The Roman Alphabet Within the Japanese Writing System: Patterns of Usages and Their Significance

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Abstract

The present study explores the usages of the Roman alphabet within the writing system of Japanese. Japanese is typically said to have three types of characters in its writing system: hiragana, katakana, and kanji. However, the Roman alphabet is also commonly used in Japanese for various purposes along with other types of characters in Japanese. The present study argues that with the recent surge in electronic communication, the writing practice of Japanese is transitioning from vertical writing to horizontal writing, and this transition allows more foreign words and expressions written in the Roman alphabet to be used within Japanese without being converted into katakana loanwords. The present study also discusses the influence of the ever-increasing international interaction to the usages of the Roman alphabet within Japanese.

Keywords: Japanese, loanwords, Roman alphabet, katakana, writing system

Povzetek

Članek raziskuje uporabo latiničnega zapisa v pisnem sistemu japonščine. Za japonščino običajno pravimo, da ima v pisnem sistemu tri vrste znakov: hiragano, katakano in pismenke. Hkrati se v japonščini pogosto pojavlja tudi latinica, nameni za to pa so različni. V članku ugotavljamo, da nedavni porast elektronske komunikacije, s katero pisna praksa japonščine prehaja iz navpičnega v vodoravni zapis, omogoča, da se v japonščini uporablja več tujih besed in izrazov, napisanih v latinici, ne da bi jih pretvorili v izposojenke v katakani. Članek obenem obravnava še vpliv vedno večje mednarodne interakcije na uporabo latinice v japonščini.

Ključne besede: japonščina, prevzete besede, latinični zapis, katakana, pisni sistem
1 Introduction

The writing system of the modern Japanese language is typically said to consist of three major types of characters; the three types are hiragana, katakana, and kanji. However, one set of characters that is often overlooked in the writing system of Japanese is the Roman alphabet. In addition, with the recent surge of the use of the written language on the Internet, the Roman alphabet used within Japanese has also been increasing its importance. The present paper explores the usages of the Roman alphabet within the Japanese language, with a special focus on the linguistic, communicative, and social significance resulting from the usages of the Roman alphabet within the writing system of Japanese.

Before discussing the usages of the Roman alphabet within the writing system of Japanese, first, the present study provides a brief overview of the types of characters used in Japanese.

In the writing system of Japanese, hiragana characters are considered to be the most basic set of characters. After Chinese characters were introduced to Japan around the late fourth and early fifth centuries, hiragana was first created as a reading aid for Chinese characters around the ninth century (Hasegawa, 2015). Hiragana went through some modifications after its initial creation, and the modern set of hiragana used in present-day Japanese consists of 46 characters. Hiragana are phonograms, each of which represents a specific syllable, and are used for words in various lexical categories such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Hiragana is also used for particles and conjugational endings.

Another set of characters used in Japanese is katakana. Katakana characters were also developed from Chinese characters around the ninth century as a reading aid. In modern Japanese, katakana are mostly used for loanwords from non-Japanese languages and also for onomatopoeic expressions. Another major set of characters in Japanese is kanji characters. The literal meaning of kanji (漢字) is ‘characters of the Han Dynasty of ancient China’ (Hasegawa, 2015), and approximately 50,000 kanji characters exist in modern Japanese (Morton et al., 1992; Taylor & Taylor, 1995). However, most of those 50,000 characters are not in use in everyday life in Japan. The Agency of Cultural Affairs of Japan sets 2,136 characters as joyo kanji, which translates to English as ‘commonly used kanji’ (Agency of Cultural Affairs, 2010). The Joyo kanji list also serves as the guideline to select kanji characters that are to be included in school education as part of the government-set nationally standardized curriculum. Kanji characters are mostly used for words that were incorporated into Japanese from Chinese as well as Japanese nouns and the non-conjugational components of various lexical items such as verbs and adjectives.
The following sentences demonstrate the typical mixture of hiragana, katakana, and kanji in Japanese sentences.¹

(1) 食堂でアイスクリームを買いました。
    Shokudoo de aisukuriimu o kaimashita.
    ‘I bought ice cream at the cafeteria.’

(2) 田中さんはロンドンにいます。
    Tanaka san wa rondon ni imasu.
    ‘Mr./Ms. Tanaka is in London.’

In (1), shokudoo (食堂) ‘cafeteria’ and the non-conjugalional part of the verb kaimashita (買いました) ‘bought’ are written in kanji. Particles such as the location marking de (で), the object-marking o (を), and the conjugalional component of the verb kaimashita are written in hiragana. Katakana is used for the loanword aisukuriimu (アイスクリーム) ‘ice cream,’ in accordance with the phonological transformation from the English ice cream to the Japanese aisukuriimu. As shown in (1), the three major types of characters are used within a continuous sentence in Japanese, and the choice of the type of characters is determined at the word level depending on the property of each word. Similarly, in (2), the personal proper noun Tanaka (田中) is written in kanji, the city name rondon (ロンドン) ‘London’ in katakana, and other components in hiragana.

