ALPHABET *ante portas:*
HOW ENGLISH TEXT
INVADES JAPANESE
PUBLIC SPACE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the prominence of written English on shop signs in Japan. Based on data from a larger empirical study into multilingual signs in Tokyo, the most common ways of using English and the roman alphabet on Japanese shops signs are identified. It is argued that the ambivalent nature of English loan words plays a key role in the ever growing visibility of English in Japanese public spaces. Focusing on one special type of sign – price lists outside hairdressers' – I will show how the use of English loan words entails the general use of English and the Roman alphabet, which in the long run results in signs completely functioning in English.

INTRODUCTION

About twenty years ago, Saint-Jacques (1987) in this journal pub-lished a paper that was titled "Bilingualism in Daily Life: The Roman Alphabet in the Japanese Writing System." Motivated in part by a discussion on the use of the roman alphabet published two years earlier in a special issue of the Japanese journal *Gekkan Gengo* (1985), Saint-Jacques observed a relatively sudden increase in the use of roman letters in Japan, the beginning of which he dates back to the early 1980s. One of the main points he makes is that 'the alphabet is in,' especially in the domain of commercial language usage (Saint-Jacques, 1987, 90, 97).

The aim of this paper is to follow up on Saint-Jacques' observations and see how things have developed since. On the basis of empirical data, I will discuss how the roman alphabet and the language that it most commonly represents, English, are integrated into Japanese text and context. In this respect, it is necessary to know that written Japanese is a combination of four scripts: 1) *kanji,* the Japanese adaptations of Chinese characters; 2) *hiragana* and 3) *katakana,* the two indigenously developed syllabary scripts also referred to as *kana;* and 4) the twenty-six letters of the English variety of the roman alphabet, called *rōmaji* in Japanese. The roman alphabet has tradi-tionally been used for transliterating Japanese terms, usually place

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and person names or other proper nouns, and in internationally known abbreviations, acronyms, measurement units, etc. However, already Saint-Jacques observed a growing use of 'the alphabet'[1] for the representation of loan words from Western languages. This second type of usage is of major interest in this paper, which focuses on language use on public signs.

The study of language on signs is now commonly referred to as linguistic landscape research (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Gorter, 2006), but the topic already attracted scientific interest in Japan long before the term gained wider currency. An early survey was conducted by Masai (1972, 153-158), who in 1962 examined shop signs in the Shinjuku area of central Tokyo. His methodology was revived by Lim (1996) some three decades later. Comparing the findings of her survey to Masai's data, Lim observed a strong increase in the use of the alphabet. Similar studies into language on shop signs in Japan have been conducted by Miyazima (1995, 14-19), Ōura (1997, 27-28), Inoue (2000, 16-20), Someya (2002, 2007), MacGregor (2003) and Satō (2003). The general tenor of these publications is that English and the alphabet are characteristic features of shop signs in Japan. They further emphasize that the use of English in the majority of cases serves a Japanese rather than a foreign target group.

The survey on which the observations in the present paper are based was conducted in Tokyo in spring 2003 (Backhaus, 2007). A total of 2444 multilingual signs were collected in twenty-eight survey areas in the center of the city. Employing this data, I will identify four common ways of using English and the alphabet on Japanese signs. I will argue that the ambivalent nature of English loan words plays a key role in the ever growing visibility of English in Japanese public spaces. Discussing in detail four signs found outside hairdressers, I will show how the use of English loan words entails the general use of English and the alphabet, and how in the long run, this results in signs completely functioning in English.

THE LOGIC OF KATAKANA

The orthodox way of graphically integrating foreign terms into Japanese text has been to make use of the *katakana* script. Consequently, loans written in *katakana* are an indispensable component in Japan's linguistic landscape. The streets of Tokyo are overflowing with terms like *kōhī hausu* (coffee house),[2] *kopī sābisu* (copy service), *kurīningu* (cleaning, i.e., laundry), *gyararī* (gallery), or *fasshon saron* (fashion salon), to quote just a few examples from shop signs in Komagome, a survey area in the north of central Tokyo.

