

Katakana Scripts in a Japanese Publication in Malaysia: A Case Study of Katakana Words in “SENYUM” Magazine

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1. Abstract

A unique feature of Malaysia is her multicultural and multilingual society which comprises mainly Malays, Chinese and Indians. There are also many foreign expatriates from various countries who work and live in Malaysia. As of October 2009, as many as 9,152 Japanese nationals reside in this country, some as expatriate professionals and others as students. It is not surprising then that publications in the Japanese language are easily available in Malaysia to fulfil the needs of this group. A cursory observation shows that the Japanese language used within the Malaysian context is influenced by the various Malaysian language styles. In the written form, this ‘foreignness’ appear as katakana loanwords. This study uncovers the categories (Igarashi, 2008) and functions of these katakana loanwords. The data is taken from a locally published Japanese magazine, “SENYUM”, from July 2009 – March 2012. Specifically, 20 articles called “Otak-Otak” are selected to investigate the function of katakana words in Malaysian context. Findings show that the katakana words act to enhance the native speakers understanding of locally-situated contexts. Due to the language contact with the various languages as well as dialects, it can be observed that there are minor changes and variations in katakana usage. These minor changes may have been done in order to enhance the Japanese expatriates’ understanding of Malaysian society. In addition, the katakana script enables the reader to decipher the pronunciations of these ‘new’ words.

2. Introduction

The katakana syllabary consists of 48 syllables and was originally considered "men's writing".

Kanji was used to write ‘all foreign loanwords before the 20th century’. This changed at the turn of the 20th century when katakana began to be widely used for ‘non-Chinese loan words, onomatopoeic words, foreign names, in telegrams and for when writers want to emphasize certain words or phrases’ ([http: www.omniglot.com/writing/japanese_katakana.htm](http://www.omniglot.com/writing/japanese_katakana.htm), accessed 21 December 2012).

The world saw Japan evolve tremendously after the Second World War when it broadly embraced westernization. Since then there had been ‘major technological, cultural, and linguistic imports’ from various sources into the Japanese way of life and communication. In relation to language, the infiltration of loanwords is insurmountable that publications in the Japanese language, for example, print advertisements and magazines such as *manga* and the like, extensively use katakana (Hashiba, 2007).

There are advantages as well as disadvantages to the widespread use and expanding roles of katakana in modern Japanese discourse. One disadvantage is the confusion that may arise on the functions of katakana scripts. For example, in the following:

ぼくのヒミツ

Boku no himitsu

My secret

でもそんなキレイなら見なきゃな

Demo sonna kirei nara minakya na

But if (it is) as pretty as this, (we) must see.

(Source: 葛田さんの話 ‘*ichigoda san no hanashi*’)

The above consist of all native Japanese words, so why would the words ヒミツ *himitsu* (‘secret’) and キレイ *kirei* be written in katakana? The words ‘*himitsu*’ and ‘*kirei*’ cannot be categorized (see categories proposed by Igarashi, 2008) as foreign words, are not onomatopoeia, and certainly are not organisms to be listed in a science text. Therefore, the use and function of katakana here may be misleading.

This study intends to provide some clarity to the above problem at least within the Malaysian context by identifying patterns or categories (Igarashi, 2008) and functions (Hashiba, 2007; Ishiwata, 2001) of katakana usage. The source of data is “SENYUM” magazine which is a Japanese magazine published locally in Malaysia. Twenty articles called “Otak-Otak” are selected from the magazine from July 2009 – March 2012 as data for analysis. SENYUM is a

lifestyle magazine specifically targeted to not only the Japanese community living in Malaysia but also Japanese visitors to Malaysia. Its main aim is to endear Malaysia to the native Japanese readers as in their slogan マレーシアがもっと好きになる (Like Malaysia more (sic)). “Otak-Otak” is chosen as the data for analysis as its topics or subject matters cover all things Malaysian such as nature (自然のはなし), arts (マレーシア最新芸術事情), languages (Bintang&Bulan のマレー語リレー) and food (ボレボレ♪10 リンギ以下グルメ).

