

# The Japanese Department Store as a Fantasy World

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The purpose of this paper is to compare department stores and shopping malls in Japan with those in the United States in order to find out how they try to attract their customers linguistically and non-linguistically in different ways. American-style department stores were introduced to Japan in the early 1990's. For over a century, their marketing strategies and styles have been diverse. The marketing strategies used in some Japanese department stores to attract customers are aimed to create a fantasy world for the customers linguistically and visually, while few linguistic strategies are found in the United States. Some shopping malls both in Tokyo and Los Angeles are designed to create a "pseudo-town" but they are conceptually different.

The first part of this paper is a brief review of the history of Japanese department stores which were established under the influence of those in the United States. The second part is the historical overview of department stores in the United States. Then I compare the linguistic strategies used in the department stores and shopping malls in Japan with those in the United States, and discuss the cultural differences between them.

## 1. A brief history of Japanese department stores

The original model for today's department stores in Japan is *gofukuya*, mercer, or shops dealing in fabrics for kimono. *Mitsukoshi*, one of Japan's major department stores, has a history of 330 years. It was founded by one

of the oldest banks in the country, *Mitsui*, which started its business in Edo (present-day Tokyo) in 1673. *Mitsukoshi* was the first retailer in the world to tag all their merchandise. It supplied ordinary people with *gofuku*, or *kimono*, which at that time were so expensive that only wealthy and high-class people were economically privileged enough to purchase them. Adopting the American system, Osuke Hibi, the executive manager of *Mitsukoshi Gofukuya* store, issued the “Department Store Declaration” in 1904. This marked the dawn of modern department stores in Japan. Subsequently, *gofukuya* stores adopted the joint-stock system and developed into stores which deal not only in clothes, but also other merchandise. Items to be sold were gradually broadened from private clothes to items related to social fashion such as umbrellas and shoes, and then to other kinds of commodities. *Hyakkaten*, the Japanese word for department store, refers to stores dealing with a hundred kinds of merchandise. Following the Department Store Declaration mentioned above, major *Gofukuya* were remodeled one by one as department stores. Following *Mitsukoshi*’s example, *Takashimaya*, *Shirokiya* (now called Tokyu Department Store), *Ito Gofuku*, and *Matsuya* became joint-stock corporations and all five Gofukuya stores established the *Gofuku* Group. Today there are numerous other department stores in Tokyo.

During the nation’s economic prosperity of the 1980s, which is referred to as “the Bubble Period” because of its inherent fragility, Japanese department stores had no difficulty attracting consumers even though they were in severe competition with each other in the big cities. However, at the same time, young people were searching for their own style, distinct from others. They checked out the smaller clothing shops selling limited numbers of clothing to find favorite articles of clothing in order to create their own styles. Gradually many discount shops for electric devices cropped up where consumers could buy items at much cheaper prices than in the department stores. Furthermore, at this time special focus magazines were published which featured various forms of entertainments, such as movies, restaurants, fashion and events, making it easier for people to get informa-

tion about their pastimes. As a result, fewer people went out to shop in stores on weekends. Department stores could no longer attract people by selling all kinds of commodities. In order to adjust themselves to the customers' needs, they had to quickly change their marketing approach in order to appeal to more people. I will discuss this later.

## **2. A brief history of American department stores**

Department stores are defined as “establishments engaged in retailing a wide range of new products with no single predominant merchandise line” according to the US Census Bureau’s NAICS (North American Industry Classification System). The prototype of the US department store was established by the entrepreneur, Alexander T. Stewart (1803-76) in 1846 in New York on the east side of Broadway, between Chambers and Reade Streets. In 1862, Stewart built a new department store with 8 floors and 19 departments offering such things as toys, glasses, and sports equipment, as well as dresses. During the 1880s and the 1890s, department stores such as Macy’s, Benjamin Altman, Lord & Taylor, McCreany’s and Abraham & Straus were built, and the area from the Stewart store to 23<sup>rd</sup> St on Broadway and 6<sup>th</sup> Ave. was called “Ladies’ Mile”.

Department stores have a long history in both countries, and we can still see their stately and grand buildings in New York and Tokyo. There is a sense of dignity in their appearance, such as we can not find in the present-day shopping malls. When you step into these department stores, you find big-name brands everywhere. These prestigious brands together with the grand appearance of the buildings have resulted in their being ranked as first class retailing stores. Now, however, department stores in big cities in the United States are apparently be faced with the same problem as their counterparts in Japan. They all look alike. Older people may have their favorite department store, but the younger generation would rather go to shopping malls.



