

# FROM LOANWORDS TO LEXICAL INNOVATION: COVID-19 BUZZWORDS IN JAPANESE DISCOURSE

#### Takako Kawabata

SOAS University of London, London, United Kingdom kawabata.takako@n.iput.ac.jp

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced language, leading to the emergence of numerous neologisms worldwide to describe unprecedented changes in lifestyle. In Japan, English-based loanwords were frequently adopted alongside Japanese terms in pandemic discourse, despite the availability of Japanese equivalents. This study explores COVID-19-related buzzwords in Japan, focusing on their formation and usage. It addresses three key research questions: 1) What types of COVID-19-related neologisms emerged in Japanese? 2) What are the distinguishing features of these neologisms? and 3) What roles do English loanwords play? Using linguistic and sociolinguistic approaches, the study examines terms nominated for two prominent new word and buzzword awards in Japan. The findings reveal four categories of neologisms: Japanese words, English loanwords, concomitants of Japanese and English loanwords, and hybrids of Japanese and English words. Furthermore, the study identifies four primary processes: nominalisation, word formation, lexical deviation, and borrowing. The analysis highlights the sociolinguistic impact of these neologisms, demonstrating how they reflect Japan's cultural and generational dynamics, facilitate engagement with global public health discourse, and underscore tensions around accessibility for older demographics. This research contributes to understanding language evolution in response to international events and offers a novel perspective on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Japanese language.

Keywords: COVID-19; nominalisation; word formation; lexical deviation; borrowing

#### **INTRODUCTION**

## **Background and Context**

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted virtually every aspect of life globally, from public health to economic activities, and social interactions to cultural practices. One of the notable but often underappreciated areas of change due to the COVID-19 pandemic has been in language. Crises and major societal disruptions historically prompt the emergence of new words—neologisms—that encapsulate novel experiences, concepts, and phenomena associated with the events. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception, with a surge in neologisms across various languages as people have sought to describe new realities and navigate unprecedented challenges.

Language is crucial for communication, shaping and reflecting societal attitudes, behaviours, and responses during crises. The emergence of neologisms during the COVID-19 pandemic provides valuable insights into how societies adapt linguistically to extraordinary circumstances.

These linguistic innovations are not merely additions to the lexicon but are imbued with cultural and social significance, encapsulating shared experiences and collective consciousness.

Japanese is known for its adaptability in incorporating foreign terms, and using loanwords has long been an integral part of its lexicon (Hosokawa, 2015; Kunert, 2020). During the pandemic, new words and phrases were coined in Japan to address its unique challenges, leading to numerous neologisms' widespread creation and use of multiple neologisms. These neologisms complement conventional terminology and introduce new English-based loanwords into the linguistic repertoire. This linguistic evolution includes using English-based loanwords alongside native terms, reflecting various aspects of the pandemic, from medical and public health terminology to colloquial expressions capturing the everyday realities of this transformative period. While some of these English loanwords have Japanese equivalents, the extent to which they are used and the



criteria for their adoption in describing the health crisis remain ambiguous.

While extensive work has conducted on the sociolinguistic aspects of loanwords in Japan (Asahi et al., 2022; Hosokawa, 2023), relatively little research has examined how neologisms emerge in response to societal crises, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies such as O'Neill's (2021) analysis of COVID-19-related English loanwords have shed light on generational disparities in comprehension and usage. Toratani (2023) examined specific terms like masuku ('mask'), revealing cultural underpinnings. However, existing research has yet to comprehensively address the processes and implications of neologism formation that combine native Japanese and loanword elements, particularly in times of crisis.

The study analyzes COVID-19-related terms nominated for major new word and buzzword awards in Japan from 2020 to 2023, using Krishnamurthy's (2010) framework—nominalisation, word formation, lexical deviation, and borrowing. It also explores the role and function of English-based loanwords during the pandemic. The research addresses three main questions: the types, features, and functions of COVID-19-related neologisms in Japanese. By examining buzzwords, the study reveals linguistic trends and societal engagement with these terms.

The importance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding how language evolves during crises. It offers valuable insights for linguistics, lexicography, sociolinguistics, and public health communication by documenting real-time linguistic change and highlighting effective strategies for engaging the public.

# The COVID-19 Pandemic and Government Responses in Japan

To provide context for analyzing Japanese COVID-19-related neologisms, this study first outlines the progression of the pandemic and governmental responses in Japan,

followed by a review of the linguistic impact of COVID-19 both globally and locally. Previous studies on pandemic-related neologisms are discussed alongside an overview of the Japanese lexicon, emphasizing the role of loanwords in the language.