3. The patterns, characteristics and functions of katakana

Igarashi (2008) contends that the role of katakana is changing in the Japanese Writing System. In short, the usage of katakana is evolving and dynamic. Typically, “... contemporary Japanese possesses three major types of words, (1) *kango* (Sino-Japanese words), (2) *wago* (Japanese native words), and (3) *gairaigo* (loanwords), and each word type is associated with three types of scripts. Kanji is used for presenting *kango* and *wago*, while some *wago* is written only in hiragana. Katakana is used for presenting *gairaigo*” (Igarashi, 2008: 103). However, nowadays, katakana is also ‘unconventionally’ used to write Sino-Japanese words and Japanese native words for the purpose of emphasis. In order to identify the different categories of katakana, Igarashi classifies them into six groups:

1. *gairaigo* (loanwords)
2. *kango* (Sino-Japanese words)
3. mixed-words (mixture of katakana and other script types) e.g.:- 窓ガラス ‘*mado garasu*’ which means ‘window pane’
4. onomatopoeia
5. proper nouns (e.g. Name of a local television show ヌーカシン ‘Nur Kasih’)
6. *wago* (native Japanese words).

This study uses the categorization above as the basis to analyze the data.

In analyzing the functions of katakana, on the other hand, we utilize the list proposed by Ishiwata (2001) who argues that katakana words are used for presenting *gairaigo* (loanwords).

The functions of katakana loanwords according to Ishiwata (2001) are as follows:

1. To express new ideas and objects introduced from other cultures and as such, fulfill the basic function of loanwords in all languages,
2. To represent an expression which already exists in Japanese. Although there is an equivalent expression in Japanese, speakers intentionally use a loanword to express a different nuance of the word. For instance, there is already a Japanese word for hotel, i.e. ‘*yadoya*’. But recently ホテル ‘*hoteru*’ which means ‘hotel’ is quite prevalent.
3. To define professional jargon, i.e. it takes on the role of providing new information to the general population of listeners and readers. E.g. ダウンロード ‘*daunroodo*’ which means ‘download’,
4. To intentionally convey an international atmosphere for an event; especially used by the media,
5. As euphemisms; i.e. expressions related to body and sex sometimes are expressed by katakana loanwords. E.g. ヘア陰毛 ‘*hea-inmou*’ which literally translates to ‘hidden hair’ but euphemistically expresses the meaning ‘pubic hair’.
6. To express some words in English which are just simpler than existing Japanese words.

Additionally, Hashiba (2007) suggests four other functions of the katakana:

1. To mark emphasis/point of interest
2. To mark slang and newly created words
3. To eliciting trendiness
4. To alleviate seriousness or harshness

In summary, the framework used in this paper is based on the findings by previous researchers as mentioned above.

4. Results

The Categories of Katakana Words in “SENYUM” Magazine

There are a total of 1127 katakana words in the data sourced from “SENYUM” magazine. All of the katakana words are categorized in six categories as shown in Table 1.

As can be seen, the category ‘*gairaigo*’ (loanwords) has the highest number (41.3%) of katakana words while the category ‘*wago*’ (native Japanese words) has the lowest (11.8%) frequency from 1127 katakana words. The figures also show that the category ‘proper nouns’ projects quite prominently mostly due to the function that katakana plays within the local

context. In other words, since the magazine is published in Malaysia and revolves around subject matters related to Malaysia, it is no surprise that a high number of Malaysian names, titles, and contexts specific to the local scene would be featured. Therefore, the proper nouns are foreign to Japanese and thus katakana is highly utilized.

	Category	Frequency	Percentage, %
1	<i>gairaigo</i> (Loanwords)	465	41.3
2	<i>kango</i> (Sino-Japanese words)	11	1.0
3	mixed-words (Katakana+other scripts)	163	14.5
4	onomatopoeia	66	5.9
5	proper nouns	289	25.5
6	<i>wago</i> (native Japanese words)	133	11.8
	TOTAL	1127	100.0

Table1: Frequency and Percentage of 6 Types of Katakana Words

Katakana Functions in Malaysian Context

The findings on the functions of katakana found in “SENYUM” magazines reveal that they concur with the functions as suggested by Ishiwata (2001). This is with the exception of the function as ‘euphemisms’. The data in this study indicates that there is no occurrence of katakana used as euphemisms found in the data.