2 The present study

The Roman alphabet is typically not included as a major character type when the writing system of Japanese is discussed. However, close observation of the written language in Japanese shows that the Roman alphabet is frequently used as part of the Japanese writing system, and the Roman alphabet can be considered to be one of the major character types used within the Japanese writing system. The present paper explores the usages of the Roman alphabet used within Japanese, and discusses the communicative and sociolinguistic significance surrounding the usages of the Roman alphabet in Japanese.

This paper’s organization is as follows; the usages of the Roman alphabet are categorized into several categories, and example sentences are listed in each category.

¹ The present study follows the convention of transliteration that is typically adopted in linguistic studies in North America for its Romanization of Japanese. In this convention, the long vowel oo as in gakkoo (がっこう) ‘school’ is Romanized as oo, not ō or ou. Similarly, ee as in sensee (せんせい) ‘teacher’ is Romanized as ee, not ē or ei.
to demonstrate the usages and illustrate the significance and implications of choosing to use the Roman alphabet instead of other types of characters in Japanese. The present study primarily focuses on qualitative analysis of examples, and example sentences are selected from various sources in Japanese from online and printed materials. Some selected examples from the *Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese* (Maekawa, 2008) are also included in the present study.

As for the selection of data, the present paper mostly focuses on the usages of the Roman alphabet within Japanese sentences, not the Roman alphabet used at the word or the phrase level. Various studies report that English words are used with the original spelling in the Roman alphabet, especially in advertisements for commercial products and also in popular culture such as popular songs and titles of movies and TV shows (e.g., Honna, 1995; Kay, 1995; Kinjo, 1998; Kubota, 1998; Stanlaw, 2004; Daulton, 2008; Irwin, 2011; Sung & Mitsudo, 2016). However, when English words written in the Roman alphabet are used independently of other sentential components in Japanese, the examples may simply be considered as the usages of English, rather than English words in the Roman alphabet appearing within the Japanese language. For this reason, even though the increased use of English in Japan is an intriguing phenomenon and relevant to the present paper’s topic, considering the abundance of existing literature on the use of English in Japan, this present paper attempts to contribute to the existing literature by focusing on the Roman alphabet used within Japanese along with other types of characters in Japanese.

3 The usage of the Roman alphabet in Japanese

Various types of usages of the Roman alphabet within the Japanese writing system are explored in this section.

3.1 Roman letters used for acronyms

One of the common types of usages of the Roman alphabet in Japanese is for abbreviated expressions originated in Western languages, most of which are from English. When loanwords from foreign languages are incorporated into the vocabulary pool of Japanese, they are conventionally written in *katakana*. However, when acronyms that are written in the Roman alphabet in foreign languages are used as loanwords in Japanese, the letter combinations in the original language are preserved when they are used in Japanese. Those acronyms in Roman letters are typically used as nouns in Japanese, both as common nouns and proper nouns. Tables 1 and 2 list some select examples of acronyms in the Roman alphabet that are used as common nouns and proper nouns in Japanese, respectively.
Table 1: Acronyms in Roman Letters used in Japanese [Common Nouns]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronyms</th>
<th>Original Forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AED</td>
<td>automated external defibrillator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATM</td>
<td>automated teller machine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>compact disc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DNA</td>
<td>deoxyribonucleic acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVD</td>
<td>digital video disc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPG</td>
<td>liquefied petroleum gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR</td>
<td>public relations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Acronyms in Roman Letters used in Japanese [Proper Nouns]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronyms</th>
<th>Original Forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FBI</td>
<td>Federal Bureau of Investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHK</td>
<td>Nippon Hoosoo Kyookai ‘Japan Broadcasting Corporation’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTT</td>
<td>Nippon Telegraph and Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPEC</td>
<td>Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USJ</td>
<td>Universal Studios Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following example demonstrates how acronyms in Roman letters are used mixed with other types of characters in Japanese.

(3) 現在では、オンライン・リアルタイム処理は鉄道や航空機の座席予約、銀行のATM、工場での機械制御などで利用されている。

Genzai de wa, onrain-riarutaimu shori wa tetsudoo ya kookuuki no zaseki yoyaku, ginkoo no ATM, koojoo deno kikai seigyo nado de riyoo sarete iru.

‘Currently, online real-time processing is used in reservation systems for trains and airplanes, bank ATMs, and machine control systems in factories.’


In (3), the acronym ATM ‘ATM’ is written in Roman letters and used with other components in characters that are unique to the Japanese language such as hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Also, since ATM is a commonly-known word among speakers of Japanese, no further explanations are provided in the text.

When acronyms in the Roman alphabet are used in Japanese sentences, the full Japanese translation of the form before abbreviation is often written in parenthesis.
after the acronym. The following example demonstrates such listing of translation in Japanese. Translations for acronyms in Japanese tend to be provided when the acronym is a proper noun, or a less commonly known phrase.

(4) 当時の占領軍に該当する外圧といえば、いまなら IMF(国際通貨基金)である。

Tooji no senryoogun ni gaitoo suru gaiatsu to ie ba, ima nara IMF (kokusai tsuuka kikin) de aru.

‘What is equivalent to the occupying force back then is the IMF (International Monetary Fund) in modern times.’