Japan reported its first COVID-19 case on January 15, 2020, with a major outbreak soon after on a cruise ship in Yokohama on February 3 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2020). The WHO named the virus and disease on February 11, but in Japan, the public commonly referred to it as shingata korona (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2020). The Japanese Government declared a state of emergency in several prefectures, including Tokyo, on April 7, 2020 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2020). This was followed by various emergency measures, border controls, and the postponement of the 2020 Summer Olympics (International Olympic Committee, 2020; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2020).

Unlike many countries, Japan avoided strict lockdowns, instead opting for quasi-emergency strategies such as limiting activity in dining and event spaces (Steen, 2020). These restrictions were gradually relaxed, and by March 2022, the country began to shift toward coexistence with the virus (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022). Eventually, COVID-19 was reclassified to be treated like seasonal influenza starting in May 2023 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2023).

## **Linguistic Impact of COVID-19 Globally**

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the productivity of morphological systems through borrowing, compounding, blending, and affixation, reflecting the adaptive nature of language (Souag, 2020; Werigbelegha & Kwokwo, 2019). Neologisms—newly coined words or expressions—emerged rapidly in response to the global crisis, filling lexical gaps and

improving communication (Jiang et al., 2021; Sharipova, 2024). Their creation is often influenced by sociocultural shifts, with crises such as the pandemic prompting linguistic innovations (Samylicheva & Gazda, 2020; Lehrer, 2003; Fischer, 1998; Bell, 2021).

The year 2020 saw a notable spike in language change as both new words and altered meanings of existing terms emerged to convey novel experiences. These changes enhanced communicative precision during the pandemic (Korat, 2019; Klymenko, 2019; Nicholson et al., 2023). Lexicographers worldwide documented such neologisms, which unlike nonce formations, are stable and widely recognized within speech communities (Stevenson, 2015; Matiini, 2024; Schmid, 2008; Fischer, 1998; Usevičs, 2012). This study defines neologisms as expressions that are still considered new yet used consistently over a certain period.

Cross-linguistic studies confirmed that triggered similar COVID-19 linguistic responses globally. The Oxford English Dictionary added numerous COVID-19 terms in 2020 (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024), and neologism research has spanned many languages: English (Asif et al., 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2020), German (Klosa-Kückelhaus, 2022), Spanish (Bueno & Freixa, 2022; Adelstein & Boschiroli, European and Brazilian Portuguese (Barbosa & Martins, 2022; Alves et al., 2022), Croatian (Mihaljević et al., 2022), Korean (Nam et al., 2022), and New Zealand Sign Language (Vale & McKee, 2022). Comparative studies included Hungarian, Italian, and English (Papp, 2022), and French, German, Dutch, and English (Cartier et al., 2022).

Other research analyzed formation methods, communicative roles, and social implications of neologisms (Kananaj & Rushiti, 2024; Asif et al., 2021). Social media platforms, especially Twitter, were also used to explore neologism trends during early 2020 (Ibrahim et al., 2020; Al-Azzawi &

Haleem, 2021). These studies revealed frequent use of borrowing, word formation, and lexical deviation. Additionally, research explored public awareness and usage patterns of neologisms, including demographic differences such as gender-based variations in Saudi Arabia (Amiruddin et al., 2022; Al-Melhi & Busabaa, 2022).

#### **Linguistic Impact of COVID-19 in Japan**

In Japan, the COVID-19 pandemic has created numerous neologisms, reflecting both linguistic innovation and cultural adaptation. Terms such as ソーシャルディ スタンス (sōsharudisutansu, social distance), 自粛警察 (jishukukeisatsu, selfrestraint police), and 'ウィズコロナ (wizu with corona) have become commonplace, encapsulating various aspects of the pandemic experience. During the pandemic, Toratani (2023) examined how the Japanese used the word マスク (masuku, mask). O'Neill (2021)analysed comprehensibility of COVID-19-related English loanwords by the Japanese public and found a lower comprehension rate among research participants over 60 than younger participants. Other researchers have focused on analysing the social impacts of the pandemic in Japan. Minetaki (2020)investigated the use of COVID-19-related words on Japanese Twitter, arguing that lifting some pandemic measures influenced economic activities by the public. Yomoda (2021) analysed Japanese tweets containing 'COVID-19 and school closures' and found they mainly expressed negative sentiments, whereas the public had positive attitudes toward online learning. These neologisms provide linguistic tools to navigate the pandemic and reflect cultural nuances and societal responses to the crisis.

