

TEACHING *KATAKANA* LOANWORDS TO LEARNERS OF JAPANESE:
CURRENT ISSUES AND PEDAGOGICAL SUGGESTIONS

日本語非母語話者に対するカタカナ語教育：現状と教授法の課題について

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1. Introduction

The complexity of the rules for converting English words to their *katakana* counterparts is often pointed out by scholars who specialize in linguistics and/or JSL/JFL education (Quackenbush 1977, Preston & Yamagata 2004, Jinnai 2008, Nakayama et al. 2008, and Mochizuki 2012, etc.). However, it seems that the difficulty of learning *katakana* loanwords for L2 speakers of Japanese is often not fully recognized by teachers of Japanese, especially by the ones who are also native speakers of Japanese. In addition, even though Japanese textbooks introduce *katakana* loanwords as part of the Japanese vocabulary system, they do not provide explicit instructions on how the conversion from English to their *katakana* counterparts is processed, and the extent to which learners can use *katakana* loanwords as a part of the Japanese vocabulary. For example, in *Genki I: An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese*, which is one of the leading beginning-level Japanese textbooks for the English speaking market, the *katakana* characters are simply explained as “normally used for writing loanwords and foreign names” (p. 24) in the introduction part before the beginning of lesson 1, and the book simply keeps introducing *katakana* loanwords along with non-*katakana* vocabulary items that originate from the Japanese language. In addition, in *Yookoso!: An Invitation to Contemporary Japanese*, the usage of *katakana* for loanwords and onomatopoeic expressions is discussed when the *katakana* syllabary is introduced, but no special attention is given to *katakana* loanwords after the initial introduction of the *katakana* syllabary. As represented in the treatment of *katakana* loanwords in these textbooks, it seems that learners of Japanese are not receiving enough input on the actual conversion process from English words to their *katakana* counterparts. Furthermore, due to the lack of input on the conversion rules, learners of Japanese may not be aware of the level of complexity of the conversion process from English to *katakana*. There are some resources available for advanced learners of Japanese such as *A Guide to Modern Japanese Loanwords* by Webb (1990), *Tuttle New Dictionary of Loanwords in Japanese* by Kamiya (1994), and *Yoku Tsukau Katakana* by Sasaki et al. (2001), but those resources are lists of *katakana* loanwords rather than the guidance on the practical process of converting English words into their *katakana* counterparts.

In the present paper, we first examine the conversion rules from English words to their *katakana* representations, and which aspects of the conversion rules cannot be intuitively processed by L2 speakers of Japanese. Second, recognizing that the complexities of English to *katakana* conversion rules are still under investigation and further research must be conducted, the present paper suggests that learners of Japanese can benefit from understanding the basic conversion rules from English to *katakana*,

since this enables them to utilize their knowledge of the English language in the recognition and production of their L2 Japanese.

2. Issues in Learning *Katakana* Loanwords

There are numerous factors that make the learning of *katakana* loanwords more difficult than it intuitively seems for native speakers of Japanese. We do not have enough space to discuss all of the linguistic factors contributing to the difficulties such as different syllable structures between Japanese and English in this paper, but it appears that the most overarching and fundamental source of difficulties is the narrow range of intuitive acceptability when English words are converted into their *katakana* representations. For example, when the English word *bracelet* [breɪslət] is converted into *katakana*, *buresuretto* (ブレスレット) is the only acceptable *katakana* representation for the English word, and other representations such as **buresureto* (*ブレスレト), **bueesuretto* (*ブレースレット), and **breisuretto* (*ブレイスレット) are all considered incorrect by native speakers of Japanese. In addition, this type of narrow range of acceptability is not limited to the *katakana* loanwords that are already integrated into the Japanese vocabulary, but also prevalent even when English words that are not well-known to Japanese people are converted into *katakana*. Unlike *bracelet/buresuretto*, the word *ambulance* [æmbjələns] is not used as part of the Japanese vocabulary, but the *katakana* representation of it must be *anbyuransu* (アンビュランス), not **anburance* (*アンブランズ) or **amubyurance* (*アムビュランス).

