

# Action and Drama: American Film Titles in Japanese

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## Abstract

Japanese titles of foreign films come in many varieties, from direct translation to phonetic representation to something completely different from the original title. This study looks at trends among the Japanese titles of over 6000 American action films and drama films over the past 100 years. The author created a spreadsheet of titles from an online film database and examined *katakana* usage in each genre decade by decade from the 1920s to present day. The author found that these genres differ greatly from each other in the percentage of *katakana*-only titles, and in how likely those titles are to be phonetic representations of the original English titles. Finally, the author discovered *katakana* and Japanese words that occur disproportionately in Japanese titles when compared to their English equivalent in the original titles.

*Keywords:* film titles, genre, *katakana*, translation, phonetic representation

## Action and Drama: American Film Titles in Japanese

This paper is an examination of the Japanese translations and renderings of American film titles. In particular, I will examine the Japanese titles of American action and drama films over the past 100 years, looking at differences in the extent of *katakana* usage between the two genres.

Researchers including Inoue (2001) and Tsukawaki (2009) have looked at three different types of Japanese title: direct translation (直訳), alternate or culturally-

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transformed translation (意識), and *katakana*-transcribed (外来語). Inoue further divided the *katakana*-transcribed titles into word, phrase, and sentence types. Table 1 summarizes and provides examples of each type of title.

**Table 1**  
**Categories, Examples of Japanese Titles of Foreign Films (Adapted from Inoue, 2001)**

Category	Japanese Title	English Title
Direct translation	街の灯	City Lights
Alternate translation	哀愁 (Melancholy)	Waterloo Bridge
Katakana (Word)	ライオン	The Lion
Katakana (Phrase)	マイ・フェア・レディ	My Fair Lady
Katakana (Sentence)	ニーナ・テイクス・ア・ラバー	Nina Takes a Lover

From these categories, one may assume that titles in *katakana* are close phonetic equivalents of the original title. In fact, a large percentage of *katakana* titles do *not* faithfully represent the original English title. Leaving aside small grammatical omissions (no article, lack of plural) for the time being, there are titles that have been shortened (『ミスエデュケーション』 *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*) as well as lengthened (『グランド・ジョー』 *Joe*). There are also English renderings in *katakana* that do not correspond to the original title at all (『タイム・トゥ・ラン』 *Heist*).

Next, there are the many cases where there is a double title, with an English title (usually rendered in *katakana*) and a Japanese title or subtitle. These come in several varieties. Tsukawaki (2009) examined cases where the title is a phonetic equivalent and the subtitle is a Japanese translation (『ロード・オブ・ザ・リング／二つの塔』 *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*), of which there are many. However, there are also cases where one or both titles are not a direct translation or phonetically equivalent (『ザ・フューリー 烈火の戦場』 *Saints and Soldiers: The Void*). Then there are cases in which a Japanese subtitle is added where there is none in the original English title (『オール・イズ・ロスト ～最後の手紙～』 *All is Lost*) or even where the original English title becomes a subtitle for the Japanese title (『極道・最終戦争／オーバー・キル』 *Over Kill*). Finally, a phonetically equivalent title may appear within a Japanese phrase (『笑激のダブル・トラブル』 *Double Trouble*). Table 2 provides more examples of the different types of Japanese titles.

**Table 2**  
**Examples of Japanese Titles of American Films, by Type**

Japanese Titles	English Titles
<b>Translated Titles</b>	
Direct Translation:	
戦火の馬	War Horse
食べて、祈って、恋をして	Eat Pray Love
Alternate Translation:	
恋人たちのパレード (Lovers' Parade)	Water for Elephants
あの頃ペニー・レインと (That Time with Penny Lane)	Almost Famous
<b>Transcribed Titles</b>	
Phonetic Equivalence:	
マンチェスター・バイ・ザ・シー	Manchester by the Sea
ストレイト・アウト・コンプトン	Straight Outta Compton
Alternate English Titles:	
Shortened Title:	
ミスエデュケーション (Miseducation)	The Miseducation of Cameron Post
ドント・ウォーリー (Don't Worry)	Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot
Lengthened Title:	
ライフ・アズ・ファニータ (Life as Juanita)	Juanita
グランド・ジョー (Grand Joe)	Joe
Changed Title:	
タイム・トゥ・ラン (Time to Run)	Heist
ディア・ブラザー (Dear Brother)	Conviction
<b>Double Titles</b>	
プリンス・オブ・ペルシャ／時間の砂	Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time
アイ, トーニャ 史上最大のスキャンダル (I, Tonya: The Biggest Scandal in History)	I, Tonya

Of most interest to me are the transcribed titles. This study aims to answer the following questions: What is the extent of transcribed titles and do the number and type differ by genre? In the Methods section, I will describe the process of creating a workable spreadsheet for evaluating titles and the issues surrounding it. In the Results section, first I will look at overall *katakana* usage throughout history in Japanese titles of American action and drama films. Next, I will compare the usage of phonetic equivalence and alternate titles in *katakana*-only titles, and finally I will look at the most

frequent words used in Japanese translations of American action and drama films. The paper will end with a discussion on the results and suggestions for future research.

## Method

All the film title data for this research was taken from the database website *Allcinema* ([www.allcinema.net](http://www.allcinema.net)). The site contains a wealth of information about Japanese and non-Japanese (henceforth *foreign*) films dating back to the 1900s, including release dates, original and Japanese titles, genres, lists of actors, descriptions, and reviews. The website's own description states that it is Japan's largest database of film, anime, and television dramas.

