

Japanese Writing System II

Hiroshi Nara

In another essay, I discussed some of the facts about the origin and history of the Japanese writing system. Here, I would like to delve further into the development of the Japanese writing system by looking first into the changes in writing styles through history. Next, I will discuss as well systems of marking used to indicate voicing of consonants, as well as some explanations for the emergence of a use of kanji for its sound value only, a practice similar in principle to man'yōgana. Finally, I would like to indicate some aspects of the use of furigana, an orthographic convention which indicates the pronunciation of unfamiliar kanji. This section then concludes with a short discussion of jindai moji, a writing system thought to have existed before the arrival of kanji.

Styles of Writing

Over many centuries, the Japanese written language has consisted of many styles of writing, ranging from pure Chinese writing, to a mixture of Chinese and Japanese elements, and then to a system that is more overtly Japanese. By the Nara period (710-794), Japanese scribes had already created diverse ways of writing the Japanese language. During this time the language of choice for official documents was Chinese, so documents in this genre were written in best literary Chinese Japanese scholars could muster, using both Chinese syntax and vocabulary. This style was called junkanbuntai or pure Chinese (純漢文体). In other genres of writing, people also wrote in modified Chinese called hentaikanbuntai (変体漢文体), where the writer used keigo (deferential language) in Japanese word order, interspersing annotative and diacritical words to indicate the particular functions of words in a sentence (such as phrase particles). It contained many elements from both Chinese and Japanese.

Closer to the Japanese end of the continuum, another mixed style, called senmyōtai (宣命体) developed. In the style of writing, used mainly in various imperial edicts including those used in ceremonies, substantives, adverbs, connectives, modifiers, and the stems of conjugated words were written largely in kanji and the rest written small in man'yōgana. During the Heian period (794-1185) and later, this style came to be used for some official proclamations of temples and shrines, letters of appointment, personal letters, and congratulatory texts. This writing style formed the foundation of a style called wakan konkōbun—a mixed writing style containing both Japanese and Chinese elements (that is, Chinese compounds, Japanese vocabulary, and colloquial

expressions prevalent during the period)—which exhibits characteristics that are very similar to contemporary writing conventions.

A fourth type, *kanabuntai*, was entirely written in hiragana (仮名文体), in which most, if not all, was written in *man'yōgana*, using purely Japanese grammar. Personal letters were typically written in this style. In the early poetic collection, the *Man'yōshū*, some words were written for meaning (place names, titles, and other substantives such as 月 and 潮, as we recall from another essay on the Japanese writing system in this module), while particles, inflectional/derivational endings, and auxiliaries were written in *man'yōgana*. This type of writing is not easily classifiable by the above scheme but in terms of its function, it occupied a central position among unofficial types of writing. During the Heian period (794-1185) official documents continued to be written in *kanbun*. War chronicles, diaries, records, personal diaries, official documents, and letters were written in *hentai kanbuntai* (see above). This style, although it sometimes included kana, was written primarily in kanji. *Taketori monogatari* (The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter), widely acknowledged as the first work of fiction to be written in Japan, dating from around 800, was written in *kanabuntai*.

This confused mixture of various writing styles, whose choice was dictated by genre and purpose, changed only somewhat over time. In summary, we may say that there were two main streams of writing styles, one best termed Chinese and another Japanese. Note that the Japanese spoke only Japanese, so the writing style that more truly reflected it in any given historical period was not Chinese, since it is believed that few Chinese compounds were used in daily conversation. When people set down their thoughts, however, they went into the writing mode of language use, which normally meant using more Chinese vocabulary and adding appropriate Chinese syntax to their writing. This gap between the spoken and written modes of language still remains quite large today, much wider than one would find, say, in English or French.

The Japanese did try to bring written Japanese closer to spoken Japanese for the first time during the Meiji period (*genbun'itchi* movement). Proposed in the first years of Meiji by such advocates as Maejima Hisoka (1835-1919) and later joined by scholar Kanda Takahira (1830-1898) and writers Yamada Bimyō (1868-1910) and Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909), this movement gained political momentum. Its development was spurred by the government's decision to adopt spoken Japanese as the main style of exposition in school textbooks beginning in Meiji 36. By the Taishō period (1912-1925) newspapers began to write their editorials in this spoken style.