In the case of Japan, the use of loanwords and their impact should not only be discussed from a linguistic perspective but also examined in terms of their influence on broader society. Loanwords serve crucial

sociocultural functions. Beyond introducing new concepts, they often signify cultural openness and modernization. For instance, adopting English loanwords during COVID-19 pandemic facilitated the dissemination of global public health information in Japan, highlighting the role of English as a lingua franca. However, the sociocultural implications extend further: loanwords like sōsharudisutansu (social distance) and rokkudaun (lockdown) reflect Japan's integration into global discourse while sparking debates about accessibility for older demographics.

# **Japanese Lexicon**

The Japanese lexicon comprises four main categories: native Japanese words, kango (Sino-Japanese words), gairaigo (primarily European loanwords), and hybrids combining Japanese and foreign elements (Taylor & Taylor, 1995). Gairaigo, often written in katakana, includes both soundbased loans (onvaku) and translated words ([hon]yakugo) (Park, 1986). The presence of Western loanwords in Japanese has grown over time. For instance, Kojien data from 1991 showed that Western-based words made up 16.6% of the lexicon (Oshima, 2009). Sanseido's loanword dictionary grew from 20,000 entries in 1972 to 52,500 in 2000 (MacGregor, 2003), with English comprising 80-85% of gairaigo (Park, 1986; Irwin, 2011).

Borrowing is a key mechanism in language development, with speakers of all languages adopting new terms (Trask, 1996). In Japan, loanword usage correlates with age and gender. A 2004 survey showed that 35% of youth aged 15–19 understood *gairaigo*, while awareness among those over 60 was significantly lower (National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics, 2004). Ishino (1983) found younger people were more accepting of English loanwords. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, excessive reliance on *gairaigo* led to confusion among older adults unfamiliar

with English-based terms (The Sankei News, 2020).

#### **METHOD**

This study systematically examined COVID-19-related neologisms that gained prominence in Japanese society from 2020 to 2023, illuminating their characteristics and evolution. Words nominated for distinguished 'word of the year' awards in Japan were analysed: the *U-can Shingo* Ryukogo Taisho (U-can new words and award), announced by buzzwords collaboration between educational material publisher company U-can and the Jiyukokuminsha, and the Sanseido Jishowoamuhitoga erabu kotoshino shingo (Sanseido word of the year selected by lexicographers), published by Sanseido, were analysed for the study. These awards annually recognize the top 30 words nominated by the Japanese public, with editorial staff selecting the word of the year from these lists in December. In addition to the top 30 words, Sanseido has a special category related to the social situation of the year. In 2020, Sanseido's list had a category for COVID-19-related words, with six words being nominated. The nominated words included new words, existing words with new meanings or concepts, and buzzwords. To expand the scope beyond award-nominated buzzwords, this study additionally examined the usage of these neologisms in everyday contexts. Sources such as online forums and social media platforms (e.g., Twitter) were observed to trace how these words were adopted and used across different societal domains.

Krishnamurthy's (2010) framework has been adopted in the research on COVID-19 neologisms. Krishnamurthy (2010) analysed Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* and identified four neologisms: nominalisation, word formation, lexical deviation, and borrowing. Krishnamurthy's study on lexis and neologisms concerns the use of English and other languages, and it

helps investigate COVID-19-related new words and buzzwords in Japanese that contain English loanwords and compound words blending English. As previous research on COVID-19-related neologisms has adopted this framework (Al-Azzawi & Haleem, 2021; Asif et al., 2021; Ntalala, 2022), utilising it in this study facilitates the comparison of neologism types across different languages and societies. Therefore, this study examines the characteristics of COVID-19 neologisms based on the framework and four forms identified by Krishnamurthy and other researchers.

The methodology encompassed several key steps:

- 1. The top 30 nominated words are distinguished into 'COVID-19-related' and 'non-COVID-19-related' categories.
  - The two buzzword awards provide explanations of the meanings and social backgrounds of each nominated word, such as words widely used to express COVID-19 restrictions. This research distinguishes between COVID-19-related and non-COVID-19-related words based on these explanations.
- 2. Categorising the types of COVID-19-related words based on their linguistic origins, including Japanese words, loanwords, concomitants of Japanese and loanwords, and hybrid forms that blend Japanese and foreign language elements. (This step includes identifying the linguistic origins of the loanwords.)
- 3. These neologisms identified are four distinct through forms: nominalisation, word formation, lexical deviation, and borrowing, Krishnamurthy's drawing upon established classifications.
- 4. Classifying the neologisms based on their usage contexts. The identified neologisms were further analyzed to understand how

they were utilized across different societal and communicative contexts.