From this data, I created a simple spreadsheet of foreign film titles, their Japanese titles, year and decade of release, genre, and country of origin. As the website's data is divided into three categories (film, anime, and television), I only included those listed as "film." In total, there were 44,023 foreign films in 36 genres from 135 countries, from the year 1900 to 2020. For simplicity, if more than one country was given credit for producing the film, only the first country listed (the main country) was taken. Likewise, if a film fell under two or more genres, only the first listed (main) genre was considered. Finally, if a film had more than one original title listed, only the first listed title was added to the spreadsheet. There were some gaps in the data, as *Allcinema* did not list a genre for roughly 12% of all films, and for a very small number of films did not list a country of origin (0.2%) and/or year (0.1%).

Besides these omissions, it is entirely possible that there are mistakes in the *Allcinema* database. Also, a particular film's genre designation might differ from other film databases, such as *IMDb* or *Kinenote*. Because of the size of the database, it was not feasible to check for mistakes, cross-check genres, or fill the missing gaps. Finally, my own methods of scraping the data from the website may have also created errors or gaps in the data.

After some preliminary research, I decided to focus my attention on American action and drama films from the 1920s through the 2010s. First and foremost, these two genres have been the two most popular genre of foreign films throughout history, with drama accounting for 19% of all films and action accounting for 12%. Likewise, American films far outnumber that of other countries. According to the data from *Allcinema*,

American films account for 53% of all foreign films, which was nearly seven times that of France, the country with the second highest number of films. In total, there were 3,192 American drama films and 2,848 American action films, accounting for roughly 14% of all foreign films to date<sup>1)</sup>.

Second, during my preliminary research, I noticed differences in the type of Japanese titles for these two genres. By looking at these two genres separately, I felt I could find some interesting data that would be lost if I only looked at films of multiple genres together as a single group.

## Results

### ***Katakana* Usage in Titles by Genre over Time**

Other researchers (Shimamura, 2012; Tsukawaki, 2009) have noted the rise over the years of phonetic equivalence or alternate English titles over direct translations or alternate Japanese titles. Shimamura looked at the top 100 ranked films on IMDb, and Tsukawaki examined 1,480 American science fiction films from the 1900s to the 2000s. My data set is considerably larger than those, and for that reason, I have chosen to first divide the titles in a way that could be quickly and easily counted by computer, and therefore differs in some regards to the division in Table 2 above. To count transcribed titles, a computer can simply pick out those titles that are rendered entirely in *katakana* script, or a combination of *katakana*, English, and numerals. This first group includes both phonetic equivalents and alternate titles, and I will call this group *katakana-only* titles. The second group is those titles which have *katakana* characters together with other Japanese characters. I will call this group *mixed*. This group contains both double titles as well as Japanese translations, direct and alternate. The final group is those titles that have no *katakana* characters at all. This group only contains Japanese translations, and I will call it *no-katakana*. Finally, there are a few titles rendered only in English. Note that these, too, are not always the original title (as in 『NINJA U.S.A.』 *Unmasking the Idol*). These categories are not ideal, but they will give us a sense of *katakana* usage over a one-hundred-year period with a large number of films. Figures 1 and 2 show the total number of American action and drama films by decade with the distribution of their

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1) Of the films listed in the *Allcinema* database.

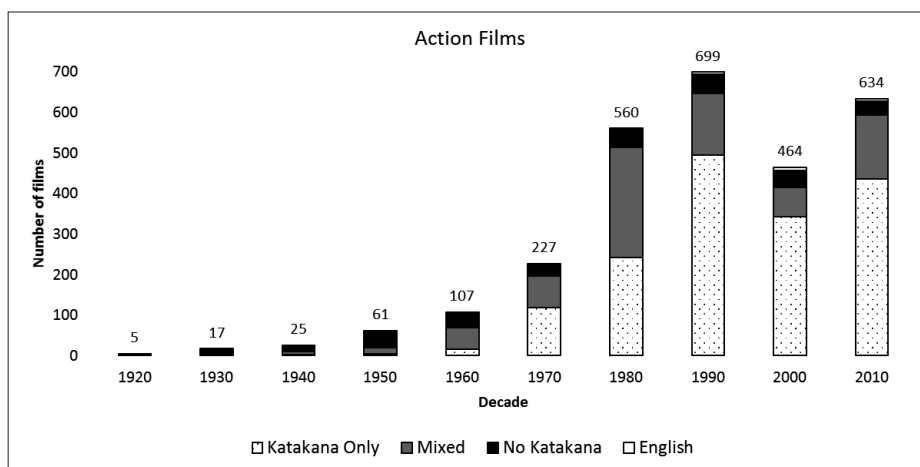


Figure 1. Total number of American action films by decade, with distribution of Japanese title types.

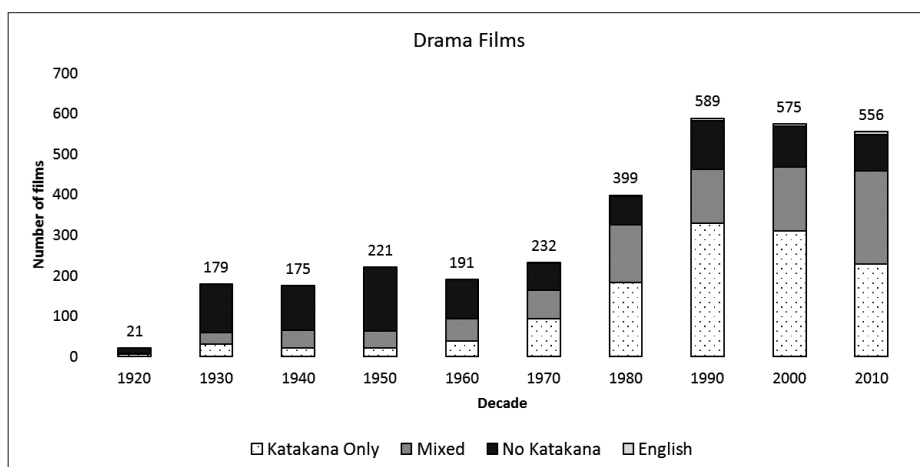


Figure 2. Total number of American drama films by decade, with distribution of Japanese title types.