As Martin (2004) points out, *katakana* is heavily used as phonetic guides in English language classes in Japan, and this repeated exposure to *katakana* English may be the source of the narrow range of intuitive acceptability on the *katakana* representations of English words. Martin states on English education in Japan that “the general use – and general usefulness – of *katakana*, as well as its presence as an aid in English-language textbooks – inadvertently assures the fossilization of Japanese intonation and pronunciation patterns in English when practiced by both teachers and students, adding a crucial block to communication” (p. 53). As highlighted by this statement, most Japanese people have been repeatedly exposed to *katakana* English because of school education, and this could be the source of the homogeneous intuitions on *katakana* English representations among native speakers of Japanese.

If we pay close attention to the phonological transformation process from English to *katakana*, we can easily find many elements that can be challenging for learners of Japanese. For example, the city name *Milwaukee* [mɪlwa:ki] is typically transformed into its *katakana* representation as *miruwookii* (ミルウオーキー), and if the conversion is done differently, native speakers would feel the conversion is not done correctly. The tricky part in the English-to-*katakana* conversion process is the fact that it is based on the conventional traditions, rather than the actual phonetic properties of the original English words. In other words, even when the *katakana* representation for a given English word best represents the original phonetic properties of the English word, it still sounds odd to native speakers of Japanese if the *katakana* representation deviates from the conventionalized ways of English to *katakana* conversion. For instance, when converting *Milwaukee* to its *katakana* counterpart, **miruwaakii* (*ミルワーキー) may be closer to the original North American pronunciation of the city name *Milwaukee* compared to

miruwookii (ミルウオーキー). However, since **miruwaakii* deviates from the conventionalized transformational patterns, it sounds odd as the *katakana* representation of *Milwaukee*. As noted by Irwin (2011, p. 79), the conventionalized conversion rules from English to *katakana* are strongly influenced by the British foreign advisors who were hired by the Japanese government in the late 19th century, and this could explain why *woo* (ウオー) is used for [wa:] instead of *waa* (ワー) in *miruwookii* (ミルウオーキー). Historical backgrounds as above may explain why accurate phonetic representations of English words in *katakana* often result in an unnatural impression for native speakers of Japanese, but this type of convention may be highly counter-intuitive for learners of Japanese because they cannot rely on their knowledge of English phonetic properties when they convert English words into their *katakana* representations.

Another type of source of difficulties for learners of Japanese is the inconsistent primacy of phonetic properties and spelling when English words are converted into their *katakana* representations. For example, the English word *media* [mi:dijə] is typically represented as *media* (メディア) in *katakana*, and *medium* [mi:dijəm] is represented as *midiamu* (ミディアム). As we observe in the two examples, the pronunciation of the first syllables in *media* and *medium* are identical since they are both [mi:], but one is converted into *me* (メ) and the other one is converted into *mi* (ミ). From examining the discrepancy between the two examples, it is speculated that the spelling of the word is prioritized for *media* in the conversion process and *me* (メ) is used for the first syllable, while *mi* (ミ) is used for *medium* due to the prioritization of phonetic properties over the spelling. Interestingly, the first syllable of the English word *meeting* [mi:tɪŋ] is also [mi:], which is the same as [mi:] in *media* or *medium*, but *meeting* is written as *miitingu* (ミーティング) in *katakana* with *mii* (ミー) for the [mi:] syllable. It is highly likely that the different ways of converting the [mi:] component into *katakana* for *medium* and *meeting* are due to the spelling differences of the two words, but examples like these again suggest that having knowledge on the phonetic properties of the original English words is not sufficient for generating the *katakana* counterpart for a given English word. Considering the consistency in English to *katakana* conversions among native speakers of Japanese, it is quite plausible that native speakers of Japanese can select the primacy of spelling or pronunciation by their intuitive knowledge, but L2 speakers of Japanese may not have such intuitive skills for choosing spelling or pronunciation over the other. Therefore, L2 speakers of Japanese may end up generating *katakana* English representations that sound odd, or simply feel that they do not have enough information for processing the conversion from English to *katakana*.

