ENGLISH LOANWORDS IN JAPANESE TV ADS

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Historically speaking, linguistic borrowing is a common phenomenon in the evolution of a language. However, unlike countries where English was adopted as an institutional variety as a result of a linguistic legacy, the English found in Japan—specifically in television advertising—is a particularly intriguing linguistic puzzle. Although most of the English one sees on products and garments is often incomprehensible, pointless, or simply rude, advertisers/copy writers do have the power to manipulate the English language and ‘engineer’ changes to satisfy their own utilitarian purposes. (Regardless of the six years spent studying Standard English at school, this is the English that the masses are exposed to!) Surprisingly, the English loanwords are used in a very systematic way:

- As a lexical gap when there are no corresponding words in Japanese
- As euphemisms to refer to unpleasant topics (toire is preferred to benjou, meaning toilet)
- As strategies to avoid direct expressions
- To refer to western images and concepts (to create a modern touch)
- In set phrases/lexical chunks
- As special-effects givers (attaching new cosmopolitan images to products and services)
- As brand, shop or product names
- To refer to technical terms

The major features of these borrowed English words can be described as follows (the examples are all romanized for readability):

1. Rephonalization (pronouncing English with a Japanese accent, according to Japanese syllabary): earth becomes aasu, headphone becomes hedohon, manager becomes manejya, McDonald’s becomes makudonoRudo, radio becomes rajio, and ticket becomes chiketto.

2. Truncation (shortening English words): contact lenses become contakuto, department store becomes depaaoto, food extract becomes Ekisu, illustrations becomes illusto, mass communication becomes masukomi, and remote control becomes remokon.


4. Hybridization (blending of English and Japanese words or when part of an English word is written in Japanese): bejtaberu kurakka means ‘vegetable crackers’ [the first word contains taberu, meaning ‘to eat’, so there’s a play on words: eat your vegetable crackers!], haburashi (ha = teeth + brush) means ‘toothbrush’, imeji chizu (chizu = map + image) means ‘diagram’, roorupan (rooru = bread roll + pan) means ‘bread’.

5. Mock-Japanese linguistic creations (when English words are invented or take on different meanings in Japanese): consent (electrical socket), feminist (a man kind to women), hair manicure (hair dye), pair look (matching clothes), and wanpiisu (one-piece--a dress).