([BCCWJ: PB53_00657] Shisan hookai, Ota, 2005)

In (4), after IMF in Roman letters, kokusai tsuuka kikin (国際通貨基金) ‘International Monetary Fund’ is listed to provide further information about the acronym, and when the acronym reappears in later parts of the text, the full translation in parenthesis is not repeated.

Similarly, the translation in Japanese occasionally precedes the acronym and the acronym in parenthesis follows the Japanese translation.

(5) 健康とは「単に病気あるいは虚弱でないということではなく、身体的にも精神的にも社会的にも完全に良好な状態であること」と世界保健機関 (WHO)は定義している。

Kenkoo to wa “tan ni byooki aruiwa kyojaku de nai to iu koto de wa naku, shintaiteki ni mo seeshinteki nimo shakaiteki ni mo kanzen ni ryookoo no jotai de aru koto” to sekai hoken kikan (WHO) wa teegi shite iru.

‘The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”’

([BCCWJ: LBt4_00058] Wakari yasui kaigo no tame no eeyoo to choori, Yoshida & Sumii, 2005)

In (5), WHO in parenthesis follows its translation in Japanese sekai hoken kikan ‘World Health Organization.’ In later parts of the text, the acronym WHO is repeated in the main body of the text without being accompanied with the translation in Japanese. Examples (4) and (5) demonstrate typical ways of introducing acronyms in the Roman alphabet when they first appear in a written text in Japanese. When the acronym may not be familiar to the potential readers, the acronym is accompanied with its Japanese translation, and when it reappears in the text, it is used without being accompanied with the translation.
As for the way acronyms in the Roman alphabet are read with other components in the sentence in Japanese, the pronunciation is based on the way in which Roman letters are pronounced within the Japanese sound system, which can be written using *katakana*. For example, when the word *CD* ‘compact disc’ is pronounced in a Japanese sentence, it is pronounced as *shiidii*, not /siːdiː/ as in the original English pronunciation. The conversion from English pronunciation to the pronunciation that conforms to the Japanese sound system and can be accurately transcribed using *katakana* is the standard procedure for using acronyms in the Roman alphabet in Japanese, and even in the Japanese language textbooks for learners of Japanese, students are instructed to pronounce acronyms in *katakana* pronunciation. For example, in *Genki I* (Banno et al., 2011), which is an elementary-level Japanese language textbook, the word *CD* is introduced with *shiidii* (シーディー) in *katakana* as a pronunciation guide in the vocabulary list. It should also be noted that for acronyms that have unique reading patterns that are different from simply reading out the Roman letters, such as **OPEC** read as /oʊˈpeɪk/ in English, the pronunciation conforms with the Japanese sound system and is enunciated as *opekkku* (this could also be written as オペック) in Japanese.

### 3.2 Proper nouns written in the Roman alphabet in Japanese

In addition to proper nouns that are acronyms, certain types of proper nouns in non-Japanese languages are written in the Roman alphabet without being converted to *katakana*.

#### 3.2.1 Roman alphabet used for reference purposes

The first types of examples discussed here are proper nouns such as personal names and place names originally written in the Roman alphabet. The following examples are from news articles that include proper nouns in foreign languages.

(6) フランス大統領府は 17 日、エマニュエル・マクロン(Emmanuel Macron)大統領が新型コロナウイルス検査で陽性と診断されたと発表した。今後 1 週間自主隔離を行うという。

*Furansu daitooryofofu wa juunana nichi, emanyueru makuron* (Emmanuel Macron)* daitooryoo ga shingata korona uirusu kensa de yoosee to shindan sareta to happyoo shita. Kongo isshuu* *kan jishu kakuri o okonau to iu.*

‘The Office of the President of France announced that President Emmanuel Macron has tested positive for the new-type coronavirus. He will self-quarantine for a week.’

気象当局によるとニューヨーク市の北 290 キロに位置するビンガムトン (Binghamton)やペンシルベニア州リッチフィールド (Litchfield) で積雪が 1 メートルを超えた。

Kishoo tokyoku ni yoru to nyuuyooku shi no kita nihyaku kyujukkiro ni ichi suru binghamuton (Binghamton) ya penshirubania shuu ricchifiirudo (Litchfield) de sekisetsu ga ichi meetoru o koeta.

‘According to the Weather Bureau, snow accumulation exceeded one meter in Binghamton, which is located 290 kilometers north of New York City, and also in Litchfield, Pennsylvania.’


In (6), Emmanuel Macron, which is the proper noun for a French politician, is written in katakana as in emanyueru makuron (エマニュエル・マクロン) and it is followed by his name in the Roman alphabet in parentheses. Similarly, in (7), Binghamton and Litchfield, which are proper nouns for city names in the United States, are written in katakana as binghamuton (ビンガムトン) and ricchifiirudo (リッチフィールド), followed by their original names in the Roman alphabet. It should be noted that in (7), nyuuyooku (ニューヨーク) ‘New York’ and penshirubenia (ペンシルベニア) ‘Pennsylvania’ are not followed by their Roman alphabet forms. The reason for this inconsistency appears to be how well-known those proper nouns are among the intended readers, who are speakers of Japanese that reside in Japan. Many foreign place names are well-known in Japan, and major states in the United States such as New York and Pennsylvania have been incorporated into the vocabulary pool of Japanese as katakana loanwords, as demonstrated by the fact that nyuuyooku and penshirubenia in katakana are both included in the Daijisen Dictionary (Matsumura, 2020), which is one of the leading Japanese monolingual dictionaries. However, less-commonly-known city names such as Binghamton and Litchfield are unlikely to be recognized by speakers of Japanese, and it appears that the forms in the original Roman alphabet are provided in the parentheses as supplementary information that helps readers make a connection between the katakana forms and the original forms.