Diacritics

During the Heian period (794-1185), writing began to indicate the voicing of a consonant. What is meant by this term? An example will clarify. Consider /ka/ and /ga/. The consonants /k/ and /g/ are "homorganic consonants," that is, they are consonants produced at the same place in the mouth and in the same manner. They are different only in that /k/ is voiced and /g/ is not. The writing system, hiragana or katakana, did not indicate this voicing distinction in writing during its first stages; the reader was therefore required to know when to use the consonant /k/ and when not to use the voiced version /g/ from the larger context. In other words, /ka/ and /ga/ were written exactly the same way (if the reader already knows Japanese, this would be like writing か for both か and が in contemporary Japanese), even though the voicing difference could differentiate meaning. Why was voicing not indicated? Perhaps it was due to the fact that skilled users of the language can correctly obtain the missing information (voicing, in this case) from the surrounding contextual information (Skilled English reader can read this sentence.) During the Heian period, however, one or two dots were written next to a character to mark the voicing of the consonant, to make clear in some ambiguous cases of pronunciation. The double dots for marking voicing came to be more commonly used in the Edo period (1603-1868).

Along the same line, the writing system began to make use of a small diacritic circle to indicate a change from /h/ to /p/, which became widely adopted in the second half of the Edo period in such popular publications as kibyōshi, ninjōbon and other types of popular writing (gesaku). For instance the moras /pa pi pu pe po/ are each written by adding a small circle diacritic to hiragana or katakana /ha hi hu he ho/ respectively (ぱぴぷぺぽ and パピプペポ). One might wonder how the consonant /h/ is related to /p/. The reason relates to the development of the consonant /p/, where /h/ is generally accepted to have come from /p/ by a process of weakening. One may say that this historical process is still exhibited in the writing system. For example, the counter for long cylindrical objects -hon in /ip-pon/, /ni-hon/, /san-bon/, where you can see /h/, /b/, /p/ alternate in pronunciation. Showing voicing in the writing system as well as writing the small circle diacritic is now a standard practice, except in calligraphic writing.

Ateji

One interesting phenomenon that began to occur during Kamakura and Muromachi eras (1185-1568) was ateji. The term ateji refers to a practice of writing Japanese in kanji disregarding their meanings of the characters altogether. Ateji therefore is a bit like man'yōgana, except that in the case of ateji two or more morae are typically associated with a kanji. Early examples include asamashi 'shameful' 浅増, aramashi 'will not probably be' 荒猿, itohoshi 'lovely' 糸惜, hakanashi 'short-lived' 無墓, mutukashi 'difficult' 六借.

Take the first compound *asamashi*, for instance. Here the characters 浅 'shallow' and 増 'increase' each has the kun reading *asa* and *mashi*. (Recall that in *man'yōgana* the sounds borrowed were Chinese, or the on reading.) The sounds of these characters add up to *asamashi*, but not the meaning; that is, 'shallow' plus 'increase' does not make 'shameful.' Naturally *ateji* are not Chinese compounds; if they happen to represent Chinese, their meanings will be totally different from Japanese. Such liberal use of kanji was practiced even more rampantly in the print culture through the Edo period (1603-1868) and later, when a large number of printed books came to be published to satisfy people's needs in an increasingly consumer oriented, urban society.

Today, although the use of *ateji* is well and alive, it is a usage practice to be avoided, at least according to the educators of the language. I will come back to this issue a little later, in discussing the relationship between *jukujikun* and *ateji*.

Furigana

Furigana refers to the practice of writing, in hiragana or katakana, the pronunciation of a kanji next to the kanji. In some texts, the on reading for a Chinese compound is written on the right side in katakana. The meaning (that is, the kun reading) of the compound in Japanese was written on the left side of the compound. This enabled those with limited knowledge of Chinese compounds could still understand the texts by referring to the kun reading, which represented its meaning in Japanese. Here are some examples.

膂力 リョウリョク ちから power, strength

皇子 ワウジ みこ prince

嘆賞 タンセウ をどろきほめる praise

賞賛 ショウサン ほめる praise

討論 トウロン はなしあふ discuss

慚愧 ザンギ はずる shame

晦矇 クワイモウ まつくら total darkness

霹靂 ヘキレキ いかづち thunder

飛禽 ヒキン とり bird

廊下 ロウカ ほそどの corridor

脚半 アユヒ きゃはん leggings

獵夫 サツヲ かりびと hunter

Furigana practice in which both the on and kun readings are indicated as above is now rare, but the use of furigana as a pronunciation aid is still commonly used today. In contemporary usage, furigana is added to the right side of a compound when the text is written vertically to show its pronunciation (usually in hiragana if the pronunciation is kun, katakana if on). Furigana is given right above the compound if the text is oriented horizontally.

