

# The three-tier <sup>の</sup> vocabulary

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Most languages have different words that basically mean the same thing. In English we find: understand and comprehend, begin and commence, make a contract and enter a contract, handbook and manual, and many more. In these cases one word is Germanic in origin and the other Latin. Most of the time the former is less formal than the latter.

Language is a product of history, and as such it reflects past interactions between cultures. Japanese, of course, is no exception. Its contemporary vocabulary could be described, in many instances, as three-tiered, composed first of indigenous Japanese words, then of loanwords from Chinese (contact with China began around the 6th century) and finally of large numbers of English words borrowed in modern times, principally after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. At different times in Japan's history, the Chinese and English languages have been very influential. For other shorter periods Portuguese, Dutch, French and German have all had their day as sources for adoption, sometimes limited to specialized fields. Medicine in Japan, for instance, uses many German words, for historical reasons.

The impact of these borrowed words is all around us every day. If you work in Japan, you may hear the word *uchiawase* to describe a casual meeting. This word is genuinely Japanese. But you will also notice people saying *kaigi* as well. This word is of Chinese origin and usually refers to a formally organized meeting. Add to this the word *mītingu* which, of course, comes from English. Another set of examples which illustrate this pattern of using three words would be words meaning "speech": *hanashi* (Japanese origin), *kōen* (Chinese) and *supīchi* (English).

Generally speaking, words that are originally Japanese sound softer and more casual, and cover a broader meaning; Chinese-origin words are considered more stiff and formal, and are used in a more limited context; English-origin words are modern, trendy and handy. In the above example set, *kōen* is a speech or lecture given by a professional speaker or lecturer while *supīchi* can be a speech made by anyone at an event. *Hanashi*, on the other hand, is broad, ranging from a chat to a lecture or even storytelling.

When foreign words are adopted in Japanese, there must be a reason driving the adoption. One reason could be that Japanese did not have the particular concept which the foreign word indicates. In this case, brand new concepts, whether products or events, are introduced together with loanwords, resulting in cultural enrichment. Currently, a flood of computer-related English words is proof of how computer-culture has penetrated Japanese (as well as most other languages in the world). Novel ideas,

items, notions and technologies are being born one after another and added to the vocabulary.

In this area, all such English words are expressed using katakana. Some Japanese oppose this trend, in vain. They try to use what they think are Japanese words, but in fact these words are of Chinese origin. In my opinion, these people are merely proposing the substitution of one foreign word (Chinese) for another (English). Because of the long history of using Chinese vocabulary, kanji words are hardly recognized as foreign by most Japanese—comparable to how many Latin- and Greek-origin words are taken as English despite their foreign origins.

Another reason Japanese is prone to accepting many foreign words is because it is a polysyllabic language. Polysyllabic languages tend to create lengthy words as different discrete concepts are added to each other to denote new ones. Chinese, on the other hand, is a typical monosyllabic language in which independent concepts are commonly expressed with one syllable. Chinese words are short and meanings are contained in single sounds. Combining two, three or four Chinese syllables still leaves one with brief words which can carry sophisticated meaning.

Numbers are a good example of words where the original indigenous Japanese words have been dropped. Although for counting up to 10 the traditional numbering system (*hitotsu*, *futatsu*, *mittsu* and so on) is still widely used, beyond 10 the Chinese system is used exclusively, such as *jūichi* ("10-1" for 11) and *sanjūku* ("3-10-9" for 39). Traditionally these words were *tō-amari-hitotsu* and *miso-amari-kokonotsu*, far lengthier and not very efficient for mathematics.

The name of the sun goddess who is supposed to be the ultimate deity in Shinto is Amaterasu-Omikami; this lengthy name translates something like Great God Shining Heaven. But it is not just names; most words get lengthy as other words are tacked on, combining many syllables. Having accepted kanji, Japanese acquired a powerful tool to create sophisticated new notions, and this advantage was for a time exploited. All the modern Western notions, institutions and items introduced at the time of the opening of Japan in the late 1800s and thereafter were expressed by creating new words using kanji, such as *jiyū* (freedom), *shakai* (society), *minshushugi* (democracy) and *denwa* (telephone). Interestingly, these Chinese-style words created in Japan were then exported back to China via Chinese scholars who studied here.

These days, Japanese seem to have become lazy and opted for taking the easy way out. Instead of creating new words using kanji for novel notions, they just adopt English words as they are. A simple way to see this laziness is by keeping track of Hollywood movie titles in Japanese. Titles used to be translated into genuine Japanese including kanji words, reflecting the original meaning, but most contemporary movies are not. Can you guess what *Turū Raizu* is? Sure, *True Lies!* And that, fortunately or unfortunately, is no lie, either.

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