## “Shiin” Is The Literal Sound Of Silence In Japanese

Pronunciation: sheeen

Not all Japanese “onomatopoeia” transcribe natural sounds. Many of them are mimetic, describing emotional states, actions, manners, etc. Think of old-timey comics where a character would punch someone and the word “PUNCH” would appear over it. It’s *a little bit* like that. In any case, Japan has thousands of words that can describe any situation, including a state of silence, which is “shiin” (シーン).

It may seem paradoxical to have a word to linguistically mimic the “absence of words/sounds,” but it actually works out great in conversation, like: “So I told her I loved her and wanted to have 10 babies with her, but she went all *shiiiiiin*, got up, and ran away from the restaurant. Weirdest first date ever.” The word can be stretched as far as you want to until it sounds like someone flatlining, which is legit how I first memorized it.

## “Kusshon Kotoba” Help Soften The Blow

Pronunciation: koo-shyon koh-toh-bah

The “kusshon” in “kusshon kotoba” (クッション言葉) is actually the Japanese pronunciation of the English “cushion,” while “kotoba” means “word(s).” So together, the expression means “cushion words,” which you know ALL ABOUT and probably use all the time.

“I’m sorry but,” “I know you must be very busy but,” “If it’s all right with you” are all examples of “cushion words” meant to ease you into an awkward topic or to help you segue into asking for a favor. Or both. So everyone in the English-speaking world knows cushion words. They just never had a proper word for them until now.

## “Betsubara” Describes An Internal Organ We Always Suspected We Had

Pronunciation: beh-tsoo-bah-rah

Picture this. It’s Thanksgiving. You’ve eaten so much that you not only unbuttoned your pants, you allowed your zipper to go all the way down because the shame portion of your brain is drowning in a pool of turkey meat and gravy. You are on your phone googling if it’s possible to literally burst from overeating like that guy in *Se7en.* You physically cannot eat more. Then someone brings out pie, and you’re suddenly “Oh, I’ll have a slice.” Where will you fit it, though? In the “other stomach,” of course, which is what “betsubara” (別腹) literally means.

## “Ryoto-Zukai” Is The Most Badass LGBTQ Term Ever

Pronunciation: ryo-toh-zoo-kai

“Ryoto-zukai” (両刀使い) literally means “two-sword fencer,” and it has a bunch of meanings, including literally a person who fights with two swords or a person who likes both alcoholic drinks and sweet things. Holy hell, Japan actually came up with a word to accurately describe the target demographic for [SkittleBrau](https://simpsonswiki.com/wiki/SkittleBrau) from *The Simpsons*.

But the word also has another meaning: a bisexual person. It’s kind of an older term, but as Japan looks to the future and keeps updating its LGBTQ vernacular, I hope they don’t forget about the past and bring “ryoto-zukai” back because it’s the most badass way to describe someone’s sexuality.

## “Debu” Is The Pinnacle Of Fat-Shaming

Pronunciation: deh-boo

“Debu” (デブ) is often simply translated as “fatso,” “pig,” “porker,” etc. Suffice to say, it’s not a nice word but to fully understand just how nice it isn’t, we have to talk about its etymology. There are three theories as to the origin of “debu.”

One says that it’s related to “deppari,” meaning “bulge.” The other one says it comes from the English “double chin,” which would be pronounced something like “daburu chin” in Japan, and with time was shortened to just “dabu” and eventually became “debu.” The third theory also traces the word back to an English expression … specifically “Death and Burst.” It works like “Pokémon,” which comes from Poketto Monsutaa (pocket monsters). So you take the “de” from “death” and the “bu” from “burst,” put them together, and, voila, you’re now a terrible human being.

## “Tsundoku” Is Japan Not Understanding That We NEED All Those Books

Pronunciation: tsoon-doh-koo

Books are available everywhere and for dirt-cheap prices in Japan. I have personally seen countless people finish reading a book and then just … throw it away or leave it on a bench. Meh, what do they care? It was probably like a buck fifty, and if they kept every book they read, their entire life would be nothing but books. They would constantly be surrounded by books, sleep on books, and eventually be buried in books.

That’s why Japan understands better than anyone else that buying books and reading books are two very different hobbies. And if you’re reading this while shamefully eyeing The Stack (C) (TM) that keeps growing with each day, know that Japan has a word for it: “Tsundoku” (積読), the stockpiling of tattooed trees that will probably forever remain unread no matter how much you lie to yourself.

## “Kuchisabishii” Is The Cutest Euphemism For Addiction Ever

Pronunciation: koochee-sah-bee-shee

Sometimes, people eat not because they’re hungry but because they want *something* in their mouth . You may also experience a similar need to stuff your gob when giving up smoking.

There’s a name for all of those feelings in the English language, but it’s terrible: “oral craving/fixation.”