A rather special use of *katakana* is the transliteration of English-based alphabet acronyms. One example from the Komagome area is *jei emu ei,* the Japanese version of the acronym JMA, which stands for 'Japanese Marriage Association.' Despite the high degree of complexity involved in deriving a *katakana* rendition from the sound value of an alphabet acronym of an English term, this type of *katakana* use is a common practice. The fact that the *katakana* version is always modeled after the English reading of the alphabet letters – even in cases where an acronym is not based on an English term (e.g., NHK, BMW) – is indicative of the strong association of the alphabet with English in Japan (see also Coulmas, 1999, 15). A look at the signs in Komagome also reveals some characteristic features concerning the morphological integration of English loans into Japanese text. Where longer phrases are concerned, a frequent practice is retaining morphological complements of the donor language by directly transliterating them into *katakana.* Some examples are *redisu fasshon* (lady's fashion) *menzu katto* (men's cut), or *raionzu manshon* (Lion's Mansion), where the genitive 's' of the original phrase is molded into the Japanese version in accordance with English phonological rules as either *su* (voiceless) or *zu* (voiced).

English loans in *katakana* transliteration can be combined almost unrestrictedly with Japanese terms in *kanji* or *kana*. The signs in the survey area in Komagome among others contain the following phrases (*katakana* term underlined): <u>*petto*</u> *yōhin* (pet supplies), <u>*supīdo*</u> *shiage* (speed finishing), *kasabukuro* <u>*sābisu*</u> *ki* (umbrella-bag service machine), *matsuge* <u>*kāru*</u> (eyelash curls) and <u>*puropōshon*</u> *dukuri* (proportion building). Noteworthy about the last example is the application of Japanese morphophonemic compounding rules according to which initial voiceless consonants of attached constituents become voiced. Thus, *tukuri* (produce) is altered into *dukuri*,[3] regardless of whether or not the preceding part of the compound is an English loan (see Tsujimura, 1996, 54-63). The terms discussed so far are given in Table I.

Table I. English terms in katakana

Term as given on sign	Transliteration	English gloss
コーヒーハウス	*kōhī hausu*	coffee house
コピーサービス	*kopī sābisu*	copy service
クリーニング	*kurīningu*	cleaning (= laundry)
ギャラリー	*gyararī*	gallery
ファッションサロン	*fasshon saron*	fashion salon
ジェイ・エム・エイ	*jei emu ei*	JMA (Japan Marriage Association)
レディスファッション	*redisu fasshon*	lady's fashion
メンズカット	*menzu katto*	men's cut
ライオンズマンション	*raionzu manshon*	Lion's Mansion
ペット用品	*petto yōhin*	pet supplies
スピード仕上げ	*supīdo shiage*	speed finishing
傘袋サービス機	*kasabukuro sābisu ki*	umbrella-bag service machine
まつ毛カール	*matsuge kāru*	eyelash curls
プロポーションづくり	*puropōshon dukuri*	proportion building

'BEAUTY MENU'

Previous research has shown that the use of foreign language ele-
ments in Japan's linguistic landscape is more striking in some com-
mercial domains than in others (Masai, 1972; Lim, 1996; Someya,
2002; Satō, 2003). English loan words are particularly widespread
in business types like hairdressers' or Western-style restaurants and
cafés, where a sign in extreme cases may be completely *katakana*-
dominated. An example is the 'Beauty Menu' in Figure 1, which
was displayed outside a hairdresser's in the survey area in Tabata.
The sign is a price list consisting of three columns. The left column
gives the names of the services, the two columns to the right the
prices of each service for short (middle column) and long hair (right
column), respectively.

