

# **The Creation of the Modern Japanese Language in Meiji-Era**

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A way to look at the history of the modern Japanese language is to look at what came before and after 1903. This year represents a fundamental division in our understanding of the Japanese language and, by extension, Japanese culture. The reforms instituted in 1903 represented an effort by the Japanese Meiji government to promote a mutually comprehensible language. At the turn of the twentieth century, there were at least four different ways of rendering the language in the written form. It is easy to imagine that this was a serious impediment to the economic, political and cultural development of Japan. Indeed, it is hard to characterize Japan as a modern nation-state until it gained a common form of communication. Today, the Japanese language is a source of national pride and occupies a special position in the national consciousness of the Japanese. The purpose of this essay is to describe how a common form of communication—both in the written and spoken forms—came into existence in Japan. We will discuss what motivated the ruling elite of Japan to make such a change, how the various forms of the language were altered to create modern Japanese, and some of the prominent people and events which will assist us in more fully understanding the movement.

## **A Short History**

Before describing how modern Japanese assumed its contemporary appearance around the turn of the 20th century, it might be best to describe the various prior forms and how they came to influence the modern form. Perhaps the most important concept to know is that the Chinese language was the single greatest influence on the Japanese language. Before the time that Japanese civilization was beginning to coalesce in the 6th and 7th centuries A.D., Japan had a spoken language, but no written language. As Japan's ruling elites learned more and more about the brilliance of China through their envoys abroad, they determined to adopt the written form of the Chinese language as a tool to help govern the Japanese people. After all, the Chinese language represented both a way to communicate in writing—something any government requires—and the glory of the Chinese Tang Dynasty—the world's greatest civilization at the time. The Japanese would later call this language kanbun—Chinese writing.

Kanbun became the language of officialdom and of the imperial household during the Nara period (A.D. 710-784). It was one of the means through which the ancient government sought to legitimize its rule and assert its authority. By bringing writing to a people who had none, kanbun also represented civilization. In time, it came to occupy much the same position in Japan as Latin did in Europe. Later, Chinese characters were

also modified to serve as Japanese writing (syllabary). Initially, the Japanese imperial court employed immigrant scribes to act as chroniclers and to help conduct the business of state. Naturally, the need arose over time to train more people to read and write the language. However, the rigors of learning such a difficult foreign language led to the development of many variant forms. Often, sentence structure was modified to reflect a writing style that more closely approximated Japanese grammar. Even at this early stage of language development, the various shades of kanbun had begun to blur. Nonetheless, knowledge of the language offered access to power. Many strove to master it. Those who did so were revered as learned, erudite men. By the next historical period, the Heian era (A.D. 794-1185), kanbun had become the language of the elite, the cultured and the refined.

Kanbun, in one form or another, continued to evolve in Japan. One thousand one hundred years after its introduction, it still retained its position as the most learned form of writing. While its fortunes rose and fell based on the political, social and economic conditions in Japan, as late as the mid-nineteenth century, it was still considered the most proper form of expression. It continued to be closely associated with the state and the power of the elites. During the Edo era (A.D. 1600-1868), because of the Tokugawa revival of Confucianism, kanbun's popularity and widespread usage rivaled that of the Heian period among the ruling class. However, few even in this class still wrote in pure Chinese. Indeed, official documents were often written in a variant form called wakankonkōbun (a hybrid form which uses Chinese characters as nouns, verbs, and kana syllabary for verb endings and other elements). As Japan was ushered into modernity with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, kanbun began to lose its authority. The successful Chinese models of the previous centuries could no longer offer solutions to the problems faced by the Meiji leadership. The demands of creating a modern nation-state made difficult the maintenance of a language built upon an archaic, aristocratic form of writing with few links to the spoken language. Although other forms of writing existed, including sōrōbun and the gesaku forms, no one written (or spoken) form was used by everyone in Japan. Other genres of writing such as poetry and diaries in literature were done in yet another style of writing.

