**To Grandparents, English Word Trend Isn't 'Naisu'**

**by Howard W. French**

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When Ayako Komata, 18, talks fashion with her friends, she throws around terms like "hippu hangu," or hip-hugging, jeans and "shadoh" (eye shadow), and ponders their effect on "chou naisu gai" (very nice-looking guys). This contemporary Japanese, spoken at breakneck pace and filled with English-sounding words, is incomprehensible to her grandparents. So when they complain that her underpants are showing, Ayako patiently explains that the fashion these days is to wear jeans just above the pelvis, which someone decided should be called "hippu hangu."

The Japanese government, like many older Japanese citizens, is unimpressed by these linguistic imports that are transforming the language. Invoking a widening communication gap in three-generation households, among other reasons, it has decided to act. In an effort reminiscent of France's doomed bid to halt the proliferation of English words in the language of Molière, the government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi recently appointed a panel to propose measures to stem the foreign word corruption in the language of Lady Murasaki, author of the 11th-century "Tale of Genji."

Their target is words written in katakana, a script largely reserved for writing the exploding number of trendy words imported from Western languages, especially English - even though Japanese has been borrowing Western words, changing their pronunciation and giving them a Japanese flavor, at least since the 19th century. Before that it did the same thing on an even larger scale with Chinese words.

With his permed mane, snappy dress and plain speech, Mr. Koizumi himself has been a distinct trend setter. But the politician, who studied at the London School of Economics in his youth, has drawn a line when it comes to the purity of the Japanese language. He was moved to action not by the puzzling speech of teenagers, but by the English-infused and equally difficult-to-track bureaucrat-speak that surrounds him - involving clunky Japanese derivations of things like outsourcing, back office, redundancy and accountability.

"How can ordinary people understand if I don't understand?" the prime minister complained during a recent strategy session on how to revive Japan's technology sector. Among the offending words was incubator, rendered "inkyubeetaa" when pronounced according to the katakana spelling. "You have got to use expressions that are more easily understood," Mr. Koizumi said.

No firm regulations have yet been introduced, but the Council on the Japanese Language, a body somewhat akin to the Académie Française, is already honing its powers of persuasion. It says it will analyze newly arrived vocabulary each year and advise the government and the media to avoid terms it regards as unwanted or as confusing intruders.

"We do not think that katakana words will disappear from the Japanese language, because there are just too many arriving all the time," said Satoshi Yamaguchi, director of the Japanese language division of Japan's Cultural Agency. He continued, "The problem is there are so many words that most people don't understand." Among the recent offenders he cited were negotiation (negoshieishon), literacy (riterashii) and interactive (intarakutibu). New terms that mysteriously cleared the comprehension barrier, as measured by the language agency, included home helper (herupaa) and treatment (toriitomento).

Some language experts here think Mr. Koizumi is treading much too lightly. Rather than seeing the growth of English-derived terms as an inevitable side effect of globalization, which is striking cultures around the world, they see the spread of katakana words here as a uniquely Japanese peril.

"We Japanese have an inferiority complex over language which has turned into a dangerous longing," said Chikara Kato, a professor of linguistics at Sugiyama Jogakuin University in Nagoya. "As a result, Japanese youngsters are taking a distance from Japanese and favoring katakana words. If you go into a clothing store that caters to young people, you'll find that everything is in English." In fact, although borrowings from English are by far the most numerous, they are not alone in invading the Japanese language. Many medical terms come from German, and in conformity with national stereotypes, the language of romance has been invaded by French. A young woman who sleeps out for a night, unannounced to her parents, is said to have pulled a "puchi iede," or roughly a petit, or little, night out - "iede" is standard Japanese.

People like Professor Kato become incensed over the thought that entire sentences can be strung together in contemporary Japanese using nothing but Western-derived words, save for an occasional Japanese verb or particle.

Try for example: "Kasuaru use of katakana is not reezunaburu." Reasonable or not, the casual use of katakana seems almost uncontrollable, and most Japanese people, especially those under 50, seem unconcerned about the debate. The love affair with English is so well established here that a Japanese purification program would have to erase everything from the name of the country's perennial baseball favorites, the Yomiuri Giants, to renaming virtually every part in their automobiles, from the doa and taiya to the mootaa (door, tire and motor).

For his part, in fact, Tomatsu Komata, the 79-year-old grandfather of Ayako, affects nonchalance about the subject, claiming to have no difficulty understanding.

At 43, Sumiko Komata, right in the middle of this yawning language divide, knows better, and slyly begins to pepper her speech with borrowed terms like dilemma, policy and mental. A few moments later she asks granddad if he understands, and he throws up his hands in surrender.

"To tell you the truth, if we go to a restaurant and I don't understand what's on the menu, I just give it to her," Mr. Komata said, chuckling as he gestured toward his daughter-in-law. "With all the new words, half the time I have no idea what they are serving."

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