

The Melting Pot and the Moulin Rouge:
affinity and the spread of new lexical items in media fandom

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The online media fan community is an ideal laboratory for studying lexical choice and the diffusion of new lexical items. In online communication, where every aspect of language that cannot be reduced to text is pared away, lexical choice becomes perhaps the most important aspect of a speaker's self-presentation. In media fandom, we find a community that predates the internet by decades, is long accustomed to conducting its affairs more through written than oral interaction, and has a tradition of linguistic playfulness in which coinages and loanwords flourish-- leaving an electronic paper trail which simplifies tracing their early spread and development.

I examined the spread of Japanese loanwords out of the anime/manga (Japanese cartoon and comic book) fandoms, and into Western media fandom. I used as my corpus the Live Journals-- online diaries-- of 23 Harry Potter fans: a core group of 14 who describe themselves as fans of both Harry Potter and anime/manga, and a second group who are not anime/manga fans, but who read the journals of at least 2 of the first group. (Live Journal's friends-list feature, which allows users to view recent entries from a selected list of users on one digest page, lets one see easily which users read each others' entries-- a glimpse into online social networks.)

I found that the Japanese vocabulary of anime and manga fandom has been largely naturalized by English-speaking fans, as shown by these words' great morphological productivity. However, their spread out of Japanese-media fandom has been hindered by two extra-linguistic phenomena: the greater prestige of fanfiction writers over fanfiction readers, and the differing aesthetic norms of Western media fanfiction and fanfiction based in Japanese media. The result of these interacting forces is that Japanese loanwords are more frequently and more creatively used by fanfiction readers, who need not maintain an authorial persona or demonstrate adherence to community aesthetic norms, than by fanfiction writers. However, since within fandom the line between reader and writer is quite fluid, with all fans seen as potential writers, being a writer is more a matter of affinity than of action. In addition, among writers, there is a notable split between the maintainers of the dominant aesthetic, and its subverters, who may gain considerable covert prestige.

Among online fora, Live Journal and the other weblog networks that use its code are supremely well-suited for use as linguistic corpora: much social network data is embedded in the system's infrastructure, or easily extractable from publicly posted information. And the social networks of media fandom, with their overlapping circles of real-life and online acquaintanceship and influence, are of particular complexity and interest-- and are perhaps impossible to study without the methodologies allowed by the use of such corpora.

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