Figure 1. Hairdresser's sign in Tabata

Of all available services only those in the last three lines are not, or only partially, given in *katakana: shukumō kyōsei* (hair straightening) and *kitsuke* (dressing) are written in *kanji, tokushu kōtingu* (special coating) in *kanji* and *katakana*. The other twelve items are English-based expressions exclusively written in *katakana: pāma* (perm), *dezain pāma* (design perm), *sutorēto pāma* (straight perm), *katto & burō* (cut & blow), *sukūru katto* (school cut), *chairudo katto* (child cut), *burō* (blow, i.e., dry), *karāringu* (coloring), *heāmanikyua* (hair manicure), *shanpū* (shampoo), *setto* (set) and *heā torītomento* (hair treatment). Two other *katakana* items, given in the headline of the middle and the right column, are *shōto* (short) and *rongu* (long).

The 'Beauty Menu' demonstrates that terms of English origin are not only used to fill lexical gaps for terms like 'perm' or 'shampoo,' but also replace such rather unspectacular concepts like 'long' and 'short,' 'hair' and even 'school' and 'child.' Transliterating these terms into *katakana* rather than using common Japanese vocabulary thus can hardly be accounted for from a purely instrumental point of view (see also Takashi, 1992). It is the interaction of language and writing that is at the heart of the matter here, because the *katakana*-dominated linguistic environment of the sign works like a chain reaction that affects all parts of the vocabulary in use.

'PARM, CUT, BROW'
Though *katakana* has been the default choice when using terms of English origin in Japanese text, it is not the only option. As Saint-Jacques observed two decades ago, there has been a strong tendency to use the roman alphabet for these types of expressions. Examples can be found on the sign of a hairdresser's in the survey area in Meguro. As can be seen in Figure 2, the sign lists four services and their respective prices for member and non-member customers, respectively. The four services are given in the alphabet, each accompanied by a smaller *katakana* version attached below. The function of the *katakana* glosses is to assure that the sign remains comprehensible to people less familiar with roman letters. However, not all English terms have been equipped with translit-erations. Not accompanied by *katakana* glosses is 'PHONE,' given in the right part of the sign, as well as the name of the business at the bottom, 'Beauty Salon Claude MONET.' Compared to the 'Beauty Menu' in Tabata *(figure 1),* the roman alphabet terms here make up a quite substantial part of the text.

Figure 2. Hairdresser's sign in Meguro

Interesting aspects of the sign are the two lexical items 'Parm' and 'Brow,' which are supposed to stand for 'perm' and 'blow' (i.e., to blow-dry), respectively. Regarding the fact that the two terms lead a second life as well-established loan words in the Japanese lexicon, the orthographic idiosyncrasies can be identified as interferences between the two linguistic systems and between language and script. As exemplified with 'perm' in Table II, the orthographic output <parm> is generated by the term's graphical representation in Japanese as *pāma,* which in turn results from its phonetic representation /pa:ma/ (or the other way round). Similar types of interferences on the spelling of re-romanized loan words are listed in Table III.

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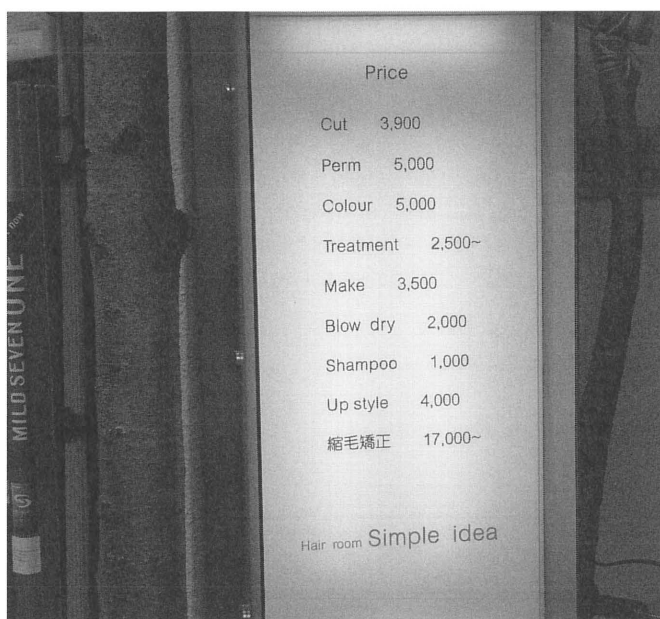**Table II.** Representations of "perm" on different linguistic levels