Jukujikun

Jukujikun is closely related to the first example cited for furigana. It refers to writing the Japanese name for a Chinese compound next to the word in kana and to the practice of reading of Chinese compounds by their equivalents in Japanese. For instance, 梅雨 is a Chinese compound referring to sustained rains that fall on Japan in the month of June. Its on reading (i.e., Chinese pronunciation adopted into Japanese) is baiu (Ch. meiyu). The native Japanese word for this seasonal rain is tsuyu. As in the case of ateji, no mora in tsuyu is related to any traditional pronunciations of these two characters. When the word 梅雨 is used in a text, it may be accompanied by its kun reading tsuyu as its furigana.

This jukujikun - the practice of showing a Japanese equivalent of a Chinese compound as furigana or reading it in a Japanese way - has come to serve another purpose. Consider 拳銃 'handgun, pistol'. You may find this word in a murder mystery appearing with furigana of チャカ chaka. Chaka is a slang word for a handgun. What is happening here is that a normal, common compound known to everyone is assigned here a different pronunciation. This is a device to show that the author not only would like the word 拳銃 be read as chaka, but also attempts to clue in the reader that, in the world of criminals, handguns are referred to by a slang word chaka. This is a bit like abbreviated footnoting. A comparable situation in English might be that the word "heat" ("He is packing heat") in a murder mystery is annotated with the word gun. Authors nowadays have taken advantage of this annotation system. Thus the same character 女 may be given a number of different readings. If none is given, it has the standard variety of pronunciations—onna, jo, or nyo. When furigana is given, the reading depends entirely on what the author would like the reader to conjure up - it could be suke (slang, girlfriend) in a murder mystery, burondo (a blond), yatsu (that woman) in a novel in which the woman is referred to casually, or senyōrita (a young girl in Spanish) in a diary of someone traveling to Puerto Rico. Similarly, a trendy word IT (abbreviation of information technology) in IT 革命 "IT revolution" may not be immediately comprehensible to the Japanese reader, so the writer may give it an innovative furigana,

right above IT, such as 情報技術 or 情報テクノロジー, both of which are Japanese equivalents for "information technology."

Reading Japanese may be said to require a lot of gymnastics and contortions of this sort; and indeed those techniques for expressing meaning do require some getting used to.

Jindai moji

Jindai moji 神代文字 (lit. "writing dating from the mythological times") is a term still in use which refers to the writing system purported to have been in place to write Japanese before the introduction of Chinese characters. This would of course predate Japanese missions to China. First described in Kannahi fumi no tutae 神字日文伝 in 1819 by the famous Tokugawa scholar Hirata Atsutane (平田篤胤, 1776-1843), his historical theories have now been discounted as having no real credibility. Jindai moji contains symbols for only 47 sounds. This corresponds to the number of existing kana at the beginning of the 19th century, a fact which aroused suspicion. Many scholars now think that classical Japanese had an eight vowel system, and the 47 symbols would therefore not have been adequate. More troublesome still is the fact that there are no extant documents written with this set of characters. The symbols used in jindai moji resemble those in Hangul, the phonetic writing system of Korea, and it is speculated that Hirata obtained his initial inspiration from that script for inventing jindai moji.

Parenthetically Hangul is a system of phonetic script that uses consonant and vowel symbols to write Korean. Any Korean syllable can be written by combing a consonant symbol with the appropriate vowel symbol. Invented in 1446 by a committee of scholars commissioned by the King Sejong to create a writing system to replace Ido (a system like Japanese at the time, a mixture of simplified kanji to represent sound and Chinese characters), Hangul was able to replace the then prevalent use of Chinese characters. It was not until 1945, however, when Korea gained its independence from Japan, that Hangul officially supplanted the Chinese characters (Kor. hanja) completely. Hangul has now ten vowel symbols and fourteen consonant symbols, a combination of which is capable of representing Korean in its entirety.

Hiroshi Nara

Hiroshi Nara is Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages & Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh. His research interests are 20th century Japanese intellectual history and modernity, particularly the development of aesthetic categories and their political implications before World War II.

Suggested Reading

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