Saks Fifth Avenue (NY)



Bergdorf and Goodman (NY)

For this research I visited the following department stores in New York and Boston: Bloomingdale's, Bergdorf Goodman, Henri Bendel, Saks Fifth Avenue, the NY branch of Takashimaya, Macy's, and Barneys in New York, and Macy's and Filenes' in Boston. Some of them have their own style brands, such as Henri Bendel and Barneys New York in New York, and Filenes' basement in Boston. However, they do not create a "fantasy world" as some shopping malls do. Later I would like to compare department stores in Japan and the United States, and also discuss on the strategies of shopping malls to make customers feel as if they were in a fantasy world.

### **3. Differences in linguistic behavior toward customers in Japanese and in American department stores**

#### **3.1. The Department store as a "city"**

Some Japanese department stores use the same strategies that the shopping malls use to arouse more interest on the part of the customers. They try to have their customers entertain the illusion of being in a dream town – a shopping paradise. First, I would like to focus on one of the biggest and most popular department stores in Japan, *Isetan*, and discuss how it creates a fantasy world.

In 1985, *Isetan* decided to gather specific “DC Brands”, which stands for Designer and Character Brands on the second floor of the building – the floor on which fashionable brands for young people are usually arranged for sale in most department stores. As mentioned in Chapter 1, at that time young people were pursuing their own style of fashion and patronizing shops which sold a limited number of brands reflecting the originality of the designers. *Isetan* turned their attention to these stores. Originally such shops were concentrated on a certain popular street in Harajuku which was visited by teenagers. *Isetan* attempted to attract these youthful customers by creating a “city” where young people could feel as if they were walking on the streets of Harajuku in a pleasant, fully air-conditioned atmosphere.

They named this floor “Cinderella City”. The name was intended to attract young women since it would make them feel as if they had the potential to change themselves into the beautiful girl in the famous fairy tale. They also set up a café in the corner, while the floors even had manholecovers drawn on them so as to appear like the real streets of a town.

*Isetan* was founded in 1886 in Kanda with the name of *Iseya Tanji Gofukuya* Store. In 1924, after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, *Iseya Gofuku Store* began to deal in commodities other than clothes. After becoming a joint-stock corporation in 1930, they built their main branch in Shinjuku, the center of Tokyo. Their first foreign branch was opened in 1972 in Singapore, then in 1989 they formed an alliance with Barney’s New York. Now they have six stores in Japan and eight stores outside Japan.

*Isetan* is one of the most popular department stores in Japan. On weekends, you can find the store full with customers of different generations, though elsewhere department stores have lost their popularity with younger people. The cafés on each floor are full of customers at lunch-time, and people wait in long queues. The reason why they have succeeded in captivating the customers’ hearts is that they have created enjoyable spaces for customers to browse in.

In March, 2005, “Cinderella City” was renovated and renamed “CC Cinderella City”. When you move up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of “CC Cinderella City”,

you find a narrow hallway in front of you, which is called “*The Stage*”. Here representatives of one of the merchandisers on the floor can exhibit their products as they like. In July 2005, a brand producer placed mannequins with fashionable dresses for the season on both sides of the hallway, and then covered it with a red tunnel which looked like an arch. All customers coming up the escalator went through this tunnel into “CC Cinderella City”. It had the magical effect of making the customers feel as if they were entering a fantasy world and could become Cinderellas. “The Stage” is now on each floor and producers of one brand can use the space for their own exhibit.



CC Cinderella City (Isetan, Tokyo)



The Stage (Isetan, Tokyo)

The second floor of Isetan consists of 4 areas, including “CC Cinderella City”. According to the style of the brands, these areas are visually divided so that people walking around this floor can feel that they are moving into another “City”. “CC Cinderella City” is more romantic and girly than other areas. The walls and floors are painted in white and the lighting is brighter. In the area called “The Message”, brand producers seek to focus on the designers’ originality, and the space has a concrete floor and a bare ceiling like a warehouse. Though not as remarkable as the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, every floor demonstrates its own style to convey the image of the brand merchandise exhibited there.

Besides these visual strategies, Isetan department store has its own

linguistic strategies aimed at the customers. The names “CC Cinderella City” and “The Message” are just two of them. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, boutiques dealing in internationally famous top brands are placed. Here the floor is covered with marble-like tiles in order to create a fancy atmosphere, and each area has its own name such as “Le Boutique” for top brands, as well as “Import Plaza”, “Contemporary Garden”, “Orchid Plaza”, and “Elegance Plaza”. The expression “plaza” is also used in a Japanese shopping mall, Venus Fort. “Plaza” usually means a place with fountains or lively markets in the open air. The word is used to mean “space” or “place” in Japanese department stores and shopping malls, with the aim of creating a city-like atmosphere.