Lexical input	"perm"
Phonetic representation	/pa:ma/
Graphical representation	パーマ
Roman transliteration	*pāma*
Orthographic output	\<parm\>

Table III. Examples of orthographic interference

Original English term	Japanese loan	Japanese loan (Transliteration)	Spelling on sign
blow	ブロー	*burō*	brow
alcohol	アルコール	*arukōru*	alcohl
side order	サイドオーダー	*saido ōdā*	side ordar
chicken	チキン	*chikin*	chickin
Chinese	チャイニーズ	*chainīzu*	Chainese
strawberry	ストローベリー	*sutorōberī*	storawberry
cocktails	カクテル	*kakuteru*	cacktails
import	インポート	*inpōto*	inport

'SIMPLE IDEA'

As terms like 'PHONE' and 'Beauty Salon Claude MONET' on the hairdresser's sign in Figure 2 demonstrate, the alphabet in some cases is considered the only option for graphically representing terms of English origin. More examples are given in Figure 3, the price list of a hairdresser's named 'Simple idea' that was found in the survey area in Ebisu. As can be seen, eight of the nine services are announced in the roman alphabet, unaccompanied by *katakana* glosses. Were it not for the four *kanji* characters in the bottom line of the list, the sign at first sight would hardly be identifiable as a Japanese hairdresser's sign in a Japanese city at all.

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Figure 3. Hairdresser's sign in Ebisu

However, this sign, too, contains some noteworthy idiosyncrasies which betray its linguistic background. While terms like 'Cut,' 'Perm,' 'Color' and 'Treatment' would appear in a similar way on signs of hairdressers' elsewhere, the term 'Make' in the sense of 'makeup' is Japan-specific and clearly distinct from common English usage. What makes this well-established English loan appear idiosyncratic in this context is its alphabet representation based on English spelling rules. This suggests that we are dealing with an English term rather than with a well-established Japanese term that happens to be of English origin. When given in *katakana,* the term would be clearly identifiable as Japanese and appear much less odd.

The same holds true for a couple of other apparent lexical misfits in English-looking expressions. The 'Beauty Menu' in Figure 1 is a good example in this respect. While the term 'menu' in English is usually restricted to the domain of eating and drinking, its Japanese offspring *menyū* has a broader scope including selections of products and services well beyond this domain. A similar case was found in the survey area in Gotanda on a sign of a business named 'PUB&SNACK PEARL.' The semantic mismatch of the terms 'pub' and 'snack' is only in English, whereas the loan *sunakku* in Japanese designates a bar or night club, which goes together well with 'pub.' Table IV gives a list of the terms discussed.

Table IV. Examples of lexical interference

Term as given on sign	Japanese loan	Transliteration	English gloss
Make	メーク	*mēku*	makeup
Beauty Menu	メニュー	*menyū*	list of services and prices
PUB&SNACK	スナック	*sunakku*	night club, bar

'HAIR & MAKE'