The study captures a broader perspective on how pandemic-related terms permeated Japanese society by incorporating award-nominated and organically used neologisms. This expanded approach allows a more nuanced understanding of their sociolinguistic impact, bridging institutional recognition with grassroots adoption.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

# **Classification of Neologisms**

Examining nominated words from 2020 to 2023 revealed intriguing patterns in Japan's emergence and evolution of COVID-19-related neologisms. The number of nominated words in four years was 158 after excluding duplicated words in the two awards. Among the nominated words, 30 were related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, many such words surfaced, but this trend gradually waned in subsequent years. The chi-square test revealed a p-value less than 0.05, indicating that the observed difference is statistically significant. Although most COVID-19-related words appeared in 2020, some new words became widely used in the following years. The term' shingata korona' (COVID-19) was not among the nominations. Most of the non-COVID-19-related words were associated with entertainment in 2020, the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2021, and war and religious groups related to the assassination of then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022. The findings were summarized in Figure 1.

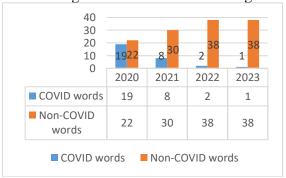


Figure 1. Number of COVID-19-related and non-COVID-19-related words by year

#### **Linguistic Origins**

The study identified four types of COVID-19-related neologisms in Japanese: Japanese words, loanwords, concomitants of both Japanese and loanwords, and hybrids of Japanese and loanwords. Although Japanese has historically adopted medical terminologies from German, COVID-19loanwords and hybrid words related predominantly contain English elements, reflecting the widespread use of Englishbased loanwords in Japanese society.

Loanwords appeared prominently in 2020; however, all the new words that emerged in the following years were either Japanese or blends of Japanese loanwords. Although Japanese words continued appearing over the four consecutive years, this does not indicate statistical significance, as the number of COVID-19-related words decreased yearly. The chi-square test produced a p-value of 0.307, indicating no statistically significant difference. Figure 2 provides insights into the COVID-19-related of categorised by year.



Figure 2. Types of COVID-19-related words by year

All the loanwords were adopted from English, for example,  $\Box$   $\mathcal{P}$   $\mathcal$ 

To travel), a tourism-boosting campaign led by the Government to support industries struggling with the pandemic-caused downturn (The Japan Times, 2021). Another example is  $\mathbb{J} + \mathbb{L} + \mathbb{L}$  ( $rim\bar{o}to$ , remote), which is used to mean 'work remotely' and 'work from home' in Japanese.

In the nomination lists for 2020, two entries were concomitants of Japanese and English-based loanwords, which are the use of Japanese and English loanwords. One entry was 新しい生活様式 (atarashiiseikatsuyōshiki, new lifestyle) in Japanese and ニューノーマル (nyūnōmaru, new normal) as a loanword. The other entry was おうち時間 (ouchijikan, time spent at home) in Japanese and ステイホーム (suteihōmu, stay home) as a loanword. Although the Japanese and English phrases express almost the same concepts, the two languages were used in different periods.

The final type is hybrid words, Japanese consisting of and **English** morphemes. For example, アベノマスク (abenomasuku, masks Japanese the Government provided to the public) is a compound noun formed from 7 < (abe,then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe), / (no, possessive in Japanese, 'of' in English), and マスク (masuku, mask), which is a conventionally used English-based loanword in Japanese. Another example is Zoom映え (zūmu bae, photogenic at Zoom meetings), which comprises an English morpheme, 'Zoom' (zūmu, an online meeting system), and a Japanese word, 映え (bae, sequential voicing of a noun 'hae', which means 'to make something appear more beautiful'). An English acronym with a Japanese noun, PCR 検査 (PCR kensa, PCR test), was also in this type. All the pandemic-related words, their pronunciations, and meanings are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. *COVID-19 related words*, pronunciations, and meanings