## **A Script Reform**

In the years immediately following the Meiji Restoration, the new leadership had other, more pressing tasks to complete before they could move on to the reform of the Japanese written language. They were engaged in the creation of a state strong enough to protect itself from the imperial designs of the Western powers. However, the ruling elites discovered after a couple of decades of reform that although Japan had become strong enough to protect its national sovereignty, it could not catch up with the Western powers without having a strong educational system. This could only happen if the

language itself—the actual mode of transmission for new knowledge—was up to the task. Instead, the Japanese language in the early decades of the Meiji era can best be described as being in a state of chaos. Communication difficulties were compounded in the written form because the various spoken dialects bore little resemblance to kanbun. Literacy rates were very low perhaps because one had to master approximately 10,000 characters in order to be considered fully competent in kanbun. Of course, some segments of Japanese society were literate in their own dialect and many, particularly in the Osaka and Tokyo areas, used the language for commerce. Those with training in a specific job or profession could also communicate. For example, doctors could communicate with doctors, merchants with merchants, craftsmen with craftsmen and priests with priests. Nonetheless, as Japan entered the Meiji era, it needed the written and spoken forms of the language that were capable of acting as a unifying force for the new nation.

Though several prominent language-reform advocates had begun to consider how written Japanese might best be reformed, the ruling elites could reach no consensus in the first two decades of the Meiji era. Men of renown such as Maejima Hisoka (1835-1919), Mori Arinori (1847-1889) and Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901) had suggested ways the official Japanese language (kanbun) might be simplified or somehow made more accessible to the average Japanese citizen. Mori, who would later become Minister of Education, had even considered a proposal to substitute English for Japanese! Nishi Amane (1829-1897), a prominent script-reform advocate of the era, recommended the abandonment of Chinese characters and that the Latin alphabet be adopted to write Japanese.

However, most of the options floated by educators, scholars and government officials were much more moderate and included such possibilities as the abandonment of Chinese characters and the exclusive use of Japanese syllabary (kana). None of these options was ultimately adopted.

The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 acted as a catalyst to spur late Meiji-era policymakers to consider seriously how the Japanese language could be made to act as a positive force for strengthening the nation. Though the Japanese won, it became clear that the military sometimes could not communicate as quickly or efficiently as possible. In addition, Japan had just defeated the nation from which kanbun had originated. Therefore, many of the policymakers no longer felt the same reluctance to abandon the ancient Chinese forms of writing as in the previous decades of the Meiji era. The question remained however, what would emerge as the modern form of the language--and who would decide what it would be?

By the late 1890s, the numerous options which had been bandied about by language-reformers in the early Meiji years had been narrowed to two. Either they would select a simplified version of the classical language (futsūbun) or a written form of the colloquial language spoken by upper-class residents of Tokyo (genbun'itchi, which literally means "unity of the spoken and written language"). Advocates of these two forms competed to decide the future of the language. Since genbun'itchi would ultimately become the national standard, let us first examine the movement which led to the creation of this form.

## **Genbun'itchi Undō and Futsūbun**

Many authors and educators in the middle Meiji years had grown tired of attempting to manipulate kanbun and began to experiment with a new writing system they hoped would be both capable of conveying ideas found in the new Japan and acceptable in polite society. As more and more examples of English, German, French and Russian novels began to appear in Japan after the Meiji Restoration, it became clear that novelists writing in every other language, including Chinese, used a written form closely linked to the spoken language. Translators in Japan experienced great difficulty rendering these works into one of the classical forms. Japanese literary specialists therefore began to cultivate an interest in developing a writing style more closely approximating spoken Japanese. The problem with kanbun was both syntactic and conceptual. The classical forms were not elastic enough to incorporate into the text modern ideas having no ancient antecedent. Translators were therefore seldom able to convey more than the basic story, thereby stripping many works of their essential qualities.