Japanese title types. Figures 3 and 4 show the percentage of each title type by decade (here excluding English titles, which consistently account for only zero to one percent of the whole).

A noticeable difference is in the number of films of each genre. From the 1920s through the 1980s, the number of action films in each decade exceeded the total number of action films in history up to that point. In fact, in the 1980s there were 560 action films compared with just 335 from the 1920s through 1970s. Drama films on the other hand, were abundant in earlier decades, and greatly outnumbered action films until the

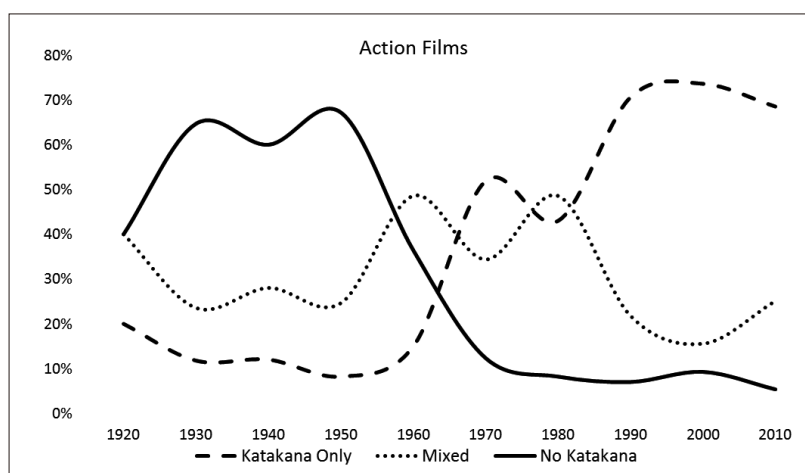


Figure 3. Percentage of Japanese title types, American action films by decade.

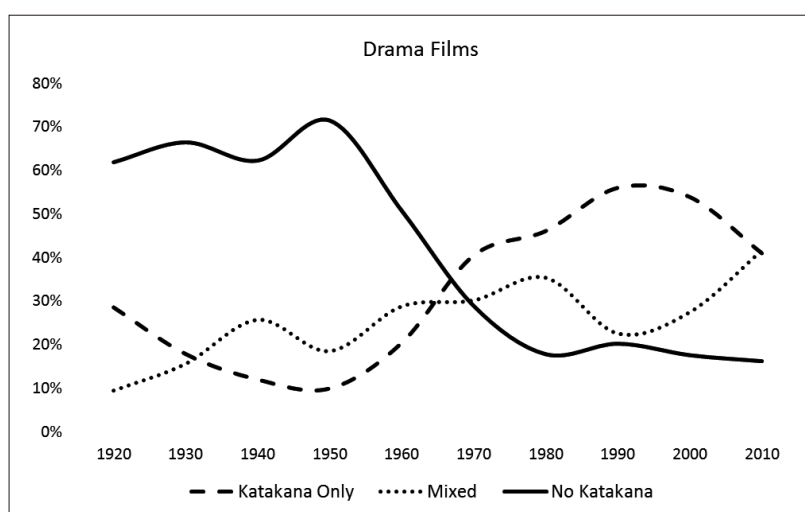


Figure 4. Percentage of Japanese title types, American drama films by decade.

1970s. Since the 1980s, however, action films have generally outnumbered drama films.

Regarding the types of titles, both genres follow a similar pattern: titles rendered in native Japanese were in the majority through the 1950s. The 1960s saw a rise in the use of *katakana* (either through *katakana*-only titles, or mixed titles). This could be seen as a transitional period, as from the 1970s, the majority of titles have been essentially English renderings using the *katakana* script. This change was most dramatic in action films, in which these *katakana*-only renderings continued to increase, peaking in the 2000s at 74% of titles. The decrease in Japanese-only renderings was also more dramatic

in action films, with only five percent of American action films in the 2010s containing no *katakana* script.

Tsukawaki (2009) argues that this rise is due to more familiarity with English among Japanese people, as English became required learning in Japan. While this is certainly one major underlying factor, I would argue that *katakana*-only and mixed titles also fulfill an important linguistic role. Corresponding with the rise of *katakana*-only films was a rise in the total number of films, both Japanese and foreign. A movie-goer in the 1970s would have to be more selective than one in the 1960s. With *katakana*, a clear distinction can be made between Japanese and foreign films. According to Inoue (2001), the *katakana*-only films have an aura of foreignness to them, which appeals to fans of foreign films.

