

Contemporary Japan

Challenges for a World Economic Power in Transition

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An Ancient Writing System for Modern Japan

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Abstract This essay deals with what we could call 'the adequacy of a writing system to the society it serves'. It is intended to be a sociolinguistic approach to writing, which is, however, seldom tackled by modern linguists. In other words, the question can be reformulated as: 'How does the mixed logophonographic *kanji-kana majiri* writing system presently used in Japan work in modern Japanese society? And, above all, does it fulfil its task or is it too cumbersome, causing difficulty in learning and manipulation? Or, on the contrary, is it too poor, causing inadequacy and ambiguity?'

Summary 1. An Outline of the Problem. – 2. Japanese Writing System in Modern Society. – 3. A Different Approach to Japanese Writing System. – 4. Concluding Remarks. – Appendix.

1 An Outline of the Problem

I will discuss the case of the modern Japanese writing system by starting with two fundamental points, one a statement and one a question:

1. The writing system of present-day Japan is ancient (statement);
2. Considering the first point, how does this ancient writing system work in modern Japanese society? (question).

As to the first point, there are good reasons to support the view that the present-day Japanese writing system is ancient. If we look at the Latin alphabet, we can acknowledge that it is without a doubt ancient, even more ancient than the system used by the Japanese.

We may argue over the meaning of 'ancient' in reference to a writing system. Actually, it has a double meaning: 1. The characters have a long history. 2. The 'system' – how it works or how it is related to the spoken language – has developed in ancient times, and has remained ossified at an old stage. Of course, here I am referring to the second case.

As regards the English writing system, for example, nobody can deny that it is typical of the second case since it represents language at an older stage, and has remained fixed at that stage. The question, then, is the reciprocal relation between a writing system and language.

The present-day Japanese writing system, which was also developed in ancient times, has remained fundamentally unchanged up to now, and has influenced the spoken language.

In fact, what we now call *kanji-kana majiri*, a mixed form of writing with sinograms (*kanji*) and phonetic characters (*kana*), was developed many centuries ago, and became the most widespread form of *buntai*, or written style with the name of *wakan konkōbun* – a sort of mixed Sino-Japanese – from around the beginning of the thirteenth century. This system prevailed from then on, and, notwithstanding many changes and reforms in recent times, maintained its basic structure.

The Japanese language has a mixed vocabulary of *kango* and *wago*, or ‘Chinese words’ and ‘Japanese words’. The former must be written in sinograms, whereas the latter can also be written phonetically, as well as the functional parts of the language. Therefore, until now, the contemporary use of sinograms and Japanese syllabic alphabet has remained unavoidable, complicating the matter of writing in Japan.

The success of *wakan konkōbun* from the Kamakura period (1192-1333) onwards, superseded the largely phonographic writing system that had been used previously. Although this former system could have become the model for the modern writing system, for various reasons, it did not, and a gap developed between the spoken and written language. This is a gap that continues to be present today.

In the Meiji period (1868-1912), when the Latin alphabet began to spread in Japan, the ‘problem of a difficult writing system’ came strongly to the fore. Many intellectuals and politicians strove to change it, or rather, to simplify it. Though they had little success in the beginning, in recent years many reforms were carried out. This nevertheless, the Japanese writing system continues to be considered one of the most complicated existing in the world today, if not the most complicated. The complexity of the modern Japanese writing system has caused a series of significant consequences. However, before dealing with the ‘consequences’, let us briefly examine what is intended by ‘complicated’.

Complication derives from the following factors:

1. contemporaneous use of different types of characters;
2. difficulty of standardisation and presence of many non-standard forms;
3. large number of sinograms (notwithstanding the presence of restrictive lists) in general use;
4. unstable relationship between sinograms and syllabic alphabet;
5. personal inclinations in writing.

Much of the complication comes from the hybrid nature of this writing system, which combines two different kinds of characters, logographs (sinograms) and phonograms (*kana* syllabaries). An additional source of difficulty is the non-standard use and reading of characters developed in the past and still utilised today. In fact, the many strata of non-standard and learned variations that have accumulated over the centuries have never been eliminated or simplified. In both the spoken and written languages,

the Japanese have continued to maintain ossified forms, expressions, styles and words because they are considered a source of cultural richness.

2 Japanese Writing System in Modern Society

Now, let's turn to the second point by trying to answer the following question: how does this ancient writing system work in Japanese modern society?

The general principle for the evaluation of the efficacy and adequacy of a writing system in modern society regards its capacity to manipulate and transmit information in a convenient, quick and efficient manner. This demands a rapid, widespread and smooth dissemination of information throughout society. Language in modern society has a primarily communicative role. It allows easy communication among the members of society and facilitates the ever-increasing flux of information.

If we consider that the function of writing consists mainly in conveying information, we must conclude that the Japanese writing system is cumbersome, difficult and complex (see Hirai 1998). Therefore, it is scarcely adequate to the task of bringing about the clear and swift exchange of information necessary in a modern society. It is a hindrance to smooth communication both within Japanese society and abroad. The transmission of information and the communicative roles would be better carried out by a light and simple writing system with a strong logical structure.

An ideal writing system should be:

1. standardised (in order to enhance communication and prevent miscommunication);
1. relatively simple (to learn and to use);
2. democratic (accessible to all members of society);
3. versatile (i.e. capable of being applied in any field);
4. flexible (i.e. able to express a multiplicity of new concepts);
5. sophisticated (i.e. capable of refinement and diversity of expression in the various fields) (Twine 1991, p. 28).