In addition, personal proper nouns in languages that are written in the Roman alphabet are also written in the original format in scholarly publications in Japanese. The following excerpt includes such examples of foreign names written in the Roman alphabet in a scholarly article.
Gumperz (1982) claims that misunderstandings occur in conversations between participants with diverse cultural backgrounds because their expectations are different, and Tannen (1993) points out that conversation styles are different in different cultures.

(Nihonjin daigakusee no gurupu tooron ni okeru ketsuron seesee to shinkooyaku no yakuwari, Otsuka, 2003)

(8) is from an article about linguistics, and the authors of the cited references are written in the Roman alphabet as in Gumperz and Tannen. This convention to use the Roman alphabet for references in scholarly publications seems to be developed from the necessity to maintain the original spelling information for the authors’ names in the cited documents. If the authors of the cited documents were converted to katakana, it would be challenging for the readers to identify the cited documents that were written in non-Japanese languages. In addition, if each author attempts to convert non-Japanese names into katakana, the same author’s name written in the Roman alphabet in the original language may be converted to katakana differently depending on the author’s personal preferences, even though the conventions for converting English to katakana are mostly uniform among native speakers of Japanese. For those reasons, names in non-Japanese languages appear to be conventionalized to be written in their original form (the Roman or other Western alphabets) in scholarly publications in Japanese.²

Furthermore, it should also be noted that even when the author of the cited document has a name originally written in the Roman alphabet, when the cited document is published in Japanese with the author’s name written in katakana, the author’s name of the cited document is also written in katakana. Observe the following excerpt.

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² Names in East Asian languages, especially Chinese names, are conventionalized to be written in kanji in scholarly documents in Japanese. However, names in Asian languages in the entertainment field tend to be written in katakana. For more details, see Kimura (2013), Mochizuki et al. (2014), etc.

(Kikikaeshi no sutorategii to mondai kaiketsu, Hayashi, 2009)

In (9), Neustupný in the Roman alphabet, which refers to the Czech-Australian linguist J.V. Neustupný, is used for some of the citations, but neusutopunii (ネウストプニー) in katakana is also included in the citation list. Neustupný in the Roman alphabet and neusutopunii in katakana in (9) both refer to the same linguist, J.V. Neustupný. This inconsistency is resulting from the difference in the languages used in the cited documents. The cited documents with Neustupný in the Roman alphabet are written in English, and the author’s name is also written in the Roman alphabet in those articles. On the other hand, the documents cited with neusutopunii in katakana are written in Japanese, and the author’s name is also listed in katakana in the cited articles. Therefore, even when the author’s name is written in the Roman alphabet in the original language if the same name is written in katakana in the cited document in Japanese, the name remains in katakana in academic citations.

3.2.2 Roman alphabet used for product names

Another type of usage of the Roman alphabet within Japanese is for specific proper nouns such as product and service names. Certain product names are marketed in the Roman alphabet without being converted into katakana for the Japanese market. In addition, those product names are also written in the Roman alphabet when they appear in Japanese sentences. The following excerpt is from a website about mobile phone services. The page includes information about the iPhone, which is also marketed as iPhone in the English-speaking market.
As shown in (10), the product name iPhone is written in the Roman Alphabet within a Japanese sentence without being converted into aifon (アイフォン) in katakana, and the readers are also expected to understand the product name without relying on katakana. However, it should also be noted that when iPhone in the Roman alphabet is read aloud in Japanese sentences, it is pronounced as aifon, conforming with the sound system of Japanese, as it would be transcribed in katakana.

Furthermore, the usage of the Roman alphabet for commercial products is not limited to products with foreign origins. The following excerpt is from a webpage about the connected service for Toyota vehicles.

In (11), T-Connect, which is the proper noun for a service offered by Toyota, is written in the Roman alphabet in a Japanese sentence. This example shows that even though Toyota is a Japanese company and the service is also for the Japanese domestic market, the Roman alphabet is used for the service’s proper noun and the assumption is that the usage of the Roman alphabet does not block communication for the Japanese-speaking audience. Also, the use of the Roman alphabet for T-Connect contrasts with the use of katakana for general loanwords from English such as yuuzaa (ユーザー) ‘user’ and saabisu (サービス) ‘service’ in the same sentence, which are considered to be already integrated into the vocabulary pool of Japanese as katakana loanwords.