Are *katakana*-only titles difficult to understand? In an article titled “When a Title Tells Nothing,” Shimamura (2012) seems to lament the rise of *katakana* usage in recent years, asserting confusion over *katakana*-only titles such as 『ハートロッカー』 (*The Hurt Locker*). Although he makes a legitimate point, in general *katakana*-only titles contain *katakana* that are in regular use in Japan. Looking at just the *katakana*-only films from the 2010s, each word was checked in the Japanese dictionary *Digital Daijisen* (Shogakukan, n.d.) through the goo dictionary website (url: <https://dictionary.goo.ne.jp/jn/>) with the results shown in Figure 5. There was not a noticeable difference between action films and drama films. Roughly 85% of *katakana* words used in both genres were found in the Japanese dictionary. Although there are certainly cases where the *katakana*

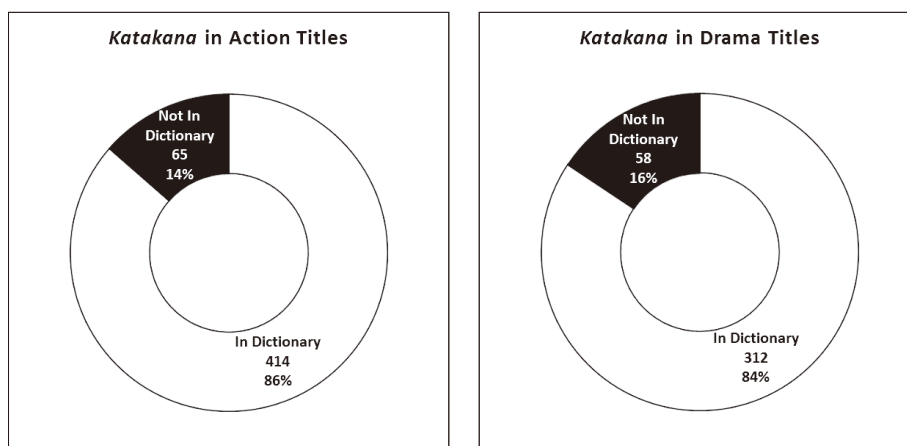


Figure 5. Number and percentage of *katakana* words from 2010s film titles listed in *Daijisen*.



titles are obscure, for the most part titles seem to be understandable. As we shall see in the next section, *katakana*-only titles are often not phonetic equivalents, but rather pseudo-English titles, created using well-known *katakana* words.

Another way to couple foreignness with understandability is by mixing *katakana* with native Japanese. Mixed titles in action films were quite prevalent between the 1960s and 1980s, accounting for between 35 and 50 percent of such films, but in the decades following, the percentage dropped to around 20 percent. On the other hand, mixed titles in drama films have steadily increased over the decades, with a slight drop in the 1990s, but increasing again through the 2010s, where they accounted for 42 percent of the drama films that decade.

Mixed titles fall mostly into two types: The first type is structurally a Japanese title which uses a *katakana* word, often as a proper name. Examples of this type are 『タイタンの戦い』 (*Clash of the Titans*) and 『華麗なるギャツビー』 (*The Great Gatsby*). It should also be noted that *katakana* does not always represent a foreign word. There are titles where native Japanese words are rendered in *katakana*, such as 『犬と私とダンナのカンケイ』 (*Darling Companion*).

The second type is the pattern of *katakana* followed by native Japanese (or, less commonly, the reverse). Some examples include 『バトルフォース 米軍第1特殊部隊』 (*Battle Force*) and 『ネブラスカ ふたつの心をつなぐ旅』 (*Nebraska*). This type is, in essence, two titles: an English title followed by a Japanese one. The Japanese title may serve the role of illuminating the content of the film, or simply be more appealing or understandable to Japanese audiences. This double title serves a useful communicative function. By using an English title, rendered in *katakana*, one can assume it is a foreign film. It might also be an important concept or idea in the film. An additional Japanese title is suitable especially when the English title is not clear or uses words that may be unfamiliar.

### Phonetic Equivalence and Alternate Titles

This section will explore to what extent the *katakana*-only titles are faithful representations of the American titles. As mentioned in the introduction, some titles are phonetic equivalents and others are not. For the sake of accuracy, I have divided the *katakana* titles into four categories, illustrated below:

1. Exact: These films are exact phonetic equivalents (*Before Midnight* 『ビフォア・ミッドナイト』).
2. Minus (-) Grammar: These films are close phonetic equivalents but may differ by the omission or addition of grammatical features, usually an article (*The Kid* 『キッド』), or a plural marker (*Fried Green Tomatoes* 『フライド・グリーン・トマト』).
3. Partial: These films are close or exact phonetic equivalents but differ by the omission or addition of a second title (*Graffiti Bridge* 『プリンス／グラフィティ・ブリッジ』), or other minor difference (*Vampire in Vegas* 『ヴァンパイア・イン・ラスベガス』). This category was more subjective and often difficult to categorize. Generally, if there were meaningful additions or subtractions, I categorized them in the final category below.
4. No Match: These films could have been further subdivided into completely different (*Stepmom* 『グッドナイト・ムーン』) and slightly different (*Finding Graceland* 『グレイスランド』), but for simplicity's sake, I decided to keep them in one category.

Figures 6 and 7 show the percentages of *katakana*-only titles that fall into each of the above categories. Titles that were a blend of *katakana* and Japanese were not considered here. Also, because of the small number of *katakana*-only titles before the 1960s, the decades of the 1920s through the 1960s have been counted together. Figure 6 shows the percentages for action films and Figure 7 shows the percentages for drama films.

