

Perceptions of Loanwords in Hiragana

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Abstract

Although loanwords are conventionally written in katakana, it is possible to find examples of loanwords in hiragana script. These marked examples of script use often appear in texts outside formal writing conventions, such as product and business names. This research reports on the results of a survey investigating the reactions of Japanese people to three such words, はびねず/happiness, れもん/lemon, and ふらい/fly. Overall, high levels of appropriacy were reported, although this figure differed significantly between examples. The perceived motivations for the use of hiragana over katakana drew on a number of factors, including the associations of the hiragana script, the perceived audience of the text, and reasons relating to the particular loanword in question.

Keywords: Japanese writing, hiragana, katakana, loanwords, gairaigo, script.

Introduction

The Japanese writing system of today utilizes three distinct scripts; kanji, hiragana, and katakana. Kanji, the complex characters adapted from Chinese, are used for the lexical morphemes or ‘content words’ of a sentence, such as nouns and verb stems. Hiragana and katakana are both phonemic scripts, but are used for distinct purposes; hiragana is used for the inflexive endings of words with kanji stems, such as the tenses of verbs,

as well as connective particles and words of Japanese origin (和語/*wago*). Katakana is used for writing loanwords (外来語/*gairaigo*), as well as a form of emphasis, in a similar way to how *italics* are used in English. The current study investigates a particular unusual use of script: loanwords which are written in hiragana, rather than conventional katakana, such as たおる (*towel*).¹ These words are of interest from three distinct perspectives: firstly, as examples of non-standard language practices vis-à-vis the established functions of each script; secondly, as the socio-historical uses of hiragana and katakana give words written in such scripts distinct associations and nuances; and thirdly as a potential response to the large number of foreign words being adapted into the Japanese language. The following sections will give a brief overview of the Japanese scripts, and the role of loanwords in Japanese.

Kanji, which were adopted from China, via Korea, in the late 6th century formed Japan's first writing system, and was used for written texts such as official documents at court. For this reason, these characters have a 'serious' or 'official' feel to them. Hiragana and katakana are both simplified versions of phonemic kanji; hiragana, sometimes called the 'cursive' style, is a fast or shorthand representation of these characters. The '*hira*' in hiragana means 'ordinary' or 'common', and this script was used as a writing system by the general population for everyday texts (Akizuki 2005), and was also enthusiastically taken up by literary-minded women in the Heian period, who were not permitted to learn the complex kanji characters associated with the male domains of government and politics (Shibatani, 1990). For this reason, hiragana has associations of being 'easy' or 'simple', and is also associated with femininity. It is furthermore said to be 'soft' and 'gentle' because of its rounded shape.

Katakana, on the other hand, was developed in monasteries. The Buddhist scriptures that the monks used contained many complex kanji, and katakana was used for annotating these words with their phonemic readings (Akizuki, 2005). The '*kata*' in

1 Loanwords in hiragana are underlined throughout the article to assist those unfamiliar with Japanese.

katakana means ‘part’ or ‘fragment’, and these characters represent part of the original kanji. Although katakana has been used in different ways the intervening centuries, it now holds a similar function of representing foreign words in written Japanese language. Through both its past and present use, katakana is associated with foreign or imported words, and has nuances of modernity and internationalism because of this. Its angular shape also gives it associations of being ‘hard’ or ‘harsh’.

The current research takes the above script associations as a base from which to investigate loanwords in hiragana. The following sections give a brief summary of the history of loanwords in Japanese, and their role today.

Japanese contains a large number of loanwords, with these terms being estimated to account for around 10% of the Japanese lexicon. Loanwords cover a broad variety of domains including food, sport, health, politics, and even kinship terms such as ママ and パパ (mama and papa). It is often said that it is difficult to hold even a short conversation without using one of these imported words.

The borrowing of foreign terms has a long history, starting with terms introduced via Portuguese traders and missionaries in the 16th century. Words from this period still in use today include ぱん (pan/bread) and たばこ (tobacco), and these examples are often still found in hiragana, as they entered the Japanese language when the conventions for transcribing loanwords weren’t as standardized as they are today. During the Meiji period, another influx of foreign words occurred, and were used for cultural imports from the west, such as バター (butter) and シャツ (shirt). New words could also be calqued from existing kanji which represented the meaning of the term, such as 麦酒 (wheat-alcohol) for ‘beer’. Another major period of loanword uptake occurred after World War 2, when renewed contact with the west resulted in new words entering the language, particularly those associated with youth culture, such as レジャー (leisure), and ティーンエイジャー (teenager) (Loveday, 1996). The borrowing of words from foreign languages, particularly English, has been supported by the technical revolution of the internet and World Wide Web, allowing people not only more access to foreign

words and phrases, but the means to disseminate them via chat rooms and later, social media. Indeed, most words associated with computers and technology are borrowed from English, such as キーボード (keyboard), and ダウンロード (download).

