

The Grammar of Borrowed Words in Modern Japanese

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In modern Japanese, borrowed and newly-created words are a highly creative and productive aspect of the language. When words are borrowed, they appear at first glance (almost) always to be borrowed as nouns, no matter what meaning they have. They require a supporting verb "be" or "do" if used predicatively (e.g. "doraibu suru", 'to drive', where "suru" is the supporting verb 'do'). In the talk I will first consider the grammar of lexical categories in Japanese; what in fact distinguishes lexemes which require a supporting verb from those that do not is their morphological status as bound (inflecting) or free (non-inflecting) forms, regardless of lexical category. With this background, it can then be seen that the language actually borrows words based on expected cognitive categories -- a word for a thing is a noun, for an action is a verb, and for a state is an adjective. This is so, even if the word did not have that category in the source language (e.g., "now" is an adjective in Japanese, meaning 'contemporary').