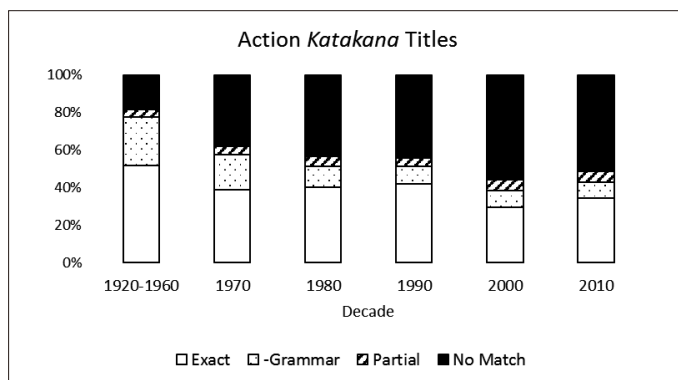


Figure 6. Percentage of *katakana*-only titles matching American titles, American action films by decade.

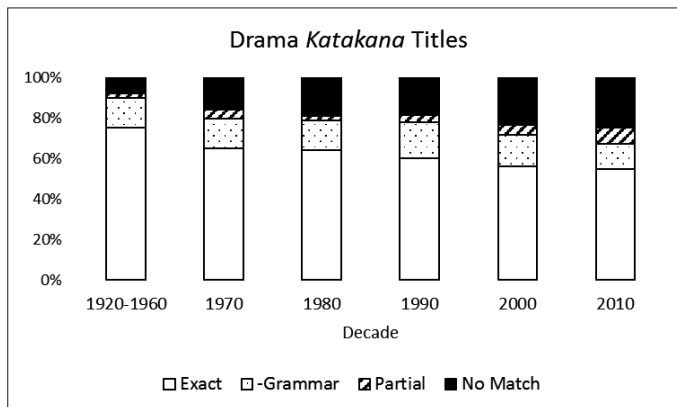


Figure 7. Percentage of *katakana*-only titles matching American titles, American drama films by decade.

The data shows a decline over the years in the percentage of phonetic equivalence in both action and drama titles, although the decline is greater in action titles. Overall, action film titles in *katakana* were classified as *no match* twice as often as drama film titles. For action films in the two most recent decades, there is a less than 50% chance that a given *katakana* film title matches its original title. A closer look at the percentages in the most recent decade is given in Figure 8 below.

To summarize, Japanese titles of American action films are more likely to be *katakana*-only titles, but those titles are less likely to be phonetic equivalents. Conversely, Japanese titles of American drama films are less likely to be *katakana*-only titles, but those titles are more likely to be phonetically equivalent.

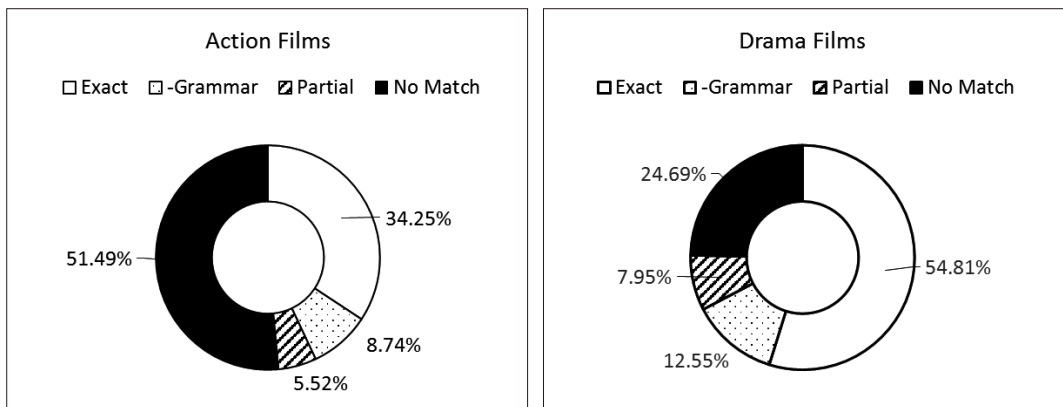


Figure 8. Percentage of “matched” titles, American action films (left) and drama films (right), 2010s.

### Word Frequency in Japanese Titles

Using Anthony's SegmentAnt (2017) and AntConc (2019), I segmented the Japanese titles into lemma, and created frequency lists for each genre, for the time period of the 1970s to the 2010s, when *katakana* appeared regularly in film titles. Taking the most frequent *katakana* words, I then looked at the titles containing those words, by decade, and noted how often its equivalent English word appeared in the corresponding original titles.

Table 3 below shows the most disproportionate word in action films of the 2010s,

**Table 3**  
**Full List of 「リベンジ」 (Revenge) Films, American Action Films, 2010s (10: 1 ratio)**

Japanese Title	English Title
G.I.ジョー バック 2 リベンジ (G.I. Joe Back 2 Revenge)	G.I. Joe: Retaliation
キックボクサー ザ・リベンジ (Kickboxer the Revenge)	Kickboxer: Retaliation
キッズ・リベンジ (Kids Revenge)	The Aggression Scale
ドルフ・ラングレン ザ・リベンジャー (Dolph Lundgren in The Revenger)	Icarus
フルリベンジ (Full Revenge)	Hidden in the Woods
ミス・リベンジ (Miss Revenge)	Miss Bala
リベンジ・オブ・ザ・グリーン・ドラゴン (Revenge of the Green Dragon)	Revenge of the Green Dragons
リベンジ・ガン (Revenge Gun)	Swelter
リベンジ・キラー (Revenge Killer)	Vanish
リベンジ・ファイト (Revenge Fight)	A Fighting Man
リベンジ・マッチ (Revenge Match)	Grudge Match
リベンジ・リスト (Revenge List)	I am Wrath
リベンジャー (Revenger)	Boy Wonder
レッド・リベンジ (Red Revenge)	Beyond Justice
ワイルド・フォー・リベンジ (Wild for Revenge)	6 Ways to Sundown
アサシンス・リベンジ -不死身の暗殺者- (Assassin's Revenge -Immortal Assassin-)	The Lazarus Papers
ブラッド・リベンジ 奪還のボーダーライン (Blood Revenge: Recaptured Borderline)	Your Move
リベンジ・ショット 最後の賭け (Revenge Shot: Last Bet)	Blue Line
リベンジ・フォー・ジョリー 愛犬のために撃て! (Revenge for Jolly: Shoot for my Dear Dog!)	Revenge for Jolly!
鉄拳 Kazuya's Revenge (Tekken: Kazuya's Revenge)	Tekken: A Man Called X