Also, take a lesson from Japan. When they were looking for a way to describe your mouth feeling lonely, they called it exactly that: “mouth-lonely,” the literal meaning of “kuchisabishii” (口寂しい).

## “Madogiwa-Zoku” Is Hell To Some And Paradise To Others

Pronunciation: mah-doh-ghee-wah-zoh-koo

Its popularity is fading, but the idea of lifetime employment at the same company is still going strong in Japan. It may sound like a slow death to you, but it has its benefits. The system heavily favors seniority, meaning that you’re pretty much guaranteed raises and promotions if you just stay with the company long enough … Unless you become such a burden that you get made part of the “madogiwa-zoku” (窓際族), the “window-side tribe.” It refers to employees relocated somewhere out of the way and given NO TASKS at all.

They still get paid, but they don’t do anything during work hours, which is management’s subtle way of encouraging them to quit because under the lifetime employment system, getting fired would require you literally burning the company down using your boss’ cherished family photos as kindling.

## “Mai Buumu” Is The Perfect Word To Temporarily Obsess Over

Pronunciation: mai-boomoo

“Mai Buumu” (マイブーム) is the Japanese pronunciation of “My Boom,” which may sound like an angry toddler claiming ownership of your stack of illegal fireworks, but it actually has a cool meaning: “ current obsession.” Those who have periods when they are ALL about one thing, be it learning a new language, a new smartphone game, or wanting to eat butter toast all the time, can be described as experiencing their “Mai Buumu” moment.

However, like an actual explosion, the obsession has to be temporary and not turn into a lifelong passion, etc. The word had its heyday during the '90s, but it feels tailor-made for modern times when access to all kinds of knowledge is so easy, we all routinely make like Cyber Alice and fall down internet rabbit holes.

## “Nekojita” Is Japan Calling You A Pussy For How You Like Your Food

Pronunciation: neh-koh-jee-tah

You ever take a bite of something that’s a bit too hot, so you open your mouth to air cool it inside you because taking it out would be giving up, and your parents may have raised an anxious neurotic with more issues than a newspaper publisher, but they didn’t raise no quitter? Yeah, well, some people can’t do that. Not because it makes them look like a panting pug, but because they quite literally can’t handle the heat. Their mouths just aren’t made to handle hot food. Japan calls that having a “cat tongue” or “nekojita” (猫舌).

There are a couple of theories as to the etymology of the word, but the overall point is that if your friend routinely burns their mouth, Japan says that it’s okay to call them a pussy.

## “Happobijin” Are Not Really Bad People But Dealing With Them Can Be A Headache

Pronunciation: ha’poh-bee-jeen

Does this sound familiar?

1: Where the hell is Steve? He promised he’d help me move that corp … I mean couch out of my basement.

2: Wait, he promised to get drun … I mean, read the Bible with me today.

3: I think he’s at that ska concert with Dave. He had an extra ticket he didn’t want to go to waste.

2: … Who still listens to ska? What a loser.

The thing is, Steve had every intention of keeping his promises, but he overextended himself because he’s always trying to be *everyone’s* friend. In other words, he’s an “all-direction beauty” or “happobijin” (八方美人). Again, they’re not bad people, but like a chemist who doesn’t know the abbreviation for nobelium, they really need to learn how to say “No.”

## “Yuufoo Kyacchaa” Are Rigged! Just One More Game, Though …

Pronunciation: yoo-foh-kya’cha

This phrase is the Japanese pronunciation of “UFO Catcher” (ユーフォー/UFO キャッチャー), though you’d be forgiven for thinking that it refers to some kind of alien fetishist. Thankfully, it’s just the Japanese term for claw crane games. Japan does have Western-style “robo-hand” crane games, but the catching mechanism on the most popular variety does kind of look like a flying saucer with two grabbers, one of which IS MORE LIMP THAN BOILED SPAGHETTI. You usually have to spend a preset amount of money before both grabbers start working properly, but once they do, it’s actually easy to grab a prize, some of which are pretty cool arcade exclusives. That being said, “UFO Catcher” would also be a pretty accurate name for alien fetishists, which must exist in Japan because Japan.

## “Batakusai” Is Japan Throwing Shade At The West

Pronunciation: bah-tah-koo-sai

For most of the Edo Period (1603—1868), Japan was isolated from the world, but after the US metaphorically [came up to the country’s front door](https://www.britannica.com/place/Japan/The-opening-of-Japan) with shotgun in hand and started coughing suggestively, the country opened its borders to the West. They got some neat things out of it, though, like access to plenty of ice cream, beer, and butter. For some reason, the country really focused on that last one and started describing all things Western-influenced or European/American-looking as “smelling of butter” or “batakusai” (バタ臭い).

This is a *very* outdated term, and on the rare occasion you spot it in the wild, it’s probably being used ironically. But it should totally make a comeback so that Americans can know how French people feel when some butter-smelling yank calls them “cheese-eating surrender monkeys.”