As the examples in Table IV show, one frequently comes across apparently English expressions that only make sense when read as Japanese. It is hard to clearly allocate these terms to one language. From a formal point of view (script and spelling) they look English, but from a functional point of view (usage) they had better be considered Japanese. This type of loan word re-imported into alphabet and English spelling has been referred to by Honna (1995, 54; see also Loveday, 1996, 152) as 'rewriting.' It is a common practice that is usually preferred over a faithful transliteration of the *katakana* version of a term, which would have resulted in 'Mēku,' 'Menyū' and 'Sunakku' in the cases just discussed.
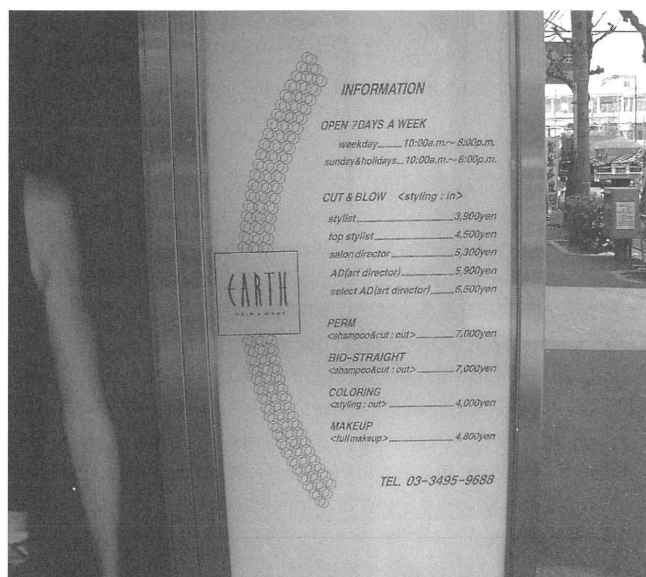
Figure 4. Hairdresser's sign in Osaki

Increasing use of graphically unaltered English loans has contributed to an ever growing familiarity with roman letters and English spelling rules for sign readers in Japan. As a result, it is no longer exceptional to find shop signs now completely functioning in English. The example in Figure 4, a sign of a hairdresser's chain called 'EARTH – HAIR & Make' is such a case. It was found in the survey area in Ōsaki and contains not a single term visibly discernible as Japanese. All information that is available is exclusively in English. In contrast to the sign in Figure 3, this includes not only the services, but longer and more complex contents about the opening hours ('OPEN 7DAYS A WEEK') and the staff ('stylist,' 'top stylist,' etc.) as well. Even the currency is spelt out as 'yen,' which, as a look at the three former examples shows, is quite unusual.

That this is the sign of an ordinary Japanese hairdresser's can be inferred only from a few remaining idiosyncrasies such as frequent lack of space between words and missing plural endings in 'weekday' and 'sunday&holidays.' However, the language of the sign can be clearly identified as English. The shift from Japanese to English has been completed – at least as far as visible language is concerned.[4]

FROM KATAKANA TO ENGLISH

The examples discussed in this paper suggest that there is an overall trend from including some *katakana* elements on a sign to producing signs completely functioning in English. A key factor in this development is the use of English loan words, which appear on commercial signs in basically three ways. The unmarked way of integrating an English term into Japanese text is using the *katakana* script. As we have seen, such *katakana* renditions can be almost unrestrictedly combined with domestic terms written in *kanji* or *hiragana*. However, as the sign in Figure 1 exemplifies, the use of *katakana* may bring about a sort of graphical chain reaction, with the effect that a sign becomes completely *katakana*-dominated.

Another way English loans are used on commercial signs is without any graphical adaptation, that is, in roman alphabet and according to English spelling rules. The propensity to use this strategy is particularly strong with terms whose *katakana* renditions have become well-established parts of the Japanese lexicon. From a diachronic point of view, it can be assumed that the *katakana* version of a term

precedes its representation in the roman alphabet. Thus, Someya (2002, 227) has pointed out that *hea* and *katto* open up the door for 'Hair' and 'Cut.' Disguised in *katakana,* these terms function like Trojan horses waiting to be re-converted into their original script and spelling.

An intermediate stage in this process is the co-occurrence of a term spelled simultaneously in alphabet and *katakana,* as has been the case for the sign in Figure 2. This way of usage is motivated by the desire to have alphabet elements on a sign while also making sure that their meaning is properly understood. Though some charac-teristic misspellings of English loan words testify to the *katakana* background of a term, a direct transliteration based on the *katakana* spelling is never considered an option. The absence of terms like 'Heā' or 'Katto' on signs in Tokyo demonstrates that use of the alphabet automatically entails the (more or less successful) applica-tion of English spelling rules. The occurrence of such terms within Japanese texts makes them linguistic hybrids impossible to clearly assign to either Japanese or English.