Furthermore, the challenges that L2 speakers face in the use of *katakana* loanwords is not limited to the actual transformation process from English to *katakana*. As briefly mentioned earlier, one type of under-investigated challenge in the use of *katakana* loanwords is the upper limit of usages in Japanese without sounding unnatural. Well-known *katakana* loanwords such as *basu* (バス) ‘bus’ and *paatii* (パーティー) ‘party’ are introduced in elementary-level textbooks, and using them frequently is not problematic because they are fully integrated into the Japanese vocabulary system. However, many *katakana* loanwords fall into a “gray area” in regards to naturalness and understandability when they are used in communicative situations. For example, most Japanese people know that the English word *chair* and also *chea* (チェア) as a *katakana* loanword that corresponds *isu* ‘chair’ in Japanese, but when a speaker utters *kono heya ni*

chea ga arimasu yo ‘there is a chair in this room’ instead of *kono heya ni isu ga arimasu yo*, most people would feel that the sentence sounds somewhat unnatural. This unnaturalness may give an impression that the speaker of the sentence is not a fully competent speaker of Japanese, but the sentence itself is clearly functional for conveying the propositional message because *chea* (チェア) is fully understandable for a typical native speaker of Japanese. Similarly, since *appointment* is also a well-known English word among speakers of Japanese, L2 speakers can use *apointomento* (アポイントメント) as part of their Japanese utterances, and the utterance would be functional in communicative situations. Needless to say, using *yoyaku* ‘appointment’ instead of *apointomento* would make the utterance sound more natural, but communicative values are not lost with the use of *apointomento* because of the shared recognition of the word.

In contrast, when the *katakana* counterpart of the English word *experiment*, which is *ekusuperimento* (エクスペリメント), is used as in *senshuu no ekusuperimento wa umaku ikanakatta* ‘last week’s experiment didn’t go well,’ the sentence may not be functional for communicative purposes since the English word *experiment* is not as well-known as *chair* or *appointment* among speakers of Japanese. In this case, since *ekusuperimento* may not be understood by Japanese people, the Japanese word *jikken* ‘experiment’ must be used. It appears that native speakers of Japanese, including the ones who are fluent in English, have a keen sense on which English words can or cannot be used in *katakana* representations as part of Japanese utterances because of their shared recognition on the level of Japanese people’s knowledge of English. However, L2 speakers of Japanese may not possess such intuitive judgmental skills for the understandability of English words when they are included in Japanese utterances. Therefore, for L2 speakers of Japanese, it may be difficult to instantly judge that *apointomento* is usable when they do not know the word *yoyaku*, while *ekusuperimento* cannot be used as a replacement word for *jikken*.

3. Pedagogical Suggestions

In the previous section, we have discussed some of the difficulties that learners of Japanese encounter in learning *katakana* loanwords. In this section, we would like to discuss possible pedagogical approaches that can be used for better learning of *katakana* loanwords.

First of all, we would like to emphasize that *katakana* loanwords are one of the most difficult-to-teach pedagogical elements in learning the Japanese language, and more thorough instructions should be given to learners of Japanese. As teachers of Japanese always observe when they correct students’ homework, the majority of students struggle with the usage of *katakana* loanwords. Needless to say, one apparent reason for students’ mistakes is the difficulties associated with the conversion system itself, but we speculate that the lack of input from the textbook or the instructor maybe be another significant cause for the high frequency of errors in the production of *katakana* loanwords by learners of Japanese. The increased amount of instruction we propose includes a greater number of *katakana* loanwords taught to students, and the inclusion of explicit instructions on the conversion rules from English to their *katakana* counterparts. Unfortunately, due to the high complexity of the English to *katakana* transformation rules, we have yet to establish a holistic conversion system that can be used as a reference by

learners of Japanese. Also, there are many *katakana* loanwords that do not follow the typical conversion patterns as we observe in the transformations from *coffee* to *koohee* (コーヒー) and *cake* to *keeki* (ケーキ). However, the *katakana* loanwords that exhibit irregularity are the ones that are frequently used, and the majority of *katakana* loanwords still follow the conventionalized conversion patterns from English to *katakana*. This is somewhat analogous to the relationship between irregular verbs and regular verbs in English, and this indicates that learners still benefit from learning the conversion rules even though the rules are not universally applicable.