「リベンジ」(*revenge*), occurring ten times as often in the Japanese titles as in the American titles. 「リベンジ」 was a buzzword in Japan in 1999 (Kimura & Tanigawa, 2006), but before the 2010s had only appeared in 23 Japanese titles of American action films, with four of those coming after 2007. As a word now commonly used in Japanese, 「リベンジ」 is understandable and close enough in meaning to words like *retaliation* or even *grudge*, which it replaces in three of the films in Table 3. However, the reason for its liberal use among the other titles is not clear.

Other decades have had similarly disproportionate words in the Japanese titles of American action films. In the 1980s, it was 「バトル」(*battle*) films (Table 4), and in the 1990s, it was 「ヒート」(*heat*) films (Table 5). Each word appeared at a 16: 3 ratio in Japanese titles over that of their corresponding English titles.

Other words that have appeared disproportionately since the 1970s are 「ワイル

**Table 4**  
**Full List of 「バトル」 (Battle) Films, American Action Films, 1980s (16: 3 ratio)**

Japanese Title	English Title
バトルクリーク・ブロー (Battle Creek Brawl)	Battle Creek Brawl
バトル・フォース (Battle Force)	Raw Force
バトル・ウォーズ (Battle Wars)	Rage to Kill
バトル・コップ / LAコネクション (Battle Cop / LA Connection)	Under the Gun
バトル・サバイバー (Battle Survivor)	Real Bullets
バトルランナー (Battle Runner)	The Running Man
バトル・ウォリアーズ (Battle Warriors)	Inferno in Safehaven
バトル・グラウンド (Battle Ground)	Hell on the Battle Ground
バトル・ファイター (Battle Fighter)	Fist Fighter
バトルガンM-16 (Battle Gun M-16)	Death Wish 4: The Crackdown
虐殺ゾーン / 地獄のバトル・キャンプ (Massacre Zone / Battle Camp of Hell)	Kill Zone
スキューバ・バトル / 地獄の爆弾要塞 (Scuba Battle / Fortress of Hell)	The Patriot
バトル・エンジェル / 怒りに燃える柔肌の復讐 (Battle Angel / Revenge of Soft Skin Burning with Anger)	Angel of Vengeance
闘う男 (バトルガイ)・復讐のボーガン (Battle Guy: Bow Gun for Revenge)	Rage of Vengeance
バトル・ドッグ / 怒りの標的 (Battle Dog / Target of Anger)	The Hunted
バトル・ラッツ / 地獄の地下要塞 (Battle Rats / Underground Fortress of Hell)	Battle Rats

**Table 5**  
**Full List of 「ヒート」 (Heat) Films, American Action Films, 1990s (16: 3 ratio)**

Japanese Title	English Title
ミッドナイトヒート (Midnight Heat)	Midnight Heat
クロス・ヒート (Close Heat)	Blown Away
バイオレントヒート (Violent Heat)	To Protect and Serve
キリング・ヒート (Killing Heat)	Fortunes of War
チェーンヒート2 (Chain Heat 2)	Chained Heat 2
バニシング・ヒート (Vanishing Heat)	Bermuda Grace
パワーヒート (Power Heat)	Honor and Glory
ファイナルヒート (Final Heat)	Undefeatable
ヒート (Heat)	Heat
クライムヒート (Crime Heat)	Red Line
バイスヒート (Vice Heat)	Sealed with a Kiss
クラッシュ・ヒート (Crash Heat)	The Underground
カジノ・ヒート (Casino Heat)	Top of the World
R.P.M. エキゾースト・ヒート (R. P. M.: Exhaust Heat)	R. P. M.
新・チェーンヒート／戦慄の女刑務所 (New Chain Heat / Horrifying Women's Prison)	Hotel Oklahoma
ヒート・ウェイブ／殺しの狂宴 (Heat Wave / Killing Revelry)	Forced to Kill

**Table 6**  
**Full List of Fast & Furious Franchise Films**

Japanese Title	English Title
ワイルド・スピード (Wild Speed)	The Fast and the Furious
ワイルド・スピードX 2	2 Fast 2 Furious
ワイルド・スピードX 3 TOKYO DRIFT	The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift
ワイルド・スピード MAX	Fast & Furious
ワイルド・スピード MEGA MAX	Fast Five
ワイルド・スピード EURO MISSION	Fast & Furious 6
ワイルド・スピード SKY MISSION	Furious 7
ワイルド・スピード ICE BREAK	The Fate of the Furious
ワイルド・スピード／スーパーコンボ (Wild Speed / Super Combo)	Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw

ド」 (*wild*) (25: 3), 「ブレイク」 (*break*) (13: 2), 「エージェント」 (*agent*) (15: 3), 「ミッション」 (*mission*) (29: 8) and 「ハード」 (*hard*) (30: 11). Of these, the *Fast & Furious* franchise, rendered in Japanese as 『ワイルド・スピード』 (*Wild Speed*), accounts for a

sizable number of the instances of *wild* (Table 6).