Use of the alphabet on commercial signs may involve similar graphical chain reactions as in the case of *katakana.* In this respect, Someya (2002, 224) has observed an 'eliminative nature of roman letters.' A similar point has been made by Satō (2003, 6,8). This brings us to the third way English is used on shop signs in Tokyo. As the example in Figure 3 has shown, there are cases in which a sign is completely alphabet-dominated. The few native (*kanji* or *kana*) ele-ments that remain are not used for the sake of intelligibility of the English terms, but represent concepts for which no handy English vocabulary exists.

The last step in this development is the occurrence of completely monolingual English signs, as the example in Figure 4. Except for the currency ('yen') and a few linguistic idiosyncrasies that remain, the sign contains no hint about its Japanese background. Examples like these refute the frequently made claim that English in Japan was used for the sake of decoration only. English is not a decoration here but conveys substantial linguistic contents. The same point has been made by Stanlaw (2004, 31), who in interviews with executives of Japanese advertisement companies found that intelligibility of an English message to potential customers was considered to be of crucial importance.

The different degrees to which English is integrated into Japanese text can be interpreted as reflecting different chronological stages (Backhaus, 2005). Point of departure is the need to fill a lexical gap (e.g., 'perm') or simply the desire to replace an ordinary Japanese term by an English one (e.g., 'short' and 'long'). Stage one is the import of the term by using the *katakana* script. This is the orthodox way of making native foreign vocabulary, but it is not the only one. A more recent strategy, which may be referred to as stage two, is integrating an English loan word into Japanese text by retaining its original script and spelling. English loans are no longer written in *katakana*, but simply left as they are. The use of graphically non-adapted English terms at the same time involves a trend to progressively replace Japanese expressions – borrowed or other – by English ones. This paves the way for stages three and four, the appearance of signs mainly or completely functioning in English. The development is sketched in Table V.

Table V. Integration of English and roman alphabet: diachronic development

Stage	Script for English term	Language	Example
(1)	Katakana	Japanese/English	Figure 1
(2)	Katakana, alphabet	Japanese/English	Figure 2
(3)	Alphabet	Japanese/English	Figure 3
(4)	Alphabet	English	Figure 4

CONCLUSION

Coming back to Saint-Jacques' paper of 1987, it can be said that the alphabet is still in, and far more even than it used to be twenty years ago. A look at Tokyo's linguistic landscape shows that Saint-Jacques' observations about the prominence of the roman alphabet were no temporary phenomenon of the 1980s, but one that has considerably progressed ever since. What Saint-Jacques does not discuss – most likely because the phenomenon was not observable to any substantial degree at the time – is the prominence of signs whose main or only language is English rather than Japanese. This is a new development that deserves special attention. It is interesting not only because it testifies to the unabated popularity of English in Japan, but also because it shows that this process cannot be properly understood without taking into account the dynamics of visible language.

ENDNOTES

1 In a wider sense, the term 'alphabet' refers to any writing system "characterized by a systematic mapping relation between its signs (graphemes) and the minimal units of speech (phonemes)" (Coulmas, 1996, 9). However, the term is used here as synonymous with 'roman alphabet.'

2 Italics are used throughout this article to indicate transliterations from terms originally written in *kanji* and/or *kana*.

3 Transliteration of Japanese terms in this paper follows the rules of the Hepburn system. Nippon transliteration (*tukuri* and *dukuri* rather than *tsukuri* and *zukuri*) is exceptionally used in this example to illustrate the morphophonemic processes at work.

4 My impression from a few spot checks conducted during data collection was that the visibility of English on signs outside usually could not be read to be indicative of the availability of English-speaking staff inside. In this respect, Loveday (1996, 157) has emphasized that "intensive Anglicization is a predominantly orthographic phenomenon associated with the public spheres of marketing and media and does not extend to ordinary interaction in the speech community."

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