Year	Туре	Written form and	English translation		
2020		アマピエ	Amabie (name of a mystical creature believed to ward off plagues)		
		amabie	, , ,		
		自粛警察	Self-restraint police (vigilantes)		
		jishukukeisatsu	,		
	Japanese	濃厚接触者	Close-contact person		
		nökösesshokusha	There Co 6 a Comment alone Class content collings and Confined and and analysis		
		3密(三つの密)	Three Cs (i.e., Crowded places, Close-contact settings, and Confined and enclosed		
		sanmitsu (mittsunomitsu)	spaces)		
		手指	Hands and fingers		
		shushi	•		
		エッセンシャルワーカー	Essential worker		
		essensharuwākā			
		GoToキャンペーン	Go to campaign		
		götöu kyampen			
		クラスター	Cluster Remote (work from home) Lockdown		
		kurasutā			
		リモート			
	Loanword	rimöto			
	Louiword	ロックダウン			
		rokkudaun			
		ソーシャルディスタンス	Social distance		
		sösharudisutansu			
		テレワーク	Telework (work from home)		
		terewāku			
		ワーケーション	Workcation		
		wäkeshon	Tion to the control of the control o		
		新しい生活様式	New lifestyle /		
	Concomitant	atarashiiseikatsuyöshiki/	Total alongs /		
		ニューノーマル	New normal		
		nyūnōmaru	TOTAL TOTAL		
	CONCONSISION		Time spent at home /		
		ouchijikan/	The spent at noise		
		ステイホーム	Stay home		
		suteihōmu			
	Hybrid	アペノマスク	Abe's mask (masks the Japanese Government provided to the public)		
		abenomasuku			
		オンライン〇〇	Online XX (e.g., online drinking party)		
		onrain XX	Online XX (e.g., Online Unitally party)		
		PCR検査	PCR test		
		PCR kensa			
		Zoom映え	Photogenic at Zoom meetings		
		zūmu bae	i nougono ai comi ilibrilligo		
2021	Japanese	副反応	Side effect		
		fukuhannö	CHILD SHOUL		
		変異株	Variant		
		henikabu	T COMMINS		
		人流	Flow of people		
		jinryū	i ion oi poopio		
		自宅療養	Homa recovery		
		jitakuryöyö	Home recovery		
		黙食	F-123		
		mokushoku	Eat in silence		
		路上飲み	Drinking on about		
		rojönomi	Drinking on street		
		鼻マスク	New years 6 - years - a feet week before each		
	Hybrid	hanamasuku	Nose mask (i.e., wearing a face mask below one's nose)		
		マスク会食	W		
		masukukaishoku	Wear a face mask when dining out		
2022	1.	オミクロン株			
	Japanese	omikuronkabu	Omicron variant		
		酸パンツ			
	Hybrid	顔パンツ kaonantsu	Face pants (i.e., cannot leave home without a face mask on)		
1023	Hybrid Japanese	酸パンツ kaopantsu 4年まり/声出し応援	Face pants (i.e., cannot leave home without a face mask on)  For the first time in four years/Cheering out loud		

#### Forms of Neologisms

Further analysis unveiled that the COVID-19-related words in the present study could be classified into four distinct forms: nominalisation, word formation, lexical deviation, and borrowing. Table 2 lists the COVID-19-related words according to their forms and types.

Table 2. *COVID-19-related words* according to their forms and types

	Nominalisation	Word formation	Lexical deviation	Borrowing
			3 密 (三つの密)	
	人流	自粛警察	sanmitsu	アマピエ
	jinryü	jishukukeisatsu	(mittsunomitsu)	amabie
	路上飲み		黙食	濃厚接触者
	rojōnomi		mokushoku	nökösesshokusha
	4年ぶり/声出し応援			手指
	yonenburi/koedashioen			shushi
Japanese				副反応
•				fukuhannö
				変異株
				henikabu
				自宅療養
				jitakuryōyō
				オミクロン株
				omikuronkabu
				omikuronkabu エッセンシャルワーカー
				essensharuwäkä Go To キャンペーン
				götöu kyampēn
				クラスター
				kurasutā
				リモート
Loanword				rimōto
				ロックダウン
				rokkudaun
				ソーシャルディスタンス
				sõsharudeisutansu
				テレワーク
				terewäku
				ワーケーション
				wākēshon
	新しい生活様式			
	atarashiiseikatsuyōshiki/			
	ニューノーマル			
_	nyūnōmaru			
Concomitant	おうち時間	1		
	ouchijikan/			
	ステイホーム			
	suteihōmu			
		オンラインの	アペノマスク	
		onrain XX	abenomasuku	
		PCR検査	Zoom映え	
		PCR kensa	zūmu bae	
			鼻マスク	
Hybrid			hanamasuku	
			マスク会食	1
	1			
			masukukaishoku 額パンツ	

