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Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

This Month's Topic: Loanwords and *Wasei Eigo*

I started studying Japanese 21 years ago in college, and I came to Japan to work about 18 years ago. Many people ask me, "Is Japanese difficult?" but I can honestly say that I have never really thought that *Japanese* words are difficult. Yes, of course kanji and honorifics and such take a long time to learn, but since they're so clearly different from English, I'm able to switch my brain to "Japanese mode." However, whenever I come across new words written in katakana, my brain glitches, and I wonder, "Is this English?" Therefore, loanwords (words that originated in other countries) and *wasei eigo* (Japan-made English) might be the most difficult part of Japanese for me.

Firstly, not all loan words come from English. Many of them come from other languages, such as French, German, and Portuguese. I only speak English, so naturally it's difficult for me to understand words from other languages. In addition, even if a loan word does come from English, the pronunciation and meaning are often different in Japanese. At first it felt very strange for me to force myself to pronounce English words the Japanese way, or use them with their Japanese meaning. Finally, *wasei eigo* words don't exist in English at all, so their meanings are often shrouded in mystery.



It's important to remember that loanwords and *wasei eigo* are not English. It took me a few years to realize that I should just memorize them as Japanese

words, and I think this is a difficult realization for many Japanese people who study English as well. My students often mistake loanwords and *wasei eigo* for English and casually add them to their English sentences. When they use loanwords and *wasei eigo* in class, I can understand them, because I've lived here for so long. However, someone without prior Japanese knowledge would be very confused. Once Japanese students learning English realize that loanwords and *wasei eigo* are actually Japanese words, their English will improve.

Now, I'm going share a list of loanwords and *wasei eigo* that I found particularly challenging or funny. Be careful when using them with English speakers! ★

• **CA (*cabin attendant*)**

English: flight attendant

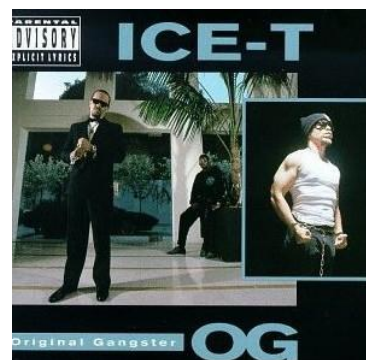
When I was teaching at a girls' school, many students said, "My dream is to be a CA." At first I had no clue what job they were talking about!

• **OB/OG (*old boy/old girl*)**

English: alumnus (singular), alumni (plural)

OB is an American brand of feminine hygiene products.

OG is short for "original gangster." It came from Black American gang culture, and it was used to refer to an



older, more senior member of the gang. Nowadays it has mostly lost its gang-related meaning, and it's used in slang to refer to someone cool whom you look up to, or someone who is really skilled at something and a pioneer in their field.

- アパート (*apart*)

English: apartment

In English, we don't shorten the word apartment. In American English, an apartment is a housing unit that people rent. A housing unit that people buy is called a condo. In Japanese, shorter apartment buildings made from wood are called *apart*, but taller reinforced concrete buildings are called *mansion*, even if they're rentals.

- アルバイト (*arbeit*)

English: part-time job

Arbeit comes from German, so I didn't understand this word at first. It was strange to me that the Japanese language differentiates between part-time jobs done by students and young people (アルバイト *arbeit*) and part-time jobs done by housewives and retirees (パート *part*). They're both called a "part-time job" in English.

- カンニング (*cunning*)

English: cheating

Cunning means clever, but in a sneaky way. We say, "Foxes are cunning animals," but we don't say "cunning" to mean copying answers from a friend's test. Though we might say, "Students who cheat are cunning."

- キーホルダー (*key holder*)

English: key chain

When I hear *key holder*, I picture a place to put your keys, like a cup holder in a car.