Because of the strong role loanwords play in the Japanese language, negative attitudes to these terms are not uncommon. The sheer volume of such words even led to one citizen attempting to sue the national broadcaster, NHK, for their overuse of loanwords, arguing that they were causing him severe emotional stress (Osaki, 2013). Although loanwords are used across many domains of use, Otake (2007) reported on how politicians and government officials are often responsible for the use of these jargonistic terms, such as パブリックインボルブメント (public involvement), despite their meaning not being clear to the public they seek to involve. The National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (2006), concerned about the unintelligibility of such terms, published a list of suggested Japanese replacements for common loanwords, although their use as government slogans shows no sign of slowing. However, both opinions for and against the use of loanwords can be found, and were described in an interesting study by Hosokawa (2015). She investigated letters to the editor concerning the use of loanwords in Japanese, and found that both proponents and opponents of the use of loanwords used based their arguments on the tradition of the Japanese language, although interpreted in different ways. Opponents argued that the long history and tradition of the Japanese language was being threatened by the influx of foreign words, and needed to be protected from such influence. Proponents for loanwords argued that the history of the Japanese language was one of adapting foreign influences, starting with the Chinese characters which now form the core of the Japanese writing system. The flexibility and adaptability of the Japanese writing system represented part of its tradition.

Against this background of both the associations of the scripts used in Japanese writing, as well as the history of the lexical items known as loanwords, the current study builds on the author's previous work on loanwords in hiragana. Kunert (2020) reported on a

corpus of hiragana loanwords, describing typical traits of the words themselves as well as the contexts in which they were found. Loanwords in hiragana, like loanwords in general, were mostly nouns and typically borrowed from English. They were found either as stand-alone words such as the name of the snack bar えんどれす (Endless), or in combination with other words in conventional scripts eg. 抹茶けーき (Green-tea cake). Loanwords in hiragana were typically single words, although two and three word examples were also found such as the title of the manga, ばわーおぶすまい る (Power of Smile) (Uro, 2012). Typical contexts for these words were product and business names. The current study investigates reactions of Japanese people to selected examples from the corpus, in order to further understand the role of loanwords in hiragana in the Japanese language.

Method

An online survey was conducted to investigate Japanese peoples' responses to texts containing loanwords in hiragana, and was open to individuals over 18 years of age who identified as native speakers of Japanese. Respondents were presented with photographs of texts featuring loanwords in hiragana², which are presented in figure 1 below. In order of their appearance in the survey, they were a sign for a business called 'はびねす鍼灸整骨院' (Happiness Moxibustion and Acupuncture Clinic), a label on a drink called '蜂蜜れもん' (Honey Lemon); and a sticker containing the phrase 'I can ふらい (fly)!!'

For each of the images, three questions were asked. The questions for the first image, 'はびねす鍼灸整骨院' (Happiness Moxibustion and Acupuncture Clinic), were as follows.

2 Two further examples, featuring a loanword in kanji and a loanword in romaji were also included in the survey, but are not discussed in this article.



Figure 1: Images used in the survey

1. *This shop's name includes the word 'happiness'. Writing 'happiness' (happiness) in hiragana is...*
 - Appropriate*
 - Inappropriate*
2. *Please tell us the reason for your answer.*
3. *Why do you think the designer decided to write 'happiness' in hiragana?*³

While some participants who answered 'appropriate' may have felt the third question repetitive, it was included to allow participants who felt the script use inappropriate to reflect on why the shop decided to use this particular orthographic choice.

Questions following the same format were given for the remaining images, the 'lemon' drink, and the sticker.

After a small pilot study, the final version of the online survey was launched using the 'snowball method,' which involved sending the link to the survey to the researcher's contacts in Japan, requesting that they forward it through their networks. Potential participants could then access the survey through the link and complete it on their computers or mobile phones. The link was active for 4 months. Response rates for each question varied between 112 and 165.

3 1. このお店の名前に、「はびねす」という文字が入っています。ハビネス (happiness/幸せ) をひらがなで書くのは… 適切です。 不適切です。 2. その理由をお答えください。 3. このデザイナーが、ひらがなを使ったのはなぜだと思いますか？

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Table 1: Appropriateness by example

Survey question	Appropriate	Inappropriate	Total
はびねす (Happiness)	116 (73%)	42 (37%)	158
蜂蜜れもん (Honey lemon)	136 (90%)	14 (10%)	150
I can くらい (fly) !!	81 (55%)	67 (45%)	148
Average	73%	27%	152

The data was then analysed. For the closed question on the appropriateness of the choice of script, totals for each alternative were calculated. For the open-ended questions on the reason for this choice, and the perceived motivation for the use of script, the responses were allocated one or more codes.

Results

Overall, loanwords in hiragana were considered appropriate for the context 73% of the time. However, differences between these examples emerged, for example, ‘lemon’ was considered appropriate by a large majority of respondents (90%), while ‘fly’ received an appropriate rating by just over half of respondents (55%) as shown in table 1 above.

The responses to the second and third questions for each text will be presented below. Numbers in parentheses in the text eg. (22) refer to the number of respondents.