The words formed within nominalisation were 人流 (jinryū, flow of people) and 路上飲み (rojōnomi, drinking on street). The former is the nominalisation of the noun phrase hito no nagare (flow of people), and the latter is from the verb phrase rojō de nomu (drinking on street). Word formations also appear in the form of compound nouns, such as 自粛警察 (jishukukeisatsu, self-restraint police), which is formed from 自粛 (jishuku, self-restraint) and 警察 (keisatsu, police). Another example is オンライン○○ (*onrain* ○○, online XX), which comprises オンライン (onrain, online) and a noun related to an online activity (e.g., drinking party). Although オン ラインゲーム (onrain gēmu, online game) has been commonly used, words related to cultural change due to the pandemic can be added to オンライン (*onrain*, online). The words formed within lexical deviation are 黙 食 (mokushoku, eat in silence) and 顔パンツ

(kaopantsu, face pants). These neologisms were created to reflect social change and the state of people's minds. Borrowings occurred not only from English but also from existing Japanese words. Semantic shifts of existing words fall into the widening, narrowing, or generalisation of meaning. For example,  $\mathcal{T}$ マビエ (amabie), which is a mythical creature believed to ward off plagues, became the symbol of protecting people from epidemics. This borrowing is not a change in meaning but adds a new concept to reflect the social situation. Another example is 濃厚接 触 者 (*nōkōsesshokusha*. close-contact person), which could be any person in close contact with someone. The meaning of this term has narrowed to refer to a person who had contact with a COVID-19 carrier. The other shift is the generalisation of specific terms to daily use. The medical terms 手指 (shushi, hands and fingers) and 変異株 (henikabu, variant) came into common usage. The borrowings from English were エッセ ンシャルワーカー (essensharuwākā, essential worker) and ワーケーション (wākēshon, workcation), which have no equivalent words in Japanese. English-based loanwords occur as a result of borrowing, and these include the shortened form of 'work remotely' as リモート (*rimōto*, remote).

## **Thematic Groups of Neologisms**

The identified neologisms can be further categorised into three main thematic groups based on their usage contexts. These neologisms range from medical terminology to colloquial expressions, reflecting the multifaceted impact of the pandemic. Below is a summary of the most notable neologisms within each category.

# Medical Terms and Public Health Communication

Japanese was used for medical terms such as 副反応 (fukuhannō, side effect) and 自宅療養 (jitakuryōyō, home recovery), highlighting the critical role of clear and accessible public health communication in

managing the pandemic. Ensuring that key terms are easily understood and widely disseminated enhances public compliance and awareness, aiding in effective crisis management. However, words related to COVID-19 prevention, such as クラスター (kurasutā, cluster) and ソーシャルディスタンス (sōsharudisutansu, social distance), were borrowed directly from English, despite having Japanese equivalents like "群れ (mure, cluster)" and "社会的距離 (shakaiteki kyori, social distance).

# Societal Adaptation

The widespread use of terms such as テレワ ーク (terewāku, telework) and マスク会食 (masukukaishoku, wear a face mask when dining out) indicates a rapid societal adaptation to new norms and practices necessitated by the pandemic. Moreover, the popularity of colloquialisms such as 自粛警 察 (jishukukeisatsu, self-restraint police) and 路上飲み (rojōnomi, drinking on the street) reflects the public's emotional and psychological response to prolonged restrictions and social pressures.

#### **Cultural Nuances**

Colloquialisms involved compounding and blending, creating new words that succinctly captured cultural nuances and complex concepts, such as アベノマスク (abenomasuku, masks provided by the Japanese Government). Furthermore, terms such as オンライン飲み会 (online nomikai, online drinking party) demonstrate Japan's ability to integrate foreign concepts into its cultural and linguistic fabric, reflecting a blend of traditional and modern influences.

# Sociopolitical Context of COVID-19 Neologisms

The emergence of COVID-19-related neologisms in Japan must be understood within the broader sociopolitical context. Japan's unique pandemic response, characterized by quasi-emergency measures rather than strict lockdowns, shaped the emerging neologisms. Terms such as

sanmitsu (三密, the Three Cs: avoiding Crowded places, Close-contact settings, and Confined spaces) reflect the Government's emphasis on individual responsibility rather than enforced restrictions. This contrasts with the linguistic responses observed in countries with more stringent lockdowns, such as the frequent use of terms like 'lockdown' in English-speaking countries. The selective borrowing of English loanwords in Japan, such as *rokkudaun* (lockdown), often involved adapting foreign terms to fit domestic discourse.

The sociopolitical context further influenced linguistic choices. In the Philippines, a surge of pandemic-related vocabulary emerged, some used humorously, showcasing linguistic creativity in coining terms addressing various aspects of the crisis (Cahapay, 2020). In Brazilian Portuguese, terms related to lockdown and quarantine expanded in meaning to reflect conceptual information related to the pandemic (Alves et al., 2022). In contrast, Japan's economic recovery-focused discourse emphasized terms like Go To campaigns, Travelreflecting a push to stimulate domestic tourism.