By teaching the English to *katakana* conversion rules to learners of Japanese, various positive effects are expected compared to the case where the rules are not explicitly taught. The biggest benefit from the inclusion of the conversion rules in the curriculum is the massive increase of available vocabulary items because of the positive transfer from the learner's knowledge of English to their L2 Japanese. Because of the English language's present status as one of the major global languages, most learners of Japanese, including the ones from non-English-speaking regions, already have the knowledge of basic-level English vocabulary. In addition, due to the abundant usage of English loanwords and the inclusion of English in the Japanese education system, basic-level English words are mostly comprehensible for Japanese people. Therefore, learning the English to *katakana* conversion rules serves as a bridge between the shared knowledge of English between learners of Japanese and L1 speakers of Japanese.

Another reason for the necessity of teaching the English to *katakana* conversion rules is the increased understandability of English words when they are stated in Japanese utterances. Even when a Japanese speaker knows a given English word, if the word is enunciated with the original English phonetic properties, it may be difficult for him or her to recognize the English word. For instance, when the English word *model* is enunciated as [madl] in the original pronunciation in a Japanese utterance, Japanese people may not recognize the word even though they know the widely-used loanword *moderu* (モデル) 'model.' The same can be said for the written language. If *butter* [bʌtər] is written as **bata* (*バタ) in *katakana* in a Japanese sentence, readers of the sentence may not understand what **bata* refers to even though the correct *katakana* representation *bataa* (バター) is already integrated into the Japanese vocabulary system. In order to avoid such communicative disruptions, the conversion rules from English to *katakana* should be taught to learners of Japanese.

Another benefit of teaching the English to *katakana* conversion rules is the increased naturalness when English words are embedded in Japanese utterances. Teachers of Japanese often hear their students throw English words into Japanese utterances, and many of them do not even attempt to modify the original words' pronunciation into Japanese sounding pronunciation. This phenomenon exhibits that learners of Japanese already recognize that it is possible to use some English words in Japanese utterances as long as the addressee understands the English word, but it also means that they are not aware of the fact that English words in Japanese utterances must be uttered in the *katakana* form in order to sound natural. Therefore, by learning the English to *katakana* conversion rules, learners of Japanese will be able to include English words in Japanese utterances without sounding excessively foreign or unnatural.

The remaining challenge is figuring out how and to what extent teachers of Japanese should teach the conversion rules from *katakana* to English to learners of

Japanese. Even though it may be difficult to teach the complete conversion system to learners of Japanese due to its complexity, we still argue that learners of Japanese should at least receive instructions on the known part of the conversion system. Any language is an immensely complicated systematic entity, and there are many linguistic components that are still under investigation. In regards to the Japanese language, linguists are still yet to fully decipher the functional properties of particles such as *wa* and *ga*, and also grammatical elements such as the so-called *n desu* structure. However, teachers of Japanese cannot avoid teaching these particles and structures to learners of Japanese, and when they teach, it must be done with the recognition that there are some aspects of them that cannot be simply explained. We argue that the same principle holds true for the teaching of English to *katakana* conversion rules, and we must teach the rules even though we recognize that there will be some unexplainable parts left for learners of Japanese.

As for each component of the conversion rules from English to *katakana*, we provide some examples in this paper. Some of the conversion rules are quite intuitive for learners of Japanese, and they are usually not problematic. For example, the alphabet *p* or the [p] component in English is converted into the Japanese *pa pi pu pe po* (パピプペポ) line in *katakana* as in the conversions from *park* [park] to *paaku* (パーク) and *pose* [pouz] to *poozu* (ポーズ). However, not all conversion rules are as simple as the *p* or [p] component. For example, for English words that end with *-er* [-ər] as in *butter* [bʌtər] and *enter* [entər], the *-er* component is transformed into *aa* as in *bataa* (バター) and *entaa* (エンター). Similarly, as we observe in the transformation from *capture* [kæptʃər] to *kyapuchaa* (キャプチャー), the [-er] to *aa* conversion is still kept the same even when the spelling of the word is *-re*, not *-er*. Another example of conversions that cannot be correctly processed without explicit knowledge is the conversions that involve [ð] or [θ] in English. For example, *brother* [brʌθər] is always converted to *burazaa* in *katakana* (ブラザー), but the transformation from [ð] to [z] may be counter-intuitive for L2 speakers of Japanese because [ð] and [z] are completely different consonants in the English language. For learners of Japanese, unless such rules are explicitly taught, they may not be able to correctly process the conversion from English to *katakana* due to the lack of information.