‘Happiness’ clinic

Most respondents felt that writing ‘happiness’ in hiragana was appropriate. The ten most frequently occurring reasons are presented in table 2 below.

The fact that many respondents noted that this example was acceptable because it was a proper noun (22) is significant in the light of the results of the corpus analysis of hiragana loanwords previously conducted by the author (Kunert, 2020). In the corpus, the most frequently occurring word class was ‘noun’, and one of the largest categories of referential meaning was business names. This suggests that respondents may have

Table 2: Reasons for appropriacy of 'happiness' in hiragana

	Code	Example	No. of tokens
1.	Name/proper noun	店名 (shop name)	22
2.	Freedom of individual	書き手の自由 (freedom of the writer)	21
3.	Not wrong	不適切とは思えない (do not think it is inappropriate)	20
4.	Familiar	親しみ (familiar)	17
5.	Soft	柔らかい (soft)	12
6.	Readable/easy to read	読める (readable)	10
7.	Suitable for the elderly	お年寄りが多そう (seems to be many elderly people [patronising this shop])	10
8.	Emphasis	目立つ (eye-catching)	8
9.	Image of the business	お店のコンセプトを反映 (expresses the shop's concept)	7
10.	Gentle	優しい (gentle)	4

been familiar with the use of hiragana loanwords for names or proper nouns, making this the most common reason for appropriacy.

The second most frequently occurring code related to ‘the freedom of the individual’ (21) to choose in which script to write a loanword. Because of the conventional association of particular lexical items with particular scripts in written Japanese (eg. katakana with loanwords, and kanji for Sino-Japanese words), it is interesting that this more flexible approach was mentioned so frequently.

The responses stating that writing loanwords in hiragana was ‘not wrong’ (20) were also of interest, although no-one stated that writing loanwords in hiragana was ‘right’ or ‘correct’. One participant expressed both an awareness of the conventions of script choice as well as an understanding of the dynamic nature of language: ‘The general rule is that katakana is assigned for the writing of loanwords, but the rules of language change flexibly over time.’⁴

In addition, many associations of hiragana were given as reasons for the appropriacy of writing ‘happiness’ in hiragana, for example that it gave the business a soft (12) or

4 外来語にカタカナを充てるのが原則だが、言葉の規則は時代とともに柔軟に変わるものだから

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Table 3: Reasons of inappropriacy of 'happiness' in hiragana

	Code	Example	No. of tokens
1.	English, not Japanese	元々日本語ではないから (not an original Japanese word)	19
2.	Incorrect	外国語のひらがな表記は正しくない (not correct to write loanwords in hiragana)	13
3.	Hard to understand	意味がわかりづらい (hard to get the meaning)	10
4.	Weird	違和感がある (feels weird)	4
5.	Immature	頭が悪そう (looks stupid)	3
6.	Other	あざとい (sly, cunning)	4

gentle (4) image, or that it was easy to read (10).

The remaining 37% of respondents selected ‘inappropriate’ for the text containing the word ‘はびねす’ (Happiness), and the reasons given were allocated one or more of six codes. The results appear in table 3 above.

The two most common reasons given were that ‘happiness’ is an English word, not a Japanese word (19), and that it was incorrect to write such words in hiragana (13). It is interesting that for the respondents who thought this example was appropriate, hiragana being a legitimate choice ranked highly, while for those who chose ‘inappropriate’, hiragana as an illegitimate choice also ranked highly. In each case, reasons of (il)legitimacy were given more frequently than reasons relating to the associations of the script (eg. either soft and gentle in the case of ‘appropriate’, or childish and weird in the case of ‘inappropriate’). This suggests that, while the connotations and visual impact of the script was important, the conventions of script use were cited more frequently by both groups of respondents.

While the hiragana script is often said to be ‘easy to read’, respondents who selected ‘inappropriate’ for this example also gave ‘hard to read/understand’ as reasons for their answer. This was explained by one respondent as being because of the word being an unusual case of a foreign word in hiragana, ‘It’s hard to read because it’s English.’⁵ The responses under the code ‘weird’ (4) may also be related to the fact that this example is a

5 英語なので読みづらい

Table 4: Respondents' perceived reasons for the use of hiragana for 'happiness'

	Code	Example	No. of tokens
1.	Familiar	親しみやすい (familiar)	62
2.	Soft	柔らかさを出す (expresses softness)	42
3.	Gentle, kind	優しい (gentle)	27
4.	Elderly are target market	高齢者むけ (for the elderly)	18
5.	Easy to read/understand	分かりやすい (easy to understand)	18
6.	Cute	かわいい (cute)	10
7.	Eye-catching	目立つ (eye-catching)	10
8.	'Yasashi' ⁶	やさしい (easy or gentle)	8
9.	Healing	癒しの印象 (a healing impression)	7
10.	Memorable	覚えやすい (easy to remember)	7

foreign word being presented in a script conventionally associated with Japanese words.

The third question for this text was 'Why do you think that the shop used hiragana for their name?' The ten most frequently occurring codes appear in table 4 above.