(10) iPhone のモデルを比較する: 容量やディスプレイ、サイズなどドコモから発売中の iPhone のすべてのモデルの機能と仕様を比較できます。

iPhone no moderu o hikaku suru: Yooryoo ya disupurei, saizu nado dokomo kara hatsubaichuu no iPhone no subete no moderu no kinoo to shiyoo o hikaku dekimasu.

‘Compare iPhone models: You can compare the storage space, display, and size of all iPhone models sold by Docomo.’


(11) T-Connect のユーザー様専用のサービスサイトや設定・操作マニュアルなど、お役に立つ情報をご紹介します。

T-Connect no yuuzaa sama senyoo no saabisu saito ya settee soosa manyuuaru nado, oyaku ni tatsu joohoo o goshookai shimasu.

‘[This page] introduces useful information for T-Connect users such as the service website, settings, and operation manuals.’

3.2.3 Common nouns written in the Roman alphabet in Japanese: IT-related vocabulary

The usage of the Roman alphabet in Japanese may initially appear to be predominantly for acronyms and proper nouns; however, there are some somewhat conventionalized usages of the Roman alphabet for common nouns. This subsection explores those usages of the Roman alphabet for common nouns and expressions. (12) is an excerpt from the website about service schedules for *Tokyo Gas*, which is the provider of natural gas in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

(12) ガス作業希望時間が午前の場合: ガス作業希望日前日の 17:00 まで Web での変更が可能です。

*Gasu sagyoo kiboo jikan ga gozen no baai: Gasu sagyoo kiboobi zenjitsu no 17:00 made web deno henkoo ga kanoo desu.*

‘If you prefer a.m. gas work: It is possible to change (the schedule) until 17:00 of the day before your preferred day.’

(https://home.tokyo-gas.co.jp/procedure/moving/change.html, 2/22/2021)

In (12), *Web* ‘web’ is written in the Roman alphabet in a sentence in Japanese, even though its *katakana* counterpart *webu* (ウェブ) ‘web’ already exists as a *katakana* loanword in the vocabulary pool of Japanese. Also, *gasu* (ガス) ‘gas,’ which has been part of the Japanese vocabulary for a considerable length of time, is written in *katakana*.

The next excerpt also includes an IT-related term written in the Roman alphabet.

(13) 備北広域農業普及指導センターは、7 月 26 日に開催された新・農業人フェア（場所 東京ドームプリズムホール）に online で参加しました。

*Bihoku kooiki noogyoo shidoo sentaa wa, 7 gatsu 26 nichi ni kaisai sareta shin noogyoojin fea (basho tookyoo doomu purizumu hooru) ni online de sanka shimashita.*

‘Larger Bihoku area Agriculture Advocacy and Training Center participated in the New Agriculture People Fair (location: Tokyo Dome Prizm Hall) online on July 26.’


Example (13) was taken from the newsletter by the Okayama Prefecture Government. In it, *online* in the Roman alphabet is used instead of its *katakana* counterpart *onrain* (オンライン). This type of usage of the Roman alphabet instead of using loanwords in *katakana* is frequently observed for the vocabulary items related to the IT field, and other well-known IT-related terms such as *chat*, *spam*, and *bot* are also often written in the Roman alphabet in sentences written in Japanese. Those IT-related terms were not in common usage until recently, since only 25% of households in Japan
had personal computers at home in 1997, and even in 2005, the percentage was 65% (Okabe, 2009). It is speculated that specialized terminologies from foreign languages that were incorporated into Japanese recently may have a tendency to be written in the Roman alphabet without being converted to katakana, and the same tendency may also exist for non-specialized loanwords that were recently incorporated into Japanese.

3.2.4 Common nouns written in Roman alphabet in Japanese: general expressions

The use of the Roman alphabet for non-proper nouns is not limited to IT-related terminologies. Some commonly-recognized expressions in English are also written in the Roman alphabet in Japanese sentences without being converted into katakana. Observe the following two excerpts.

(14) 電気とガスをまとめておトクにしたいお客さま: 電気とガスをまとめると、ガスセット割がついて電気代が年間約 1,200 円 OFF。

*Denki to gasu o matomete otoku ni shitai okyakusama: Denki to gasu o matomeru to, gasusetto wari ga tsuite denkidai ga nenkan yaku 1,200 en OFF.*

‘For customers who want to bundle electricity and gas and save money: If you bundle electricity and gas, it will be 1,200 yen off with the gas-set discount.’


(15) 経営学部の国際交流・交換留学ページを OPEN しました。これから経営学部の国際交流・交換留学制度については、このサイトを通じて最新の情報を発信していきます。

*Keeeee gakubu no kokusai kooryuu kookan ryuugaku peeji o OPEN shimashita. Korekara keeee gakubu no kokusai kookan ryuugaku seedo ni tsuite wa, kono saito o tsuuujite saishin no joohoo o hasshin shite ikimasu.*

‘We have opened the webpage for international exchange and exchange programs for the Department of Management. The latest information about the international exchange and exchange study abroad programs will be uploaded on this website from now on.’