# **Cross-Linguistic Comparisons**

In English, word-formation processes were varied, covering all possible forms of derivation, including affixation, compounding, blending, clipping, acronyms, and dual processes. Compounding and blending were the most prominent (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021). By contrast, languages such as Spanish and Croatian predominantly relied on compounding and affixation rather than hybridization during the pandemic (Božanić & Brešan Ančić, 2022; Bueno & Freixa, 2022).

Comparing Japan's neologisms with other languages reveals shared and unique patterns. For instance, like many languages, Japanese coined new phrases to describe social phenomena and public health measures. The term wizu korona (ウィズコロナ, with

corona) parallels the English phrase "living with COVID-19," reflecting a global shift in pandemic management strategies. Similarly, terms like *remote* (リモート, remote) mirror the widespread adoption of remote work practices worldwide. However, Japan's neologisms also display unique linguistic creativity. Hybrid forms such abenomasuku (アベノマスク, Abe's mask), combining the then-Prime Minister's name with an English loanword, exemplify Japan's ability to blend cultural and linguistic elements.

# **Implications of Sociopolitical and Cross- Cultural Dynamics**

The findings highlight the interplay between sociopolitical factors and linguistic adaptation. This aligns with global patterns of linguistic adaptation but also reveals Japanspecific strategies, such as hybridization and the use of culturally resonant terms like jishukukeisatsu (自粛警察, self-restraint police). Cross-linguistic comparisons enrich this analysis by illustrating universal trends, such as the rapid emergence of public healthterminology, alongside related distinct cultural responses. This underscores the importance of sociopolitical context in shaping linguistic innovation, providing a foundation for further comparative studies on the global linguistic impact of COVID-19.

In Japan, adopting English loanwords during the pandemic underscores both the influence of globalization and the localized reinterpretation of foreign concepts. The prevalence of loanwords highlights Japan's historical openness to adopting Western terminology, particularly during crises that demand new linguistic frameworks. However, the reliance on English-based loanwords during the pandemic sparked debate over accessibility and inclusivity, especially for older generations less familiar with foreign terms (O'Neill, 2021). This underscores sociopolitical the challenges of balancing global integration with domestic linguistic needs.

This study reveals unique aspects of the Japanese context. It is important to note that English loanwords became less prominent after 2021. While English-based loanwords appeared at the pandemic's beginning, the new words and buzzwords gradually shifted toward Japanese terms. This shift reflects changes in Japanese lifestyle and the reduced need for borrowing, as new Japanese terms were developed to describe life coexisting with the virus. These findings align with prior research on adopting loanwords in Japanese, emphasizing their initial prominence during periods of rapid societal change (O'Neill, 2021; Ishino, 1983). However, the observed shift away from loanwords contrasts with studies highlighting the sustained prevalence of English loanwords in Japanese (Park, 1986; Irwin, 2011). This divergence may indicate a context-specific adaptation, where native Japanese terms were prioritized as the pandemic progressed and domestic public health strategies required terms that were more accessible to a broader audience.

The use of English loanwords in 2020, as noted in our findings, was influenced by several factors. Firstly, it is a convention in the Japanese language to employ loanwords to express foreign concepts. Secondly, Japan's distinct approach to pandemic measures, characterised by a lack of strict lockdowns and the promotion of 'sanmitsu' (the Three Cs: Crowded places, Closecontact settings, and Confined and enclosed spaces), made the term 'lockdown' seem less relevant. As a result, the loanword ロックダ ウン (rokkudaun, lockdown), instead of its Japanese equivalent 都市封鎖 (toshifūsa), was more commonly used. Moreover, the concept of 'social distance' was novel and foreign to the Japanese public, despite the existence of its Japanese equivalent, 社会的 距離 (shakaiteki kyori), necessitating the use of the loanword ソーシャルディスタンス (sōsharudisutansu, social distance). As the focus moved from containment to prevention and coexistence with the virus, Japan developed its native terms to describe this evolving reality. For example, マスク会食 (masukukaishoku, wear a face mask when dining out) became a norm, and 顔パンツ (kaopantsu, face pants, signifying the necessity of face masks) highlighted the importance of masks in daily life.