Many respondents believed that the elderly were the target demographic for this business (18). This interpretation was often found in combination with suggestions that hiragana would be easier to understand (18), for example the response 'It's to make it easier to read for elderly people.'⁷ Three respondents also commented that English and rōmaji were less likely to be understood by this generation, suggesting that there was also a consideration of English/rōmaji as an alternative orthographic choice. One respondent suggested that rōmaji is 'distant' for older Japanese, 'For elderly people who are at a distance from rōmaji, (hiragana) has a feeling of intimacy or familiarity.'⁸

Four respondents also cited reasons why katakana would be unsuitable for the business name: two suggested it would feel *katai* (硬い /solid, andカタイ/solid or strict), one that it would be きつい (harsh), and another said 'If it was in katakana, it would not have the image of being able to relieve your pain.'⁹ These examples as well as the

6 This word was difficult to code in its hiragana form, as it was unclear if 'easy' (易しい) or 'gentle' (優しい) was the intended meaning. For this reason it was coded separately.

7 老人に読み易くするため

8 ローマ字を敬遠するお年寄りにも親近感を抱いてもらうため。

9 カタカナだとコリが取れるイメージがない。

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Table 5: Reasons for appropriacy of ‘lemon’ in hiragana

	Code	Example	No. of tokens
1.	Not wrong	間違っていない (not wrong)	26
2.	Noun/name	商品名 (product name)	22
3.	Kanji exists	れもんは漢字もあり (lemon also has a kanji)	15
4.	Freedom of individual	個人の自由 (freedom of the individual)	14
5.	Common	ひらがなでれもと書く人も多い (many people write ‘lemon’ in hiragana)	13
6.	Mellow/soft	まるやか (mellow)	11
7.	Japanese-ness	和の印象 (a Japanese-like impression)	11
8.	Domestic	国産レモンを使用している (made with domestic-grown lemons)	10
9.	Sweet	甘い印象 (sweet impression)	8
10a.	Becoming Japanese	れもんとして日本語が確立しており (‘lemon’ is established as part of the Japanese language)	7
10b. ¹⁰	Kanji is difficult	れもんの漢字は難しい (the kanji for ‘lemon’ is difficult)	7

consideration of English/rōmaji as alternatives above point to an awareness of users of Japanese as to the orthographic options available to them, and how these kinds of association and connotations can be skilfully drawn upon by the user.

‘Honey Lemon’ Drink

This example showed a higher degree of appropriateness than the previous example, with 90% of respondents indicating that writing ‘lemon’ in hiragana was appropriate in this text. The ten most frequently appearing codes for the appropriacy of writing ‘lemon’ in hiragana are shown in table 5 above.

Like the previous example, the idea that it was ‘not wrong’, and that it was acceptable as the word was a noun or name were common responses. Interestingly, many respondents noted the fact that れもん (lemon) can also be written in kanji (檸檬) (15), acknowledging that this particular word had an additional orthographic option

10 These codes shared equal 10th place with 7 occurrences.

compared to most loanwords. Furthermore, seven respondents noted that the kanji for ‘lemon’ was particularly difficult. The existence of a kanji character for ‘lemon’ was therefore given as a reason for the appropriacy of writing the word in hiragana from two different angles: firstly, that the existence of a kanji gave some kind of legitimacy to ‘*remon*’ as a ‘Japanese word’, and therefore it was appropriate to be written in hiragana; and secondly that because the kanji for this word was particularly difficult, the hiragana version might be preferable to the kanji version. Both of these arguments may be the reason that 13 respondents noted that it was common to see ‘lemon’ written in hiragana, and indeed, it was one of the most frequently occurring words in the corpus, occurring 15 times (Kunert, 2020).

Related to these ideas, seven respondents also expressed a feeling that ‘lemon’ was making the transition from ‘loanword’ to ‘Japanese word’, and this meant that it was not inappropriate to write it in hiragana. As one respondent explained, “‘Lemon’ isn’t just written in katakana, it has a kanji too, and so I feel it’s a word that’s transitioning to Japanese. And if it’s a Japanese word, then it doesn’t feel weird to see it in hiragana.”¹¹ One respondent contrasted the degree of familiarity of the word ‘lemon’ with ‘happiness’ in the previous question, explaining ‘In Japan, there’s a recognition that ‘Lemon’ [written in English] means ‘lemon [レモン]’, and that degree of recognition far surpasses that for ‘happiness’. I think of ‘lemon’ as part of the Japanese language, so I don’t have any objections (to this example).’¹² These results show that ‘lemon’ may be an unusual loanword in both having a recognized kanji, and the degree to which it is thought of as a ‘Japanese word’.