In the 1880s, a number of young authors became interested in creating a writing style that was true to contemporary use. Perhaps the most important is Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909). While still a student, Futabatei began working on translations of several works from Russian into Japanese, including those written by Ivan Turgenev and Nikolai Gogol. However, he discovered he was unable to convey effectively their essence using one of the classical forms of Japanese. Accordingly, he decided to render them into the colloquial but had been frustrated by the lack of a suitable form. He struggled to determine which of the spoken dialects would be most appropriate. Because no adequate language structures existed, he could not even decide on basic sentence structure. Following the advice of Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935), a friend and fellow author, Futabatei constructed a new style based on the performances of San'yūtei Enchō (1839-1900), a famous yose (Japanese vaudeville) performer of rakugo story-telling, who allowed his stories to be transcribed.

Futabatei began writing his work, *Ukigumo* (The Drifting Cloud, 1887-1889), with the intention of rendering the spoken form of the upper class Tokyo dialect into written form. In the first section of his three-part novel, Futabatei was unable, for the most part, to put aside his classical training and use the colloquial style. However, by the time he reached the third section of his novel two years later, he had decided on the colloquial verb ending and had purged much of the classical vocabulary from his writing. His work received high praise from fellow writers and literature specialists of the time. Today, scholars such as Marleigh Grayer Ryan consider *Ukigumo* Japan's first modern novel. While the problem of the *genbun'itchi* style had not yet been resolved, Futabatei had produced a prototype. Other writers such as Yamada Bimyō (1868-1910), Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), Saganoya Omuro (1863-1947), among others, would use this form of Japanese that was more closely aligned with the actual use of language.

The *futsūbun* (ordinary language) movement was initiated, in large part, in reaction to the radical reform of the *genbun'itchi* advocates. As more and more language reform activists embraced the idea of reforming Japanese, it became clear to more moderate elements that the Japanese language was inevitably going to undergo some sort of change. One of the primary advocates of *futsūbun* was Ochiai Naobumi (1861-1903). Naobumi was a well-known poet, a professor at Tōkyō Senmon Gakkō (the institution which would later become Waseda University) and editor of several literary journals. He embraced the traditional arts in Japan--especially the language. But he too could recognize that language reform was imminent and wanted to take part in the process. Naobumi sought a "middle way," one that retained the traditions of the classical forms but which would be more accessible for those Japanese with a rudimentary education. Speaking later on this, Donald Keene, the preeminent English-language scholar of Japanese literature, wrote that Naobumi's orthodox training in the Japanese classics prevented him from breaking completely with tradition.

Naobumi was an active member of the *Nihon bunshōkai*, a group dedicated to the advancement of traditional Japanese writing. He, along with several other textbooks authors who were members of this organization, assembled with the express purpose of creating a written language that could be used in primary and middle school textbooks. They decided ultimately that *futsūbun* was to be a modernized version of classical Japanese (*wabun*) with a significant percentage of vocabulary coming from *kanbun*. They began to write textbooks using this form and cornered the market for several years. The *futsūbun* version of Japanese became, for approximately fifteen years, the language used in the majority of primary school textbooks and newspapers in Meiji Japan. In this way, *futsūbun* began to replace the classical forms of the written language and emerged to become the dominant form of written Japanese during the last years of the nineteenth century.

In March of 1900, the Imperial Society for Education (Japan's premier educational lobbying organization) launched the Genbun'itchi Society for the purposes of promoting the colloquial style in fields other than literature. They were convinced that even futsūbun, the classical standard agreed upon by a consensus of intellectuals and linguists in the early 1890s, needed to be abandoned. In the Society's official records, the goals of the organization can be found. First, the members were to decide on a standard language. Second, they were to help diffuse the genbun'itchi form by writing contributions to newspapers and magazines using the colloquial style. Third, they were to write using the colloquial style in all correspondence.