This disproportionate usage of a word is not just limited to *katakana* expressions, however. Table 7 shows the most frequent words in Japanese titles of American action films from the 1970s to the 2010s. The fourth most frequent word (and most frequent noun) is 「地獄」 (hell). Of the 75 times it appeared in a title, only four of the matching English titles contained the word “hell,” or roughly once for every 19 titles. Likewise, the next most frequent word 「復讐」 (vengeance, revenge, retaliation) occurs 49 times, but in the corresponding English titles, the words *revenge* and *retaliation* do not appear at all, and *vengeance* occurs just seven times, or once every seven titles. The 33 「沈黙」 (silence) titles are, to the best of my knowledge, all Steven Seagal films, and none of the English titles contain the word *silence*.

**Table 7**  
***Most Frequent Words in Japanese Titles, American Action Films 1970s to 2010s***  
(Word Types: 2,944    Word Tokens: 7,469)

Rank	Frequency	Japanese	English (English translation)
1	461	の	(of)
2	118	ザ	the
3	86	オブ	of
4	75	地獄	(hell)
5	49	復讐	(vengeance)
6	39	者	(person)
7	33	ソルジャー	soldier
8	33	沈黙	(silence)
9	31	コップ	cop
10	31	バトル	battle

If we look now at the 10 most frequent words found in drama film titles (Table 8), we can clearly see a difference between those found in action film titles (Table 7 above). As there is a larger percentage of translated titles among drama film titles, nine of the top ten words in the list are grammatical items.

Table 8

*Most Frequent Words in Japanese Titles, American Drama Films 1970s to 2010s*  
(Word Types: 3,402 Word Tokens: 7,758)

Rank	Frequency	Japanese	English (Translation)
1	762	の	(of)
2	102	た	(past tense marker)
3	100	と	(and)
4	96	ザ	the
5	93	に	(at, on, in, to)
6	73	を	(accusative particle)
7	71	愛	(love)
8	61	て	(reason conjunction)
9	59	オブ	of
10	46	たち	(plural marker)

Next, Table 9 shows the frequency of just the *katakana* words in American dramas. The top four words are again grammatical words.

Table 9

*Most Frequent Katakana Words in Japanese Titles, American Dramas, 1970s to 2010s*  
(Word Types: 3,402 Word Tokens: 7,758)

Rank	Frequency	Japanese	English
4	96	ザ	the
9	59	オブ	of
12	36	イン	in
16	27	マイ	my
20	23	アメリカン	American
22	22	ニューヨーク	New York
-	22	ライフ	life
36	16	ラブ	love
41	15	ラスト	last
43	14	ハート	heart

As we saw earlier, compared with action film titles, there are fewer *katakana*-only titles for drama films, and these are more likely to be faithful to the English titles. Therefore, it stands to reason that there will not be the disproportion we saw concerning action film titles. And this is indeed the case. Looking again decade by decade, the most disproportionate word among drama films was 「ライフ」 (life), which in titles from the



2010s, appeared at a 3: 1 ratio with the English equivalent (Table 10).

**Table 10**  
*Full List of 「ライフ」 (Life) Films, American Drama Films, 2010s (3: 1 Ratio)*

Japanese Title	English Title
ゲット！マイライフ (Get! My Life)	Stealing Cars
ツリー・オブ・ライフ (Tree of Life)	The Tree of Life
プライベート・ライフ (Private Life)	Private Life
マイ・ライフ・メモリー (My Life Memory)	Sunlight Jr.
ライフ・アズ・ファニータ (Life as Juanita)	Juanita
スマッシュド ～ケイトのアルコールライフ～ (Smashed ～ The Alcohol Life of Kate ～)	Smashed
ライフ・イットセルフ 未来に続く物語 (Life Itself: The Story Which Continues into the Future)	Life Itself
ライフ・ゴーズ・オン 彼女たちの選択 (Life Goes On: Women's Choices)	Certain Women
僕のワンダフル・ライフ (My Wonderful Life)	A Dog's Purpose

If we look beyond the *katakana* expressions, however, Japanese titles of American drama films begin to look similar to those of American action films. Table 11 lists the most frequent non-*katakana* nouns in recent Japanese titles.

**Table 11**  
*Most Frequent Japanese Nouns in Japanese Titles, American Dramas, 1970s to 2010s*  
(Word Types: 3,402    Word Tokens: 7,758)

Rank	Frequency	Japanese	English translation
7	71	愛	love
15	33	男	man
20	23	人	person
22	22	幸せ	happiness
26	20	女	woman
-	20	天使	angel
-	20	物語	story
30	18	人生	life
-	18	奇跡	miracle
33	17	夜	night
-	17	心	heart
-	17	日	day

At the top of the list, 「愛」 (love) appears as a noun in 71 titles from the 1970s to present. In the corresponding English titles, the word *love* appears just 6 times. In the 1990s 「愛」 and *love* appeared at a 17: 1 ratio (Table 12).