Other reasons frequently given for the appropriacy of writing ‘lemon’ in hiragana was that it made the product seem ‘mellow/soft’ (11), and ‘sweet/delicious’ (8). This may

11 レモンはカタカナだけではなく、漢字で表記することもあり、外来語から日本語へと移行した言葉だと感じる。日本語であればひらがな表示をしても違和感がない。

12 Lemon はレモンと日本では認識されており、その認知度は happiness を遥かに凌駕している。日本語の一部と考えて差し支えないように思われる。

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Table 6: Reasons for inappropriacy of 'lemon' in hiragana

	Code	Example	No. of tokens
1.	Loanword	外来語だから (Because it's a loanword)	6
2.	Incorrect	普通はカタカナ (It's normally in katakana)	3
3.	Other	いまいち (It's not so great)	5

be an application of the 'soft' or 'gentle' connotations of the hiragana script in the context of a lemon flavoured drink, in other words a 'soft' flavour that was not sour. A parallel can be seen in the name of the lemon-flavoured soft drink, 'Mello Yello' which hints at the word 'mellow'.

Of the 10% of respondents who selected 'inappropriate', each gave relatively short responses resulting in 14 tokens. This resulted in only three codes, all of which are illustrated in table 6 above.

The two most common codes reflected the conventions for writing loanwords, with six people simply stating that 'lemon' was a loanword while three reported that it was incorrect, or that loanwords should be written in katakana. Five further responses were coded as 'other', and included reasons such as it was inconsistent with the word written in katakana elsewhere on the label,¹³ or even a preference for the kanji version of lemon, stating 'kanji would have had more impact.'¹⁴

The results for both groups concerning the designer's motivation for writing lemon in hiragana are given in table 7 below.

The two most frequently occurring codes, 'made in Japan' and 'Japanese-ness', suggest how respondents engaged with the text as a whole and not the word in isolation. The most frequent code related to part of the label that said 'Made with domestically-grown lemons',¹⁵ despite the small size of this element in relation to the rest of the label. The second most frequent code also related to the text as a whole, with respondents

13 横に「国産レモン使用」と表記してあるから、統一感がない

14 漢字の方がインパクトがあると思うから

15 国産レモン使用

Table 7: Respondents' perceived reasons for the use of hiragana for 'lemon'

	Code	Example	No. of tokens
1.	Made in Japan	国産製品 (domestic product)	43
2.	Japanese-ness	和風 (Japanese-style)	25
3.	Katakana is unsuitable	カタカナのレモンは果物のレモンである (lemon in katakana would be the fruit)	17
4.	Eye-catching	インパクトがある (has an impact)	18
5.	Old-fashioned, traditional	懐かしい (nostalgic)	11
6.	Soft	柔らかい (soft)	10
7.	Familiar	親しみやすく (friendly)	11
8.	Balance with other scripts	蜂蜜が漢字で書かれているから、レモンを平仮名で書くことでバランスが良く (As 'honey' is in kanji, writing 'lemon' in hiragana give a good balance.)	10
9.	Sweetness	酸っぱさを控えめ (moderates the sourness)	9
10.	Easy to read	読みやすい (easy to read)	9

stating that the design had a 'Japanese style'.¹⁶ Some were more specific, noting the 'characteristic Japanese font',¹⁷ and three mentioned the calligraphic font, for example, 'it has a good balance with the paint-brush style font.'¹⁸ These kinds of responses demonstrate how readers' perceptions of the motivations of the writer/creator of the text extended beyond the word(s) to the other semiotic resources deployed in the text.

Another example of this multimodal reading of a text can be seen in the code 'balance of scripts', in which ten respondents commented on the scripts used in other parts of the text to suggest why hiragana was chosen in this instance. Some respondents suggested that the use of hiragana related to preceding word, which was written in (a relatively difficult) kanji, 'Kanji has been used for “蜂蜜” (honey), and they used hiragana to contrast with it.'¹⁹ This could be because kanji has connotations of 'difficulty' while

16 和風 or 日本的

17 日本固有の文字

18 字体 (毛筆) とのバランスもいい

19 蜂蜜で漢字を使用し、それと対比してひらがなを使ったと思う

hiragana is associated with ‘ease’.²⁰

In an extended answer, a respondent who stated writing ‘lemon’ in hiragana was inappropriate explained what he perceived to be the motivations of the designer as well as how this technique was no longer effective:

*Today in Japan, this kind of expression (writing lemon in hiragana rather than the normal katakana) is popular. Originally, this was different from the usual version so it had high visibility, and gave a special value to the product, and had the purpose of differentiating the product from those of other companies. Now, because an exceedingly large number of companies are using this type of expression, the truth is that the effectiveness of this technique is wearing thin. The business (who produced this label) is not aware of this.*²¹

This opinion is interesting as it also reflects the feeling that it is not uncommon to see ‘lemon’ written in this way, as explained in the reasons for appropriateness. However, for this respondent, the technique has become overused and hackneyed.

‘I can fly’ sticker

This text received the most similar proportions of ‘appropriate’ (55%) and ‘inappropriate’ (45%) responses of all the examples of loanwords in hiragana presented in the survey. The ten most frequently appearing reason codes for those who selected ‘appropriate’ appear in table 8 below.

20 This phrase has a rather large number of orthographic options, by combining alternatives for the word ‘honey’ (蜂蜜, はちみつ, ハチミツ) and ‘lemon’ (檸檬, れもん, レモン).