In (14), OFF in English is written in the Roman alphabet. In this particular example, even though the same information can be conveyed by using Japanese words such as waribiki ‘discount’ or the katakana loanword ofu (オフ) ‘off,’ OFF in the Roman alphabet is selected as the vocabulary item to convey the information to the reader. Similarly, in (15), which is from a university’s website about its study abroad programs, OPEN in the Roman alphabet is used to form a past-tense verb OPEN shita ‘opened,’ even though oopun (オープン) ‘open’ in katakana is already a commonly-used
loanword in Japanese. Furthermore, the same information can also be conveyed with Japanese vocabulary such as *dekiita* ‘to be made, to be completed’ in (15).

The usages of the Roman alphabet in (14) and (15) seem to contrast with the cases we observed in (12) and (13). The IT-related terms included in (12) and (13) were loanwords that were newly introduced to the vocabulary pool of Japanese. However, general expressions in English such as *off* and *open* have been part of the Japanese vocabulary pool for a long time, and as mentioned earlier, *katakana* are typically used when words from non-Japanese languages are used in Japanese in conformity with the phonological system in Japanese. However, the role of *katakana* loanwords is not simply limited to enabling the usage of foreign words within Japanese. *Katakana* loanwords are often chosen even when Japanese equivalents already exist in the vocabulary pool of Japanese, and they have various sociolinguistic functions that are unique to loanwords, especially when the loanwords are from European languages including English. For example, Kay (1995) argues that “[l]oanwords are often associated with a sophisticated, Western lifestyle, and may be used in place of Japanese words of equivalent meaning because of their foreign appeal” (p. 74). As Kay argues, loanwords are often used to portray certain sophisticated and advanced images, even though the same information can be expressed with non-loanword Japanese vocabulary. Those loanwords used for the purpose of displaying sophisticated images are written in *katakana* in most cases; however, by using the Roman alphabet instead of *katakana*, the intended sophisticated image seems to be even more amplified, since the Roman alphabet carries more sophisticated appeal compared to *katakana*, which are considered to be fully part of the Japanese writing system.

In addition, even without an intention to portray a sophisticated image, using the Roman alphabet can be simply eye-catching in the text where the rest is predominantly written in Japanese characters. Examples of the usage of the Roman alphabet such as what we observed in (14) and (15) could also be from the writers’ desire to make the phrases more eye-catching for the audience, and since almost all Japanese readers would know basic English expressions such as *off* and *open*, the understandability of the sentences will not be sacrificed by using the Roman alphabet as in (14) and (15).

3.2.5 Proper nouns in the Roman alphabet with preserved English structures

Some English expressions written in the Roman alphabet contain expressions that are not typically considered to be included in the vocabulary pool of Japanese as *katakana* loanwords. Observe the following excerpt.
In (16), *Apple Trade In* is written in the Roman alphabet. *Apple Trade In* is a discount service for purchasing new phones with which buyers can use the value of their old phones towards the payment for the new phone, and the same service is also marketed as *Apple Trade In* in the English-speaking market. What is noticeable here is that the English expression *trade-in* is not typically considered to be a loanword used in Japanese. For example, *trade-in* in English would be *toreedoin* （トレードイン） in *katakana*, but it is not included in the *Daijisen* Japanese monolingual dictionary (Matsumura, 2020). *Apple Trade In* in (16) is an example that requires readers to understand an English phrase that is not incorporated into the vocabulary pool of Japanese. Needless to say, *trade-in* is a basic phrase for speakers of English; however, even though *trade-in* in (16) is used as part of a proper noun, (16) can be interpreted as an example in which a neologism from English written in the Roman alphabet is incorporated into a Japanese sentence mostly written in Japanese characters.

The following excerpt also includes an example of the Roman alphabet used as part of a proper noun. (17) is from an announcement about a music and dramatic reading event featuring the *Shingeki no Kyojin* series, a well-known manga and anime series in Japan. *Shingeki no Kyojin* is known as *Attack on Titan* in the English-speaking market.

(16) iPhone 12 Pro を購入: *Apple Trade In* を利用すると、最大 40,000 円割引になります。

*iPhone 12 Pro o konyuu: Apple Trade In o riyoo suru to, saidai 40,000 en waribiki ni narimasu.*

‘Purchasing iPhone 12 Pro: If you make use of *Apple Trade In*, you can save up to 40,000 yen.’


(17) 2017 年 10 月 29 日に東京国際フォーラムホールで開催される「進撃の巨人」Reading & Live Event Orchestra 「Attack 音体感 2」の各公演のチケット一般販売が決定いたしました!

*2017 nen 10 gatsu 29 nichi ni tokyoo kokusai fooramu hooru de kaisai sareru "Shingeki no Kyojin” Reading & Live Event Orchestra “Attack taikan 2” no kaku kooen no chiketto ippan hanbai ga kettee itashimashita!*

‘We announce that the tickets for each performance of “Attack on Titan” Reading & Live Orchestra “Attack Sound Experience 2,” which will be held at Tokyo International Forum Hall on October 29, 2017, will be on sale to the general public!’