- コインランドリー (*coin laundry*)

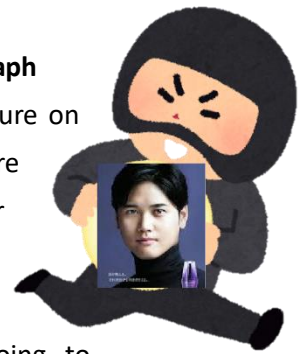
English: laundromat

Even though *coin laundry* is *wasei eigo*, I think most English speakers can imagine what it means. The word laundromat is a portmanteau of "laundry" and "automat." Automats were coin-operated fast-food restaurants.

- サイン (*sign*)

English: signature, autograph

You write your signature on documents, and if you're famous, you give your autograph to fans. If you say, "I got Shohei Ohtani's sign!" you're going to sound like you stole one of the many advertisements around town with Shohei Ohtani's face on it.



- サンド (*sand*)

English: sandwich

We don't shorten the word sandwich to *sand*, because sand belongs on the beach. Whenever I see "sand cookies" in Japan, I shudder. A cookie full of sand is not at all appetizing!



- シャープペンシル、シャープペン (*sharp pencil, sharpen*)

English: mechanical pencil

When I first heard the word *sharp pencil* used for what Americans call a mechanical pencil, I wondered, "Why is a pencil that you don't have to sharpen called a *sharp pencil*?" With how popular Japan is for robots and Gundam and the like, I would have thought that a name like *mecha pencil* would have been more fitting.

- スタイル (*style*)

English: figure

I was a young college student when I first came to Japan, so I used to get a lot of compliments. My host mother and female friends used to say, "You have nice *style*!" My preferred style has always been simple t-shirts and jeans, so I wondered, "What's so stylish about me?" Then I realized I had misunderstood. They weren't complimenting my fashion sense; they were complimenting my *figure*. Western people tend to shy away from commenting on other people's bodies, so you probably shouldn't tell someone, "You have a nice figure!"

- ・ ストーブ (*stove*)

English: heater

You can't live in Hokkaido without a heater, but when I first moved here, I didn't know the Japanese word for one. I was living in a very old house, and my local friend said, "In winter the pipes might freeze and burst, so you should leave your *stove* on." I was confused, because to me, a stove is a place where you cook dinner. I thought, "If I leave my stove on,

then my house will catch on fire. Sure, the pipes won't freeze that way, but then I'll have an even bigger problem!"



Then, I realized my friend was talking about my heater, not my stove. Crisis averted.

- ・ バイキング (*Viking*)

English: buffet, all-you-can-eat

Whenever I hear *Viking*, I picture the seafaring Scandinavian warriors who invaded lands across Europe and beyond. When I first learned that a *Viking* in Japanese is what we call a buffet in English, I figured, "Well, the Vikings were probably very hungry after all the raiding they did, so they wanted to eat a lot."

Buffet is a loanword in English as well, which originally came from France. We also say "all-you-can-eat."



- ・ ベビーカー (*baby car*)

English: stroller (US, Canada), pushchair, buggy, pram (UK, Australia, etc.)

Baby car might be my favorite *wasei eigo*. I always picture a baby driving a car, and I can't help but laugh. It's just too funny!

In America we call them strollers, but in other English speaking countries they have different names. Even though we all speak English, sometimes I have trouble understanding my friends from other English-speaking countries.



- ・ ペットボトル (*PET bottle*)

English: plastic bottle

PET stands for *polyethylene terephthalate*. In English we pronounce each letter, like "Pee-ee-tee." We don't pronounce it "pet," because that's a dog, cat, hamster, or other companion animal. If you say *PET bottle* in English, it sounds like you're keeping a plastic bottle as a pet. Since it wouldn't need any food or water, it would be a pretty easy pet to care for!



- ・ マンション (*mansion*)

English: condominium (condo for short)

Like I said above, we call a *mansion* a condo in America. In English, mansion has a completely different meaning. Hollywood movie stars, professional athletes, and millionaires and billionaires such as Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos live in mansions. If you tell someone, "I live in a mansion," they're going to think you're rich!



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