Katakana words are mainly used **to express new ideas from Malaysian cultures and languages**. Examples are ショッピングセンター *shoppingusentā* (shopping center) and ドリアン *dorian* (durian). Malaysians, especially those from cities, frequently go for shopping or simply spend time at shopping centers. Shopping centers are popular family destinations on weekends or holidays as in Malaysia because they are commonly equipped with entertainment centers. For instance, it is normal to find movie theatres, karaoke lounges, a variety of restaurants, and even a bowling alley or game centers within the complex of a shopping center. In fact, Malaysia promotes itself as a shopping haven in the South East Asian region. Therefore, since shopping centers are a significant part of Malaysian life, it is featured in the locally produced magazine in katakana to symbolize a part of the Malaysian culture.

The local fruit durian, or ドリアン *dorian*, is known as the King of Fruits in Malaysia. Even though many foreigners cannot tolerate its pungent smell, the durian is an extremely popular

fruit among Malaysians. Thus, its appearance in katakana in the data signifies the important and esoteric nature of the item.

Another function found for the use of katakana scripts in the magazines are used **to represent expressions that have an equivalent in the Japanese language**. For instance, the word for ‘gangster’ in the Japanese language is やくざ *yakuza*. However, it is found that instead of *yakuza*, the word ギャングスター *gyangusutā* (gangster) is used. It may be surmised that the word ‘gangster’ is more universal and the concept of gansterism relates to all cultures and not only in Japanese that may be the nuance implied by the word ‘*yakuza*’.

English is the second language in multilingual Malaysia. Therefore, katakana appears not just for the local languages but also for English words to illustrate local contexts. It is revealed that katakana words found in this study function to illustrate **jargons** and **to convey an international atmosphere by the media**. Some examples are ヴィジュアル・アーティスト *vu~ijuaru ātisuto* (visual artist) and ドキュメンタリー *dokumentarī* (documentary) respectively.

As some **words from English are simpler and easier to pronounce and remember than Japanese words**, words like フードコート *fūdokōto* (*food court*) リクエスト *rikuesuto* (request) are commonly used in Japanese text rather than 食堂 *Shokudō* (dining hall) and 要求 *Yōkyū* or 要請 *Yōsei* (request) that give the same meanings. Malaysians often refer to ‘food courts’ as they are commonly found in shopping malls and are popular eating destinations comparable to restaurants. A food court is where a variety of food is offered by different vendors in an open court. This is a desirable eating place for families whose members may want to eat different types of meals but still would like to eat together as a family.

The word ‘request’, on the other hand, is not only spoken in the English language, but also used in conversations to replace the native word of the same meaning in Mandarin and Malay. Apart from the functions proposed by Ishiwata (2001), we also found katakana words which function according to those stated by Hashiba (2007). The results prove that there are some katakana words which are used **for emphasis** such as ウチ *uchi* (home) and ココ *koko* (here) in the following examples.

..... なにかスナック的なものを購入してウチへ帰ろうとしていたんです。

..... *nanika sunakku-tekina mono o kōnyū shite uchi e kaerou to shite ita ndesu*

..... (I) was trying to buy something like snacks (and go back) home.

「KL でもいい店があるよ」と連れて行かれたのがココ、「台湾風味館」。

[*KL demo ī-ten ga aru yo*] *to tsurete ika reta no ga koko*, [*Taiwan fūmi-kan*].

[There is also a good shop in KL] and I was taken to here, [Taiwan Fumi-kan].

The two words are used **to emphasize or highlight an interesting point**.

Normally, *uchi* (home) and *koko* (here) are written in hiragana or kanji words. For example, they are usually written as 家 or *uchi* and *koko*.