In (17), “‘Shingeki no Kyojin’ Reading & Live Event Orchestra ‘Attack on taikan 2’” is the proper noun for the event, and the whole name is repeatedly used on other pages of the website and also in other advertisement materials. As shown in (17), Reading & Live Event Orchestra is written in the Roman alphabet, and the readers are expected to read the English component in the Japanese sentence. In addition, Attack is also in the Roman alphabet, which appears to be taken from Shingeki no Kyojin’s English title Attack on Titan. Unlike the example of the use of the Roman alphabet in (16), katakana versions of the English words included in (17), which are reading, live, event, orchestra, and attack are all included in the Daijisen Japanese dictionary and considered to be part of the modern Japanese vocabulary. However, the usage of English in the Roman alphabet in (17) demonstrates that English is presented as is, and the event is marketed with the assumption that the target audience would understand English in the Roman alphabet without relying on katakana.

3.2.6 Other miscellaneous usages of the Roman alphabet in Japanese

It should be noted that there are some other miscellaneous usages of the Roman alphabet in texts that are predominantly written in Japanese. The present paper does not discuss those miscellaneous usages in detail, but those usages are also considered to be fully integrated into the writing system of the Japanese language.

One type of usage of the Roman alphabet that was not discussed in earlier parts of the present paper is the Roman alphabet simply used as symbols, especially in listing and bullet points. Various types of characters are used as the bullet points for listing in Japanese. The characters commonly used for listing in Japanese are numbers in Arabic numerals and kanji (1, 2, 3, ... or 一, 二, 三,...), katakana characters (ア, イ, ウ,... or イ, ロ, ハ,...), and the Roman alphabet in alphabetical order (a, b, c,...). In addition, Roman numerals in the Roman alphabet (I, II, III,...) are also used for listing in Japanese. Regarding the usage of the Roman alphabet as symbols, login IDs and passwords on Japanese websites are typically in the Roman alphabet and/or Arabic numerals, even when the entire webpage is predominantly in Japanese. In addition, URLs and email addresses used in Japan are predominantly in the Roman alphabet and Arabic numerals.

Finally, one type of usage of the Roman alphabet that is prevalent in Japan but often overlooked is the usage of Romanized Japanese for typing Japanese on electronic devices. There are several different methods to type Japanese on a computer such as the Romanization input method and the kana input method when the QWERTY keyboard is used. When the Romanization input method is selected, the intended text in Japanese is typed in the Romanized format on the QWERTY keyboard. On the other hand, with the kana input method, each hiragana or katakana character is assigned to

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3 The usage of katakana for listing in the ア, イ, ウ,... order is based on the hiragana/katakana ordering system in modern Japanese. The イ, ロ, ハ,... order is based on an ordering system used in classical Japanese, which was dominant prior to the implementation of the modern order.
a key on the QWERTY keyboard, and those characters are input directly without being Romanized. However, even though the two input methods, the Romanization method and the *kana* method, are both available on computers sold in Japan, a survey by Endo (2015) shows that 93.1% of the respondents answered that they use the Romanization method when using computers with the QWERTY keyboard. Therefore, even though Japanese texts typed on computers are mostly in Japanese characters such as *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*, the majority of them have gone through Romanization during the input process. The usage of the Roman alphabet for typing is typically not discussed in relation to the writing system of Japanese, but it has become an essential component in the writing practice in Japan and has become the primary means of writing in modern day Japan. As for the input methods for Japanese on electronic devices, it should be noted that the input methods used on devices without physical QWERTY keyboards do not involve the Romanization process. For example, a survey by Nagasawa (2017) shows that when Japanese college students type Japanese on smartphones, more than 90% of them use the *flick* method or the *toggle* method, both of which do not require the Romanization process for typing Japanese characters. In addition, a study by Noborimoto et al. (2021) indicates that high school students in Japan can type Japanese faster on smartphones compared to typing Japanese on a computer using the QWERTY keyboard. However, what Nagasawa and Noborimoto et al. have found does not indicate that Japanese people stopped using the Roman alphabet for writing Japanese electronically since the usage of computers with QWERTY keyboards are still very common in Japan, but we should also be aware that Japanese texts typed on smartphones are typically input without going through the Romanization process.

4 Discussion

The present study has explored the usages of the Roman alphabet within the writing system of modern Japanese. As the excerpts explored in this paper demonstrated, even though the Roman alphabet is not typically listed as a character type in Japanese, it has already been an essential component in the writing practice in Japan.

It seems that there are several major factors that are relevant to the usage of the Roman alphabet in modern Japanese, and those factors have also been contributing to the increased usage of the Roman alphabet within Japanese. The factor that is discussed first is the shift from vertical writing to horizontal writing in modern Japanese. Yanaike (2003a, 2003b) reports that horizontal writing originally did not exist in Japanese, but it emerged due to the interaction with the West during the late Edo period and the early Meiji period. Despite the emergence of horizontal writing in the late 19th century, the writing practice in Japan remained mostly vertical, especially in

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4 For the details about the *flick* and the *toggle* input methods, see Nagasawa (2017).
printed media such as books, magazines, and newspapers. As of the early 2020s, the majority of printed media in Japan remain in the vertical writing style.