21 今日本ではこういうあえて表現 (れもん←普通はレモンと表記する) が流行っている。本来この表現は、あえて普段とは違う表記をすることで視認性を高め、同時にその商品に特別な価値を含め、他社との差別化を図る目的があった。今は非常に多くの会社がこの表現を用いるので、そのデザイン効果がうすれていっているのが事実。←このことに気付いていない会社。

Table 8: Reasons for appropriacy of 'fly' in hiragana

	Code	Example	No. of tokens
1.	Freedom of individual	表現の自由 (freedom of expression)	15
2.	Design	デザインの意匠 (design concept)	13
3.	Cute	可愛い (cute)	12
4.	Understandable	理解できる (understandable)	10
5.	Not wrong	問題ではない (not a problem)	9
6.	Soft	やわらかさ (softness)	7
7.	Emphasis	英語表記だとインパクトに欠ける (if it were in English the impact would be lost)	6
8.	Suits character	ゆるキャラだから (because it's a 'yuru-kyara')	6
9.	Suits genre	マンガやイラストであれば別に問題ない (if it's in comics or illustrations it's not really a problem.) ²²	5
10.	Katakana is unsuitable	カタカタだと機会的な印象を受ける (if it were in katakana it would seem mechanical)	4

Besides the freedom of the designer to write words how they felt best, which was the most frequently occurring reason (15), many respondents simply stated that it was appropriate because it was part of the design (14). This was not mentioned for the ‘はぴねす (happiness) text, although five respondents did mention this for the ‘蜂蜜れもん (Honey Lemon) text. While it is unclear from these statements exactly which aspect of the design is referred to, it may be related to the code ‘cute’, which received 12 responses, and also the idea that it suited the character, which was mentioned by six respondents. Because this text differs from the previous two in being a type of creative work (sticker) rather than a text associated with a business or product, it is possible that the overall aesthetics of the design were foregrounded for these respondents, leading to the large number of people giving their reasons in terms of the design. The importance of the genre of text was also noted by the five responses who mediated their choice of ‘appropriate’ by saying that it was acceptable for particular texts but not others, for example ‘It would be inappropriate for official documents like a thesis or a contract, but this is (just) a kind of product...’²³

22 Also coded at ‘not wrong’.

23 論文や契約書といった公式な文書では不適切だが、これは商品の一部であり…

Perceptions of Loanwords in Hiragana

Table 9: Reasons for inappropriacy of 'fly' in hiragana

	Code	Example	No. of tokens
1.	Hard to understand	一見してわかりにくい (hard to understand at first glance)	20
2.	Mixing is problematic	英語と日本語が混ざっているのわかりづらい (mixed English and Japanese is hard to understand) ²⁴	13
3.	It's English/a loanword, not Japanese	日本語ではない (it's not Japanese)	10
4.	Weird	変 (weird)	9
5.	Confused with homophones	揚げ物の意味と間違えそう (it's likely to be confused with 'fry')	7
6.	'Fly' is a verb	動詞をひらがなで書くのに違和感 (writing verbs in hiragana is weird) ²⁵	4
7.	Uncool	ダサイ (uncool)	4
8.	Unnecessary	必要はない (not necessary)	3
9.	Unfamiliar	見たことがないから (never seen before)	3
10.	All English would be better	全て英語にした方がいい (better to be completely in English)	2

This text was also different from the previous two as the loanword in hiragana appeared as the 'speech' of a character, rather than a product or business name like the majority of words in the corpus of hiragana loanwords (Kunert, 2020). This was highlighted by the six responses mentioning that it suited the character. While two of responses simply mentioned suitability, a further two said that it suited the youth or immaturity of the character, and two more said it was suitable as it was (like) a 'ゆるキャラ / *yuru-kyara*'. While the character in the sticker is not one of these official mascots, it shares the same round, cute, slow, and slightly helpless image of these characters. The concept of the *yuru-kyara* was also drawn upon by respondents in answering why they thought the designer had chosen to use hiragana in the following question.

As mentioned above, the text containing 'ふらい (*fly*) in hiragana generated the highest proportion respondents who selected 'inappropriate' for an example of a loanword in

24 This example was also coded at 'hard to understand'.

25 This example was also coded at 'weird'.

hiragana at 45% (67 respondents). The ten most commonly occurring codes appear in table 9 on the previous page.

For those who responded that it was inappropriate to write ‘fly’ in hiragana, the most frequently occurring reason given was that it was hard to read or understand (20). This may relate to the ‘script-familiarity’ effect, where words appearing in an unfamiliar script take longer to process. The difficulty in reading or understanding this word in hiragana may also relate to the confusion of this word with other similar words, as reported by seven respondents. These people explained that the word ‘fly’, when transliterated as the loanword ‘*furai*’, becomes homonymic with the well-established loanword ‘fry’. The word ‘フライ (fry) is used in Japan to describe deep-fried foods such as prawns (エビフライ/*ebi-furai*). One respondent also pointed out that an insect, ‘a fly’ is another possible referent: ‘When you write ‘*furai*’ in hiragana, many meanings such as ‘to fly’, ‘a fly’, and ‘fried food’ can end up being understood.’²⁶

The second most frequent category drew attention to the mixing of a hiragana (loan)word in an English sentence that was the problem (13), as one respondent explained: ‘Using rōmaji (and hiragana) together feels awkward.’²⁷ The mixing of scripts within a single sentence may also be the cause of the ‘weirdness’ stated by nine respondents.