What must be taught along with the conversion rules from English to *katakana* is how *katakana* loanwords fit into the Japanese grammar system. The usages of *katakana* loanwords that are derived from English nouns are not difficult, because they simply stay as nouns in their *katakana* representations in Japanese. One of the few elements that could be an issue is the treatment of the plural form, since Japanese nouns do not have the plural form, and it is the same for nouns in the *katakana* loanword format. Therefore, for ‘I bought two balls,’ speakers must say *booru o futatsu kaimashita* (ボールを二つ買いました), not **booruzu o futatsu kaimashita* (*ボールズを二つ買いました). Adjectives and verbs call for further special attention when they are used as *katakana* loanwords. *Katakana* loanwords that are transformed from English adjectives such as *denjarasu* (デンジャラス) ‘dangerous’ and *ekisaitingu* (エキサイティング) ‘exciting’ are used as so-called na-adjectives in Japanese sentences, as in *denjarasu na machi* (デンジャラスな街) ‘a dangerous city’ and *ekisaitingu na ryokoo* (エキサイティングな旅行) ‘an exciting trip.’ For *katakana* loanwords that are converted from English verbs, the basic pattern is the addition of the verb *suru* ‘to do’ such as *oopun suru* (オープンする) ‘to open’ and

esukeepu suru (エスケープする) ‘to escape.’ Also, this pattern is the same for phrasal verbs such as *lift up* and *shut down*, and simply *suru* is added after the whole phrasal verb, generating *rifutoappu suru* (リフトアップする) and *shattodaun suru* (シャットダウンする). The usages of *katakana* loanwords we have listed here may be quite intuitive for native speakers of Japanese, but if no information is given at all to learners of Japanese, they may not be able to use *katakana* loanwords as grammatical components appropriately in Japanese sentences.

Finally, what is necessary after the explicit instruction on the English to *katakana* conversion rules is negative feedback sessions and repetition drills. We have to admit that even after explicit instruction, learners of Japanese are still expected to make numerous mistakes due to the complexity of the conversion system, as well as the existence of *katakana* loanwords that do not follow the typical conversion patterns. Fortunately, because of the shared and homogeneous intuitions on *katakana* loanwords among speakers of Japanese, it is not difficult for teachers of Japanese to spot a mistake even when he or she cannot explain why the *katakana* representation generated by the student is incorrect. Also, repetitive drills are expected to be effective for fully implementing the correct *katakana* representation for each loanword, just like it is effective for other learning materials such as particles and verb conjugations.

4. Conclusion

As Nakayama et al. (2008) argue, teachers of Japanese must raise their awareness of the difficulty of learning *katakana* loanwords for L2 speakers of Japanese, and more pedagogical attention should be given to *katakana* loanwords. In this paper, we have discussed some of the major causes of the difficulties of learning *katakana* loanwords for learners of Japanese. Also, we have argued that explicit instructions on the conversion rules from English to *katakana* should be included in the curriculum because of the positive consequences that could be brought by the inclusion of the rules. By learning the skills to convert English words into their *katakana* representations, learners of Japanese can significantly increase the number of vocabulary items that they can use for communicative purposes, which results in the positive transfer from English to their L2 Japanese. Needless to say, the conversion rules are very complicated, and some parts of the rules cannot be explained in a simple manner to learners of Japanese. However, we still believe that the benefits of teaching override the difficulties, and teachers should not be afraid of the challenge of teaching the conversion rules from English to *katakana*.

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