**Table 12**  
**Full List of 「愛」 (Love) Films, American Drama Films, 1990s. (17: 1 Ratio)**

Japanese Title	English Title
愛と哀しみの旅路 (The Road of Love and Sadness)	Come See the Paradise
愛と野望のナイル (The Nile of Love and Ambition)	Mountains of the Moon
フェイス／愛と青春の輝き (Faith / The Radiance of Love and Youth)	Faith
愛に翼を (Love on Wings)	Paradise
愛の選択 (The Choice of Love)	Dying Young
サウス・キャロライナ／愛と追憶の彼方 (South Carolina / The Far Side of Love and Memory)	The Prince of Tides
愛と呼ばれるもの (The Thing Called Love)	The Thing Called Love
愛の果てに (At the End of Love)	The Innocent
フレッシュ・アンド・ボーン／渴いた愛のゆくえ (Flesh and Bone / Where Dry Love Goes)	Flesh and Bone
ブロンクス物語／愛につつまれた街 (A Bronx Tale / A Town Wrapped in Love)	A Bronx Tale
愛・アマチュア (Love Amateur)	Amateur
愛に気づけば... (When You Notice Love)	Angie
愛に迷った時 (When Love Confounds You)	Something to Talk About
キルトに綴る愛 (Love Weaved in a Quilt)	How to Make an American Quilt
溺愛の果て (At the End of Deep Love)	Border Line
インフィニティ／無限の愛 (Infinity / Infinite Love)	Infinity
傷心／ジェームズ・ディーン愛の伝説 (Broken Heart / The Legend of Loving James Dean)	James Dean: Race with Destiny

As with action films, each decade has its own over-used word. In the 2000s, that word was 「幸せ」 (happiness), which appeared at a 12: 1 ratio with its English equivalent (Table 13), and in the 2010s, it was 「人生」 (life), appearing eleven times without the corresponding English word occurring even once (Table 14).

**Table 13**  
**Full List of 「幸せ」 (Happiness) Films, American Drama Films, 2000s (12: 1 Ratio)**

Japanese Title	English Title
2番目に幸せなこと (The Second Happiest Thing)	The Next Best Thing
幸せになるための恋の手紙 (Love Letter for Becoming Happy)	The Other Side of Heaven
幸せのポートレート (Portrait of Happiness)	The Family Stone
幸せのちから (Power of Happiness)	The Pursuit of Happiness
幸せのレシピ (Recipe of Happiness)	No Reservations
幸せのルールはママが教えてくれた (Mom Taught Me the Rule of Happiness)	Georgia Rule
地球でいちばん幸せな場所 (The Happiest Place on Earth)	Owl and the Sparrow
幸せのセラピー (Happiness Therapy)	Meet Bill
幸せのきずな (Bond of Happiness)	Flash of Genius
しあわせの法則 (Rule of Happiness)	Laurel Canyon
しあわせの帰る場所 (The Place Where Happiness Returns)	Fireflies in the Garden
しあわせの隠れ場所 (The Place Where Happiness Hides)	The Blind Side

**Table 14**  
**Full List of 「人生」 (Life) Films, American Drama Films, 2010s (11: 0 Ratio)**

Japanese Title	English Title
アイ・アム・ニューマン 新しい人生のを見つけ方 (I am Newman: How to Find a New Life)	Arthur Newman
ザ・ワーズ 盗まれた人生 (The Words: A Stolen Life)	The Words
ベン・スティラー 人生は最悪だ! (Ben Stiller in Life Sucks!)	Greenberg
ホームラン 人生の再試合 (Home Run: Life's Rematch)	Home Run
ロスト・イン・マンハッタン 人生をもう一度 (Lost in Manhattan: Life Once More)	Time Out of Mind
人生はビギナーズ (Life is Beginners)	Beginners
人生はローリングストーン (Life is Rolling Stone)	The End of the Tour
人生の特等席 (Life's Best Seat)	Trouble with the Curve
人生は小説よりも奇な (Life is Stranger than Fiction)	Love Is Strange
最高の人生のはじめ方 (How to Begin the Greatest Life)	The Magic of Belle Isle
素晴らしきかな、人生 (What a Wonderful Life)	Collateral Beauty

## Discussion

Japanese titles of American action films and drama films differ from each other in at least three regards. First, *katakana*-only titles are more likely for action than for drama films. In recent decades, action films are more likely than not to be rendered

in *katakana* only. Second, action titles transcribed in *katakana* are less likely to be a phonetic equivalent of the original title. More than half of *katakana*-only action titles in recent decades are alternate transcriptions. Finally, more than drama films, action films tend to use *katakana* expressions disproportionately to the corresponding English expressions.

I can only speculate on the possible reasons for these differences. Action films and drama films appeal to different audiences, and it may be that certain types of titles are more appealing to members of those audiences. Also, action films, with crime, car chases, and guns, may seem more foreign than drama films, warranting a more foreign-sounding title. On the other hand, drama films tend to focus on emotions, so a more nuanced title in Japanese may be better suited to draw out those emotions.

Finally, I would like to discuss the alternate *katakana*-only titles that appeared in the lists above. It may be tempting to think of these often pseudo-English titles as at times ridiculous, at times pointless, or at times even troubling. Certainly, that may be true, but we should not ignore their virtues. The English words rendered in *katakana* in Japanese film titles are largely those that are in regular use in Japanese. Additionally, English grammar rules, especially those related to article and plural use, may be left out. This simplified English allows for understandability while also keeping a sense of foreignness. In this way, *katakana*-only titles have a unique and important linguistic role.

This paper looked at some overall trends between Japanese titles of just two genres in American cinema. Further research comparing other genres, decades, or countries is merited, and could further our understanding of overall *katakana* usage in Japanese film titles.

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