The same tendency can be observed in other department stores. In Shinjuku Takashimaya, they use the word “World” in naming each floor, including as “Designers’ World” and “Young World”. Shinjuku Takashimaya was built in 1996 as a complex connected with the buildings of a bookstore and a famous furniture dealer. The entire collection of buildings was named “Takashimaya Times Square”. A structure like this connecting several shopping buildings is not rare in American shopping malls but is uncommon in Japan. The same area was redeveloped in the 1990’s, but people have to cross a wide road in order to get there from Shinjuku Station. The success seems to be attributed to its park-like construction, and the problem of inconvenience of access from the station has been solved. After crossing the street in front of the station, moving walkways now take you to the department store. Each building is not excessively large, so people can easily move from one space to another. This complex shopping center has been successful in attracting a wide range of people.

Since it is located in the center of Tokyo, space is limited. A small alley has been created in front of the building and on it benches have been placed to resemble those in a park. Some people enjoy lunch there during the day, while others enjoy talking with their friends or their dates at night. At Christmas time, the alley is illuminated with lights and people enjoy the beautiful decorations. Arches formed of lights cover the street, and people

take in the view while walking under them. This “alley” is connected to the Southern Terrace with 2 bridges over the railway tracks. Southern Terrace is a walking street with some cafés and restaurants on each side. Southern Terrace and Takashimaya Times Square have a function similar to that of a park where people can just relax. This is similar to shopping malls in the USA, such as the Grove in LA, as I will discuss later.

The same concept of creating a city or a fantasy world in a department store is generally not found in the United States. Barneys New York, however, is an exception. It has a unique floor plan. As you go up the main escalator, you first see mannequins in fashionable dresses. They are arranged artistically and appear as objets d’art. One floor has accessories arranged around water tanks with tropical fish, while every other floor has a staircase in the middle leading to the next floor. It is not a “city” as in the sense of Japanese department stores, but it does convey a sense for customers of being at home in “the house”. The passage to the top floor is named “Chelsea Passage” and it is here that customers can enjoy the latest fashion brands surrounded by small, tasteful illustrations on the walls.

### 3.2. Sensitivity to the size of the clothes

Japanese department stores are also sensitive to the question of size. The expression “clover size” is used to mean big and tall sizes; “strawberry size” is used for smaller sizes. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, ready-made clothes were becoming the norm, replacing the former made-to-order clothes. Following this change, Isetan founded a laboratory for researching the appropriate sizes for Japanese people, and in 1965 Isetan, together with Takashimaya, decided on a unified size system. In 1968, they set up a section called “Lady Clover” for elderly women’s large size clothes, and then “Strawberry Shop” and “Young Clover” for younger women. Now, in the Shinjuku main branch, they have “Young Clover”, “Lady Clover”, “Better Clover”, and “Clover Plus” all signifying for the larger size for women. There are also “Tall Size” for tall women, and “Strawberry Shop” for small-

er women. As for men’s clothes, “Super Mens” is used for larger sizes, and “Tall Size” is used for men’s clothes in lengthier sizes.

Department Stores	Large Size	Small Size
Isetan	<i>lady / young clover</i>	<i>strawberry</i>
Takashimaya	<i>size plus</i>	<i>pearl size</i>
Keio	<i>lilac size</i>	<i>suzuran (lily of the valley) size</i>
Tokyu	<i>margaret size</i>	<i>queen size</i>

Figure 1. Japanese department stores and size designations

Almost all of the department stores avoid using language directly referring to large sizes. In Takashimaya, for example, they use “Size Plus” for young women’s larger sizes and “Your Size” for elderly women. They hope to avoid giving their customers an unpleasant feeling when shopping.

Another example of euphemisms in the department stores can be seen in the way the rest rooms are labelled. In Japanese department stores, several expressions are used. Some stores refer to *keshou-shitsu*, which means a make-up room, while others use only the icon of a man or woman. In the United States, several expressions are used as well. In the first class department stores of New York, “Lady Lounge” is an elegant expression meaning a rest room; however, Japanese rest rooms are clearly much more luxurious than American ones. They usually have an actual powder room with large mirrors and sofas.

As for linguistic aspects, the American department stores are much more restrained in their usage than those in Japan. I visited almost all the top-class department stores in New York, but I could not find any linguistic consideration for customers. American stores do not have a floor map, similar to a city map, which many Japanese stores have on each floor. The only exception which I could find was that of Macy’s in Boston. Some department stores do not even indicate the floor number. And in the shop lists of many department stores there is no designation for the number of the floor where the shops are. Also, department stores in the USA do not use any

special expressions for large sizes and small sizes. Only “petite” is used when referring to smaller and shorter sizes, whereas there are apparently no special expressions for large sizes.