Finally, they were to recruit new members. The membership roll of this organization was impressive and included cabinet-level officials such as Maejima Hisoka, Prince Konoe Atsumaro (1863-1904), Kikuji Dairoku, and Katō Hiroyuki (1836-1916). Other members included prominent educators such as Yano Fumio, Ueda Kazutoshi (1867-1937), Haga Yaichi (1867-1927), Inoue Tetsujirō (1855-1944), Ōtsuki Fumihiko (1847-1928), Miyake Yonekichi (1860-1929), and Shiratori Kurakichi (1865-1942). The Genbun'itchi Society acted as a high-powered advocacy group and petitioned the Diet, unsuccessfully in 1901 and 1902, to create a government-sponsored oversight body to investigate Japanese. However, in 1903, they were successful in petitioning the Diet to create and fund Kokugo chōsa iinkai (National Language Research Council). Though this council has changed names several times and did not meet annually, a successor exists today in Japan.

## **National Language Research Council**

The National Language Research Council (NLRC) of 1903 was led by Ueda Kazutoshi and Ōtsuki Fumihiko. Its official mandate was to investigate the Japanese language and determine which of the various dialects, if any, would be suitable to become the national standard. Though the wording in the directive was left intentionally vague to head off any early criticism from detractors outside of the capital, the committee members themselves presupposed that the Tokyo dialect, in part or in whole, would be adopted as the national standard. The NLRC also codified grammar, decided upon the fine points of writing characters, and agreed on standard pronunciation. In addition, the Council considered the continuing problem of the large number of kanji and their complexity. The members of this council were not revolutionaries. Most were very prominent educators, journalists and government officials. They reformed the language in a way that best suited the interests of the education system and the centralized state.

For NLRC manager Ueda Kazutoshi, language reform for its own sake was only one portion of the task to be completed. As an ardent ideologue, Ueda also firmly believed that the newly reformed language had to be successfully implemented, i.e., that all

Japanese had both to learn and accept the language. These tasks could only be completed through the educational system, which was itself undergoing reform. Education Minister Kikuchi Dairoku, also a member of the Genbun'itchi Society, just happened to be in office at the same time a national curriculum for primary schools all over Japan was being implemented. This gave the NLRC even more influence. In 1903, Kikuchi instructed the textbook committee of the Ministry of Education to produce primary school textbooks written in the genbun'itchi style. These, of course, would be used by all students nationwide as they learned Japanese. By 1905, this series of textbooks had begun to find their way into classrooms all over Japan. The grammar of the language codified by the original NLRC and which first appeared in textbooks around 1905 still yields considerable authority.

By giving government sanction to use the genbun'itchi style in the national curriculum, and due to the efforts of the National Language Research Council, the foundation of modern Japanese had been laid. Nevertheless, both Ueda and Kikuchi knew that the task of teaching an entire nation a new language would take decades. Only government institutions could apply sufficient power to the various national institutions for the span of years required to make a national standard language possible.

### **Post-war Language Policy**

Since all languages have an organic quality to them, modern Japanese has not remained unchanged since the time of the reform movement outlined above. In particular, during the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945-1952), linguists and policymakers considered a number of options that would have continued the process of language reform. Indeed, some language-reform advocates resurrected radical reform initiatives which had first appeared in the Meiji period. These included such ideas as the total abandonment of kanji, the adoption of the Roman alphabet, and the even the substitution of a Western language for Japanese. Again, these radical reforms were rejected. However, education officials and linguists did take several steps that have continued to make Japanese more accessible to the average Japanese with rudimentary education. In particular, limiting the number of kanji and simplifying them has been an important innovation. For example, students in Japan today are no longer required to learn 4,000-5,000 characters as was the case in the prewar era. Instead, the Japanese government has approved a list of 1,945 kanji for "general use" called the jōyō kanji. All students who graduate from Japanese public high schools know at least these characters. Other steps have been taken as well, including the continued standardization of foreign proper nouns and orthography.

Linguists, educators and Japanese government officials continue to monitor trends within the language and occasionally initiate or codify some changes. Nonetheless,

modern Japanese--the language advocated by Futabatei Shimei and championed by linguists such as Ueda Kazutoshi in the Meiji era--continues to act as a unifying force for the nation of Japan. Indeed, it is one of the markers identifying the culture and society of Japan.

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