The mixing of scripts also seemed to prompt commentary of the learning and speaking of English in Japan, which were not mentioned in relation to any of the other texts in the survey. One respondent reasoned that the use of hiragana served to highlight a non-native accent for this word, as both the ‘f’ and ‘l’ sounds can be difficult to produce for native speakers of Japanese. Another respondent noted ‘I think this is selling the Japanese’ inability to speak English’,²⁸ which suggests a slight criticism of both the designer of the sticker, and the language abilities of the Japanese in general. This idea of English

26 ふらい とひらがなで書くと 飛ぶ、ハエ、あげもの のように色々な意味で 捕らえられてしまうのでは。

27 ローマ字と混用されているから、拙く感じるから

28 日本人の英語のできなさを 売りにしているように思える。

Perceptions of Loanwords in Hiragana

Table 10: Respondents' perceived reasons for the use of hiragana for 'fly'

	Code	Example	No. of tokens
1.	Cute	可愛さ (cuteness)	59
2.	Suits character	このキャラクターには、ひらがな表記が良い (for this character, hiragana would be better)	18
3.	For children	子供にもわかりやすい (easy to understand even for children) ³⁰	17
4.	'Yurui'	ゆるい印象 (slack impression)	14
5.	Easy to read	日本人に伝わりやすい (easily understood by Japanese people)	14
6.	Impressionistic	個性的に見せるため (shows individuality)	14
7.	Soft	やわらかく (soft)	13
8.	Do not know	わからない (don't know)	11
9.	Humorous	茶目っ気を出す (shows playfulness)	8
10.	Childlike	幼稚さ (childish)	8

proficiency was taken up by another respondent who labelled the sticker 'inappropriate', explaining 'If hiragana is used to spell out English words, Japanese people will only ever be able to speak English with a Japanese accent.'²⁹ In Japan, some students and even teachers use katakana to transcribe English words, which draws criticism for resulting in speakers of 'katakana English', a heavily accented variety which departs from native pronunciation norms. It is possible that this respondent is objecting to the use of hiragana for loanwords on similar grounds. These concerns around language education may also be related to the large number of respondents who believed this product was designed 'for children', in answer to the question about the designer's motivation.

The answers in relation to the designer's perceived motivation in using hiragana for the word 'fly' were also coded. The most frequently occurring codes appear in table 10 above.

For each text in the survey, responses to this third question about the designer's motivation were calculated separately for those who selected 'appropriate' and those

29 英語の発音をひらがなで当て字のように当てはめると、日本人は日本語訛りの英語しか話せなくなる

30 Also coded at 'easy to understand'.

who selected ‘inappropriate’ for the first question to ascertain whether any differences occurred. However, it was only for the current text that significant differences were seen. Overall, the most frequent occurring perceived motivation for the use of hiragana in this text related to ‘cuteness’, and this was the case for both those who selected ‘appropriate’ and those who selected ‘inappropriate’. While the respondents who thought the use of hiragana appropriate cited design motivations as the next most frequent code (12), for those who thought it inappropriate, responses such as ‘わかりません’ (I don’t know) was the next most common code. All 11 of the responses for this code came from respondents who selected ‘inappropriate’. This response was interesting in its relatively large numbers since skipping the question was possible, and indeed many respondents did skip one or more questions in the survey. A hint of exasperation was also perceptible in some of these responses, such as ‘I can’t imagine’³¹, ‘Absolutely no idea’³², and ‘I feel there’s no points in favour of doing this.’³³

Both groups frequently mentioned that this product seemed to be aimed at children, many noting that hiragana was easier to read for them, for example ‘they wanted to make a product aimed at children, and they couldn’t read the word “fly” (in English).’³⁴ Eight respondents also mentioned that the use of hiragana made the character itself seem childish, and therefore cute: ‘Writing hiragana shows the character’s low mental age, and slight silliness, which gives it a cute impression.’³⁵

Related to this idea of immaturity or silliness is the adjective ‘*yurui*’ (緩い or ゆるい), mentioned by some respondents in their reasons of appropriateness, as the word encompasses a variety of meanings including soft, slow, slack, and helpless, as described previously. This word was mentioned 14 times in responses to the questions for the

31 理解できない

32 全くわかりません

33 flyを「ふらい」と書く利点がない気がする。

34 flyがわからない子どもたちに向けた作品にしたかったから

35 ひらがなで書くことで、キャラクターの精神年齢が低いこと、少しバカなところを表1現し、“かわいい“という印象を見る側に与えたかったから

designer's reasons, making it the fourth highest code overall.