## **4. Functions of shopping mall in the United States and Japan**

### 4.1. Looking for “the good old days”

As we have seen in Chapter 2, Japanese people look for a fantasy world in department stores. In 1998, however, a new-style shopping mall, Venus Fort, was built on empty land in the Tokyo Bay area. As its name suggests, this is the first shopping mall aimed exclusively at women in Japan. It shows clearly what Japanese people, especially people in a mega city like Tokyo long for. This shopping mall was designed by a group of American architects, Dougall Design Associates, who created a famous mall in Las Vegas, though the concepts of these two malls are not the same. In this chapter I would like to discuss differences in the aims for which people visit shopping malls in the United States and Japan.

First, I will trace the history of the shopping mall to justify why they came to be created. In the 1950’s, shopping malls began to appear in American suburbs where more and more people were moving to get away from big city centers. In the suburbs, residential and commercial areas are clearly segregated, and homes are farther from working places. From around the 1950s, cars naturally became a necessity of suburban life.

Victor Gruen is called the “father of shopping malls”. In 1950, in answer to the rise of the suburbs, this architect, an Austrian immigrant, created a new form of mall in north Seattle far away from the city center. The model for this mall was the shopping district of Vienna. Subsequently, he built Northland Shopping Center near Detroit in 1954, and Victor Guen’s Southdale Center in Minnesota in 1959. A mall is “a place where a collection of shops all adjoin a pedestrian area, or an exclusively pedestrian street, which allows shoppers to walk without interference from vehicle

traffic”, and people should enjoy walking there. This aspect of “enjoying walking” was something that people living in the suburbs of the United States had almost lost. Given their size, shopping malls reintroduced walking or strolling into the suburban lifestyle. LA has many indoor and outdoor shopping malls. I visited two outdoor malls, The Grove and Santa Monica Place.

The Grove is built on a unique concept. It has a special appeal to families with children because of its character that of an amusement park. It replicates an American town in the 30s or 40s and, at its center, there is a pond with a fountain. The street is vehicle-free, and there are road signs on the street showing the names. The street goes round the pond and shops are placed on both sides of the street. Next to the mall is the Farmer’s Market, which sells fresh fruit and vegetables, and has sushi and hamburger stands. Originally, this place was a market where farmers sold fruit and vegetables. Now a green train runs from the Farmers’ Market to the Grove. This shopping mall replicates a small dream town where adults can enjoy walking and riding the train, while families can enjoy themselves in a safe, clean park located in the facility.



Street Signs (The Grove, LA)



Green train (The Grove, LA)

Santa Monica Place is just an ordinary indoor shopping mall which contains Macy’s and Robinson’s May. It does, however, have the 3rd Street Promenade in front of it. This promenade is, of course, a vehicle-free, pedestrian promenade like the Grove. It takes advantage of its location and suc-

cessfully creates the atmosphere of a beach resort town. I found a street sign showing the direction to 2<sup>nd</sup> street & Ocean Avenue to the right, and 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> street to the left. Under the name of the streets, a list of the restaurants and stores is given. In the middle of the sign, it says “Look! There are more great restaurants and unique shops around every corner”. If it is an indoor shopping mall like Santa Monica Place next to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Street Promenade, there can be no “corners”. Indeed, the suburb itself doesn’t have “corners”<sup>1</sup>. As the word “corner store” indicates, “corners” are a very important place for town communication and the economy, but suburbanites have lost the “corners” because of the structure of suburban sprawl. According to Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck (2000, 188), “the (shopping mall) store is stocked with touching precision to match the neighborhood’s needs, so much so that it buys seven PowerBars each week to satisfy one resident’s daily habit – a small-scale exemplar of “just in time” inventory...A neighborhood-scale shopping center may be appropriate for a larger population or when adjacent to through traffic.” This phrase in the sign shows that it is a dream for Californians, who need cars to go anywhere, to enjoy walking in a safe, pleasant place where they are not bothered by cars. Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck argue that “It does not seem too optimistic to believe that Americans would spend more of their time on public pursuits if it were only more convenient”<sup>2</sup> and discuss how the American people enjoy Disney World. “According to one Disney architect, the average visitor spends only 3 percent of his time on rides or at shows. The remaining time is spent enjoying the precise commodity that people so sorely lack in their suburban hometowns: pleasant, pedestrian-friendly, public space and the sociability it engenders.”<sup>3</sup> Santa Monica Place provides them with that dream.