However, due to the recent development of IT technology, the writing practice has largely shifted towards horizontal writing, since IT-based content such as websites, emails, text messaging, and social media are predominantly based on horizontal writing. Due to this shift from vertical writing to horizontal writing, it has become significantly easier to integrate words written in the Roman alphabet into Japanese compared to doing so in vertical writing. For example, in order to integrate the English word open in a Japanese sentence written horizontally, it can be simply written as open horizontally as shown in (a) in figure 1. On the other hand, when the sentence is written vertically, the whole alphabet sequence for open must be turned by 90 degrees as in (b), or each letter in the Roman alphabet must be written vertically, following the pattern of other Japanese characters as in (c). The sentences in (a), (b), and (c) all read mise ga open shita ‘the store opened.’

(a) 店が open した。 (b) 店が open した。 (c) 店が open した。

Figure 1: Horizontal and Vertical writing styles in Japanese
(Mise ga open shita. ‘The store opened.’)

As demonstrated in Figure 1, using the English word open in the Roman alphabet may not impose a significant problem in horizontal writing, but when the text is written vertically, it is difficult to use open in the Roman alphabet without modifying how the word is written in English sentences. As mentioned earlier, due to the recent development of IT technology, horizontal writing is becoming more common, and the opportunities to use the Roman alphabet within Japanese are more widely available because of the shift to horizontal writing.

Another relevant factor is the burden of typing katakana versions of English words compared to directly typing English words in the Roman alphabet. For writing English words within Japanese sentences, depending on the complexity of katakana combinations and the original spelling in English, the amount of work required for typing the word may be lower when the word is written in the Roman alphabet. For instance, in order to type in the word website, when website is written in the Roman
alphabet, the word can simply be input as website. However, if website is converted into katakana, the writer must input webusaito in Romanized Japanese and then convert it to katakana. Similarly, in order to type in the word open, it can be simply input as open in the Roman alphabet, but to type in oopun (オープン) in katakana, the typing process involves the long vowel symbol (ー) and the whole word must be input as o-pun, the hyphen corresponding to the long vowel symbol.

In addition, the use of the Roman alphabet in Japanese clearly relates to the recent globalization and the increased exposure to written information from outside Japan due to the development of IT technology. According to a survey by W3Techs (2021), 61.7% of the web content in the top 10 million websites was in English as of July 2021, while the content in Japanese was 1.9% in those top 10 million websites. As this discrepancy between English and Japanese web content shows, users of the Internet can access a significantly larger amount of information through English, and when the words or expression used in English is included in sentences written in Japanese, writing those in the Roman alphabet may be the most convenient option if they are not fully conventionalized as katakana loanwords in Japanese. In addition, with the recent surge of the popularity of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, Internet memes tend to be shared globally in a timely manner, and users with various language backgrounds also comment on those shared contents. Christiansen (2016) reports that even novice-level speakers of English tend to communicate in English in online global communities, and such experiences by Japanese speakers may increase the use of the Roman alphabet when they write in Japanese.

Finally, it must be noted that the pronunciation of words written in the Roman alphabet within Japanese is still subject to an adaptation to the Japanese phonological system, and it is likely that such katakana-like pronunciation will continue to be prevalent for words written in the Roman alphabet in the foreseeable future. As Martin (2004) points out, katakana characters are used as pronunciation guides in English education in Japan. In addition, the conventions for converting English words into their katakana counterparts are highly standardized across speakers of Japanese (Quackenbush, 1977; Kay, 1995; Irwin, 2011; Nishi & Xu, 2013; Tsujimura, 2013; Hasegawa, 2015, etc.). For those reasons, speakers of Japanese who received school education in Japan are mostly capable of converting English words into katakana in a uniform manner, and they are also capable of applying the conventions to English words they have never seen. Therefore, even with the increased usage of the Roman alphabet in written Japanese, it is expected that the phonological realization of words written in the Roman alphabet will follow the katakana conventions when they are read aloud within Japanese.
5 Conclusion

The present study has explored the usages of the Roman alphabet within the writing system of Japanese. As demonstrated by the examples in this paper, the Roman alphabet has been integrated into the modern writing system of Japanese, and the use of the Roman alphabet is expected to increase in the future, especially with the recent development of IT technology and also due to the ever-increasing interaction with languages and cultures outside of Japan. As Yanaike (2003a, 2003b) reports, horizontal writing emerged in Japanese in the 19th century because of the interaction with the West, but the writing practice mostly remained vertical for paper-based printed materials. However, with the recent surge of electronic communication, the writing practice in Japanese is currently going through the transition from vertical writing to horizontal writing, and the transition also allows writers to use foreign words originally in the Roman alphabet without converting them into katakana loanwords. In addition, because of the Japanese government’s recent policy change, English has been included as an official subject in elementary schools throughout Japan from the 2020–2021 academic year, which used to be from the first year of middle school (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2016). This indicates that speakers of Japanese are exposed to English, which uses the Roman alphabet, from younger ages compared to the past. Considering the shift from vertical writing to horizontal writing, the influence of foreign languages written in the Roman alphabet, and the rapidly increasing global communication, it is highly likely that we will see more words written using the Roman alphabet within the writing system of Japanese in the future.

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