Another unique aspect of COVID-19-related neologisms is the selective use of loanwords. Terms with potentially negative connotations were more likely to be expressed using English loanwords, whereas positively connoted ideas were conveyed through Japanese expressions. For example, the English-based loanwordオーバーシュート (ōbāshūto, overshoot) was used to describe a surge in COVID-19 cases, even though a Japanese equivalent, 感染爆発 (kansem bakuhatsu), also existed. In contrast, 集団免疫 (shūdan men'eki, herd immunity) was explained in Japanese.

The study also identified the neologisms' four structural and formation processes: nominalisation, word formation, lexical deviation, and borrowing. Both Japanese and English elements were present in all four forms. The prevalence of hybrid words reflects Japan's linguistic creativity and the influence of English on contemporary Japanese. The neologisms were used as nouns and noun phrases, fitting seamlessly into existing syntactic structures without requiring significant grammatical adjustments. This finding showcases the linguistic flexibility of the Japanese language in responding to the pandemic. These findings corroborate Krishnamurthy's (2010) framework. demonstrating that nominalization and word formation are critical in adapting language to societal crises. However, the study also reveals unique local cultural nuances. For example, hybrid terms like abenomasuku combine Japanese and **English** elements to reflect local sociopolitical contexts. This aligns with Lehrer's (2003) findings on linguistic creativity but emphasizes the role of

hybridity in capturing culturally specific meanings. Such terms contrast with neologisms in other languages, such as Spanish, which predominantly rely on compounding and affixation (Bueno & Freixa, 2022). This highlights the significance of cultural specificity in the processes of neologism formation.

The identified neologisms demonstrate variety structural formations, of a showcasing the linguistic creativity of Japanese society. The prevalence of hybrid words, combining Japanese and English elements, indicates an adaptive innovative use of language to cope with unprecedented circumstances. The findings underscore the dual sociocultural functions of loanwords as both globalization tools and cultural identity markers. For instance, sōsharudisutansu (social distance) and wizu reflect (with corona) korona Japan's engagement with global public health discourse. At the same time, terms like jishukukeisatsu (self-restraint police) and sanmitsu (Three Cs) reveal localized adaptations to the crisis. These results support Sergeant's (2011) assertion that loanwords are markers of modernization and internationalization and highlight accessibility concerns for older generations (O'Neill, 2021).

This study's findings reveal shared and unique linguistic adaptations compared to neologisms in other languages. The pandemic-specific context introduced distinctive factors influencing this adoption. For example, rokkudaun (lockdown) aligns with global trends (Asif et al., 2021), while hybrid words such as abenomasuku reflect uniquely Japanese sociopolitical narratives. Significant societal disruptions prompt the rapid emergence of neologisms. These neologisms encapsulate new realities and behaviours, highlighting the adaptive nature of language in response to unprecedented events. The findings underscore the dynamic relationship between language and society, particularly in times of crisis. The observed

trends and patterns provide valuable insights for future linguistic research and public policy development.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the emergence and characteristics of COVID-19-related neologisms in Japan, revealing a swift linguistic adaptation to a global health crisis. Unlike previous research that focused on gradual language change, this study shows neologisms—particularly combining native Japanese and English loanwords—played a key role in reflecting and responding to societal shifts. categorized neologisms analysis into Japanese words, loanwords, combinations of both, and hybrids, with a notable decline in English-based terms from 2021 onward as public focus shifted toward prevention and coexistence. Using Krishnamurthy's (2010) framework of nominalisation, formation, lexical deviation, and borrowing. study demonstrated the Japanese language's flexibility. Terms like マスク会 (masukukaishoku) and 顔パンツ (kaopantsu) reflect how such expressions became culturally embedded.

The research highlights how integration of loanwords enables swift dissemination of global concepts, while native terms retain cultural relevance—seen in contrasts like lockdown versus 三密 (sanmitsu, Three Cs). This dual strategy underscores the importance of linguistic choices in effective public health messaging, especially in multilingual contexts. It also Japan's balancing reflects of engagement and cultural identity in its language use. By contributing to Japanese sociolinguistics, the study provides insights into how language mediates between local and international spheres, and how public discourse adapts linguistically during crises. These findings are critical for linguists, educators, and policymakers seeking to understand or enhance crisis communication through language.

Future research could explore the longterm persistence of such neologisms through longitudinal studies, compare linguistic responses across cultures, and investigate how social variables like age and profession affect neologism adoption. As continues to live with COVID-19, new terms may emerge, making it vital to consider the comprehensibility of loanwords across all demographics, as emphasized in past research (National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics 2004; O'Neill 2021). This study offers a foundation for future inquiry into neologism formation, dissemination, and obsolescence, contributing to the broader understanding of language evolution during crises.

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