Street Sign (3<sup>rd</sup> street promenade, LA)

In Japan, open-air shopping malls are rare, because people do not have to go to malls to enjoy window shopping. One dated expression, *Ginbura*, was coined to signify enjoying a walk along Ginza Street, looking at the displays in retail store windows. In the late 1950's it was very fashionable for young people to carry out *Ginbura*. Even now, on weekends, traffic is closed to Ginza Street for the sake of pedestrians; however, the expression is now gradually dying out. This is not because Japanese people do not enjoy walking down the street, looking at show windows, but that they can have a similar experience in places other than the Ginza. On the other hand, this pastime is something that American suburbanites have lost, and this loss provides the background for the linguistic strategies in many American shopping malls, such as the Grove and 3rd Street Promenade.

#### 4.2. Escape from daily life

While the outdoor shopping mall reflects the customers' nostalgia for past times that have been lost due to the suburban car life of the United States suburbs, the new Japanese shopping mall built in the Tokyo Bay area symbolizes what Japanese are longing for. In the present section, I would like to focus on the new mall named Venus Fort.

Venus Fort was built in August, 1999 in the Tokyo Bay area of Odaiba. It takes about half an hour by train from the center of Tokyo to reach and is the first theme-park style shopping mall in Japan. The interior is designed in the image of the streets of 17<sup>th</sup> century southern France. It was created by a group of American designers, Dougall Design Associates, who also designed Forum Shops in Las Vegas. While the Forum Shops complex was designed in the image of ancient Rome and aimed at spurring people to the casino linked to the mall, the target of Venus Fort is young working women who are most likely to spend their disposable incomes on shopping. Venus Fort takes good advantage of the enclosed shopping mall and makes the shopper feel as if she has been transported into another world. Three main streets, Green Avenue, orange Avenue, and Broad Avenue, stretch out from

the Fountain Plaza in the center of the mall. It is said that Venus will make your wishes come true and twice a day the staff members, Attendant Crew, give “Lucky Coins” to the shoppers so that they can throw them into the fountain and make a wish. On the show windows of each store a number is written which resembles a house number, making it easier for the customers to find specific stores. In fact, shops or houses in Japanese towns do not have such numbers on the wall and, as a result, these numbers make customers feel as if they were not in Japan. The ceiling is controlled by computers like the sky, the lighting changes from morning to night.

In this mall customers quite naturally feel like taking pictures and are encouraged to do so. There is a place called the Happy Flower Chair, on which people can take pictures while seated. It is located in front of the Church Plaza, where people can also have their wedding ceremony performed. This practice is very different from that of department stores. In the latter, people are strictly prohibited from taking pictures, even those of escalators or store signs. In Venus Fort, taking pictures also makes the shoppers feel as if they are visiting a new city.



House number



Ceiling



Street signs



*Attendant Crew*

This structure of Venus Fort is very similar to that of Disneyland. Staff members are called “Attendant Crew”, and are clothed in red, as they greet customers with smiles. They remind one of staff in Disneyland. The concept itself is that of an amusement park, so the presence of these smiling people is not surprising. However, their behavior is very different from that of Japanese sales clerks who are supposed to be polite, yet not too friendly or casual. The duty of the Attendant Crew is to answer any questions from customers; however, they also seem to play a part in creating a fantasy world.

## 5. Conclusion – fantasy or good old days

As we have seen, the department stores and shopping malls in Japan and the United States reflect the differences in what people expect. In Japan, people would like to run away from their daily life and steep themselves in an exotic atmosphere. Thus, we can see a “city” in the store, an overuse of foreign words and of euphemisms for something that may cause embarrassment. These places show how Japanese people are readily attracted by a novel atmosphere created with foreign words and phrases,

but it also shows that Japanese customers look for something more than just commercial goods when shopping.

In contrast, Americans seem to be seeking a peaceful heaven in the store, which represents an idealized daily life. Because of this tendency, an increasing number of Americans refrain from shopping in department stores. More and more people living in the suburbs rush to shopping malls, which provide them with the illusion of living a happy and peaceful lifestyle. As a result of the suburban life style, they are looking for what they have lost in their “car communities”.

### Notes

- 1 Duany, A., Plater-Zyberk, E., and Speck, E. (2000, 23) shows the figure of sprawl versus the traditional neighborhood. It indicates that “in contrast to the traditional network of many walkable streets, the sprawl model not only eliminates pedestrian connections, but focuses all traffic onto a single road.”
- 2 *Ibid*, p 63.
- 3 *Ibid*, p 64.

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