Discussion

One of the main findings of the current study was the general level of acceptance, averaging 73%, for the loanwords in hiragana exhibited in this survey. Of course, this still means that the remaining 27% found them inappropriate, and supported this opinion with the fact that these words were loanwords, and are conventionally written in katakana. Also noteworthy is the difference in appropriacy among the three texts; while れもん (lemon) was reported appropriate 90% of the time, ふらい (fly) met with only 55% acceptance. The high score for れもん (lemon) seems to be based on two related factors, this loanword is well-established in the Japanese language, and furthermore it can also be written in kanji, which may have led the seven respondents in table 5 to note that the word is 'becoming Japanese'.

The low score for 'fly', conversely, seems to be partly due to factors relating directly to this particular text; firstly, it is presented as part of an English sentence, and secondly, it is a loanword with multiple homophonic meanings. It also falls outside the typical traits of loanwords in hiragana outlined by Kunert (2020), by being a verb rather than a noun, and by not being a product or business name like the other two texts, which may have contributed to its low level of acceptability.

The familiarity of words such as 'lemon' may mean that they seem appropriate in hiragana, a script associated with Japanese-ness and 和語 (*wago*), and this can also be seen as a response to the 'torrential influx' of loanwords into the Japanese language. Hosokawa's (2015) proponents of loanwords noted the Japanese language's ability to accept and adapt foreign influences, starting with the Chinese kanji characters themselves, which are now considered an integral part of the Japanese writing system. As many loanwords undergo changes in both phonology and semantics when being adapted into Japanese, the katakana script may be the last vestige of their foreign roots, meaning

loanwords in hiragana become indistinguishable from other Japanese words. Loanwords in hiragana can therefore be seen as a further ‘acceptance’ of these once alien terms into the Japanese language. Like kanji, with their Chinese origins, they problematize the common distinction between Japanese and foreign, allowing for hybrid configurations that both express foreignness in their origins and domesticity in their transcription.

The perceived reasons for the use of hiragana for loanwords fall into three main categories: those related to the associations of hiragana, those related to the text in which the word appears, and those related to the intended audience of the text. Although there is much overlap between these three broad categories, they are discussed individually in the following paragraphs.

Hiragana is said to have a soft or gentle image, and these associations were felt to be drawn upon in both the ‘Happiness’ clinic text, suggesting an inviting atmosphere and pain-free treatment; and also in the ‘honey lemon’ drink text, where they were felt to give an impression that that product would have a mild or mellow flavour. In both these texts, the referents could potentially have unpleasant connotations (eg. painful acupuncture, and sour lemon), and the gentle curves of the hiragana script were felt to have been used to avoid such interpretations.

Hiragana is also related to “Japaneseness”, and this was also drawn upon by respondents to the ‘lemon’ text, who noted that elsewhere on the label the phrase ‘Made with domestic lemons’ appeared. The frequent use of hiragana as a claim to authenticity in omiyage or souvenir products associated with Japanese ingredients such as green-tea and soymilk noted in the author’s previous research (Kunert, 2020) also supports this use of the script.

Being the first script learned by children starting to read and write, hiragana also has a cute or child-like image. This was reported in relation to the ‘I can fly!!’ example, where respondents noted it suited the character’s cute image. However, this association could also give an impression of immaturity or silliness, as for some respondents who found the ‘happiness’ text inappropriate.

Other perceived motivations for the use of hiragana were related to the text itself, and common reasons for the appropriacy of both ‘happiness’ and ‘lemon’ were that they were business and product names respectively, and related to this, the author had the freedom to write such words as they saw fit. Other reasons connected to the individual texts drawn upon by respondents were the words appearing before and after the loanword in hiragana. In ‘蜂蜜れもん’ (Honey Lemon), the remaining part of the phrase is in kanji, and a relatively difficult and complex one. This led 10 respondents (see table 7) to note that using hiragana for ‘lemon’ ensured a good balance. This may also have been the case for ‘happiness’, although the balance of scripts was not noted by large numbers of respondents. For the ‘I can fly!!’ example, many respondents noted that this script was both cute, and suited the image of the character. Others referred directly to the genre of text itself, noting that using non-standard hiragana for loanwords was acceptable for informal genres such as comics and illustrations.

Finally, many respondents referred to the perceived audience of the text when giving reasons for the (in)appropriacy of the loanword in hiragana. For ‘happiness’, many respondents noted that the elderly were the intended market of the clinic. While 10 respondents reported that hiragana was easier to read for them, an equal 10 who thought the example was inappropriate gave ‘hard to read’ as their reason. For the ‘I can fly!!’ sticker, many respondents believed that the product was aimed at children, and hiragana was easier to read for this demographic.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on the results of a survey designed to investigate the perceptions of loanwords in hiragana script. Although a high average level of acceptance for the three texts discussed was found, the rate varied significantly between the three texts. Perceived reasons for the use of hiragana included those related to established connotations of the script, as well as reasons associated with the text itself, and the audience at which it

was aimed. This research has built on the relatively understudied topic of loanwords in hiragana, and offers new perspectives on the flexibility of the Japanese writing system.

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