Katakana scripts sometimes function to **mark slang words and newly created words**. *元カノ motokano* (ex-girlfriend) is an example of a created slang. Slang words are commonly created by adolescents (Mooney, 2011; Holmes, 2008) who are also known as language ‘innovators’. This magazine is targeted towards Japanese readers in general, which include teenagers as well. In order to appeal to the adolescent segment of the target audience, the authors of “Otak-Otak” choose to use slang words in katakana to ‘speak’ to this age group. Newly created words, for example, *タマン・ネガラ 国立公園 Taman Negara kokuritsu kōen* can be found in the SENYUM magazine. The meaning of *タマン・ネガラ Taman Negara* is actually the same as *国立公園 kokuritsu kōen*, that is, ‘national park’. However, in order to ease reader comprehension of the meaning of *Taman Negara* in Malaysia, the Malay words in katakana are collocated with Japanese words.

In order **to elicit trendiness**, katakana words would be used to replace the hiragana scripts. Again, in creating relations with the young age group, being trendy, or at least providing the impression of being trendy, would put the magazine in good stead. A common example for this purpose is *カッコいい kakkoī* (cool/ awesome) from the original written *かつこいい kakkoī*. Another usage of katakana words found in the data is to **alleviate seriousness or harshness**, for example, *ロスする rosu suru* (to lose) and *ニセモノ nisemono* (imitation/ knock-off). For example, the word *ニセモノ nisemono* (imitation/ knock-off) is written in katakana when it can very well be written in kanji, i.e. 偽物 *nisemono*. Fake goods can be found quite prevalently in the Chinatown area of Kuala Lumpur Malaysia. The use of

katakana mitigates the seriousness of the issue of pirated goods. In other words, the ease and lightheartedness of an otherwise legal and serious issue of counterfeit products is symbolized by the use of the katakana. As the magazine is intended for light reading, this would appeal to its readers.

In addition to the functions as explicated above, the findings show an additional function for katakana scripts in the “SENYUM” magazines, which is the *yure* function. The *yure* functions to **assimilate the pronunciation of phrases or sentences in the local languages with the Japanese pronunciation**. In most times this is utilized for phrases and sentences that are commonly used among Malaysians in the section called Bintang & Bulan のマレー語リレー from “Otak-Otak”. In the following example, the *yure* functions to assimilate the local language, i.e. Malay, pronunciation for the colloquial term ‘jom’ (‘let’s’) to sound more Japanese (*jomu*) and ‘geli’ to *gurī* and ‘kerja’ to *keruja* and so on:

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| (1) ジョム マカン・マカン | (2) グリー ハティ ラ カウニ |
| <i>Jomu makan makan</i> | <i>Gurī hati ra kauni</i> |
| Let’s eat eat | Funny heart (particle) you this |
| (Let’s go and eat) | (You are so funny) |
| | |
| (3) ケルジャ マチャマナ? | (4) ムルパスカン バトツ デ タンガ〜 |
| <i>Keruja machamana?</i> | <i>Murupasakan bato~tsu de Tanga ~</i> |
| Work how? | To release cough at stairs |
| (How’s (your) work?) | (literal translation of idiomatic expression) |
| | To do something half-heartedly |

5. Conclusion

In summary, katakana scripts are found in the data of this study and we may surmise that they act to enhance the native Japanese speakers’ understanding of locally-situated contexts. The findings has shown the expanded function of katakana usage as a guide for pronunciation of phrases and sentences in the local languages that are commonly used among Malaysians. However, we also contend that the *yure* function may lead to miscommunication and confusion. The sentences below illustrates how easily one may be confused over the meaning of the Malay words ‘*padam*’ (erase) and ‘*padan*’ (serves as in serves ‘him’ right). The wrong spelling of the word ‘*padam*’ has completely changed the meaning of ‘*Padan muka dia*’.

(1) パダム ムカ ディア

Padamu muka dia

“Padam muka dia”

(Erase his face)

(2) パダン ムカ ディア

Padan muka dia

“Padan muka dia”

(Serves him right)

To conclude, even though the katakana script may be used to enhance understanding it may be potentially misleading. Therefore, care must be taken not to over-extend the use of katakana. It may be recommended that the original scripts are included together with the katakana words to avoid misunderstanding. Obviously, one solution may also be to consult native speakers of the Malaysian languages to ensure correct information, spelling, and contexts are obtained.

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