has a bug                   |
| 9. hesitate  | hesitate                                 |
| 10. duff     | duff (miss) a (golf) ball                |
| 11. sabotage | play hooky, skip class                   |
| 12. panic    | panic, do something in a panicky way     |

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