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Anime sparks Japanese word boom

By Sumiere Kunieda
Mainichi Shimbun

April 5, 2004

LOS ANGELES -- New Japanese words are creeping in the vocabulary of American society. While many of them aren't in English dictionaries yet, the Internet is flooded with them.

Type in "kawaii" (cute), "etchi" (indecent), "otaku" (fanatic), "bishojo" (beautiful young girl), or "onigiri" (rice ball), on Google's search engine and you'll come up with thousands of results for each.

Why have words such as these infiltrated the language? One reason, it seems, is the popularity of anime -- Japanese animation characterized by colorful graphics and lively characters.

Santiago Rompani, a fourth-year student at Yale University, is an ardent anime fan. He says he has never taken a Japanese class before, but he can produce Japanese words left, right and center. This skill came naturally, he says, when he began watching anime with English subtitles.

So often do Japanese words crop up, that the Yale Anime Society has devoted a page to "100 common Japanese terms" that appear in cartoons. Among the words on the list are "yabai" (miserable, wretched), and "naruhodo" (I see, so). There is even a detailed explanation on the use of Japanese pronouns on the page.

Internet searches for some of the words that are often associated with anime yield surprisingly large results. "Manga" (comic) produced about 30 million results on a recent search on Google, while "hentai" (perversion), came up with about 27 million pages. For "kawaii" there were over 280,000 pages.

Compared to the 30 million pages for "Bush" and 56.4 million for "President," that's not doing too badly.

Tokyopop, a company distributing international character-based entertainment that also provides video game and anime soundtracks, says Japanese-made anime is a 500 million-dollar industry that is increasing at 10 - 20 percent per year. Even the market for Japanese comics, estimated at 150 million dollars, has doubled every year for the past two years.

Steve Kleckner, a vice president of sales and distribution at Tokyopop said the increase was largely boosted by children who had come into contact with anime and comics through television

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programs, video games and the Internet. "Shonen Jump," one hugely popular Japanese comic, already reportedly has a circulation of 540,000 copies for its translated English version.

One 33-year-old scenario writer living in Los Angeles said he heard that comics and anime tended to be looked down on in Japan as a lower class of culture, but that in spite of this they had much to offer.

An example, he says, is that even the bad characters in Japanese anime and comics search their consciences and worry about things. He says that because the character settings are complicated and elaborate, the stories come out naturally -- a fact which complements the creative ability of the Japanese, he says.

He adds that the image of Japan in the United States has turned, along with anime and comics, from a heartless, inhumane country during World War II, to an economic giant in the 1980s that threatened America, to a "cool, interesting country."

"About 80 or 90 percent of pupils studying Japanese at high schools in the United States are fans of anime and comics," says Takashi Imai, deputy director of the Los Angeles Office and Language Center of the Japan Foundation.

One 13-year-old girl sitting down on the floor of a major Los Angeles bookstore looking intently at Japanese comics said she preferred Japanese heroes to Western ones.

"The American comic heroes are too strong," she said. "I never get sick of Japanese comics. I wish I could read Japanese."

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