Now, how does the present-day Japanese writing system perform with regard to the six points above? Adopting a simple scheme, using '+' for a positive answer, '-' for a negative, we can create the following table:

Table 1

standardized	relatively simple	democratic	versatile	flexible	sophisticated
-	-	-	+	+	+

From Table 1, we can draw the conclusion that the writing system currently used in Japan has the advantage of being: versatile, flexible, and sophisticated, but the disadvantage of being difficult and complex, not standardised and accessible only through long training.

In particular, in spite of the restrictive list called *jōyō kanjihyō* (regular-use Chinese characters list), sinograms are too numerous and difficult to learn and to use. They require an intense effort of memorisation and must be studied many years to be learnt. Moreover, they are cumbersome for daily use. However, it seems that Japan has one of the highest levels of literacy in the world, though this view is increasingly becoming doubtful.¹ In any case, literacy in Japan confirms the incredible learning capacity of human beings, even in the presence of an objectively difficult and complicated system. However, this is at the cost of great effort and an extended span of time.

Moreover, at international level, Japan's efforts to increase exchanges with foreign countries are unquestionably linguistically hindered by the difficulty of its writing system (see Galan 2005; Carroll 2011).

In recent years, some outstanding linguists (like Yamada Isao and Umesao Tadao, for example) have once again resumed one of the main proposals of the movement for the modernisation of the language of the Meiji period: the romanization of the Japanese writing system. They say that «in a global information society, the Japanese language and its writing system now face new challenges. In spite of the fact that the Japanese language belongs to the structurally simplest category in the world, it has the most complex writing system, and, therefore, it is not readily embraced in the world theater, while it is also cumbersome, inefficient and stressful to render into machine readable form for processing» (Yamada 1973, p. 33).

Again, as in the past, the question of the capacity of competing with the Western nations (America and Europe) is seen as crucial, and in this perspective, the cumbersome writing system of Japan is considered an obstacle compared to the alphabet (see Umesao 2004).

It cannot be denied that from the point of view of Information Technology and efficiency in communication, they are right.

3 A Different Approach to Japanese Writing System

From a different point of view, however, a complicated and rich system has the advantage of being versatile, flexible and sophisticated. Compared to the Italian alphabet, the Japanese writing system is distinguished by a much richer level of cultural meaningfulness. The alphabet is a pure tool,

¹ This view is coming increasingly under doubt. See Masiko 2006; Yamashita 2011.

a useful one of course, but still a mere tool. On the contrary, the Japanese *kanji-kana majiri* is the condensation of Japanese culture: it is the product of the encounter between Chinese civilisation and Japanese indigenous tradition. The employment of a complex and sophisticated linguistic code makes it possible to develop an almost unlimited range of nuances in the expression of ideas, concepts and intentions. When used, it is possible to create a particular richness of expression with ability and competence.

As regards versatility or the capacity to be applied to any field, flexibility or the capacity to express a multiplicity of new concepts and sophistication, or the capacity of refinement and diversity of expression in various fields, the Japanese writing system shows a high level of all the three.

A key feature of the *kanji-kana majiri* system is that, on one hand, it permits the easy and economical creation of new words in the form of *kango* or Chinese compound words by uniting two or more sinograms. The words thus produced have also the advantage of being ‘transparent words’ whose meaning is generally easily understood by the reader. This particular flexibility in the field of the lexicon was widely employed in the Meiji period when a great number of new words arriving from the West had to be created. Nowadays, loan words and calques from foreign languages are preferred, but the possibility of easily creating *kango* is preserved.

A highly appreciated and unique feature of the Japanese writing system is its capacity to produce ‘variations’ of the basic form of *kanji-kana majiri*. According to requirements of space, conciseness, expression of details, richness of meaning, the kind of the text, type of addressee, and so on, the Japanese writing system can assume a ‘dense’ or a ‘diluted’ form. This feature is one of the main characteristics of the past system, when many *buntai*, or forms of the written language existed simultaneously. This required a great investment of effort when studying. The reformations of the written language in the past decades have largely eliminated the abundant number of written styles, but not the fundamental capacity to produce variations, or ‘modulations’. These can span from quite ‘pure Japanese’, as used in some novels (diluted form), to a kind of ‘sinicised’ style where almost only sinograms are employed, as in the first pages of important newspapers (dense form).

Let’s see an example, considering the visual impact:

1. Sinicised style

「韓国の金融委員会は18日、七つの相互貯蓄銀行を6カ月間の営業停止処分にした。自己資本比率が1%未満で、負債が資産を上回っていることなどが理由。法律で5千万ウォン（約350万円）以下の預金は全額保護されるが、対象の銀行に預金者らが駆けつけ、一部で混乱が起きた。相互貯蓄銀行は主に庶民向けの金融機関だが、乱脈融資による経営不振が指摘され、金融当局が国内85行の調査を続けていた」。(«Kankoku» 2011)

The Korean Finance Committee on the 18th, decided the suspension

of activity for seven Mutual Savings Banks for six months because the capital-asset ratio does not reach 1%, and the debt is higher than the asset. From a legal point of view, under 50 million *won* (that is 3.5 million *yen*) of deposits, the entire sum is protected, but as to the banks in question, the depositors ran to withdraw their money causing a partial perturbation. The Mutual Savings Banks are basically financial institution for general people, but since unprofitable operations caused by disordered financial activity were detected, the financial authority has continued inspection of 85 institution in the country.

2. Pure Japanese style

「そうですね。そこまではなかなかわかりません。「会って話そう」と向こうが言ったわけだから、それはある程度割り切らなくては仕方がないですね。それから自分の話したことが本になるというのは、けっこう大きなことです。自分の体験談としてわあわあしゃべると、家族やらまわりの人やらは、「うるさいな」という反応を見せることも多いんですが、こうして本になって活字で読むと、腹におさまっていくんですね。」「ああ、そういうことだったのか」とまわりにもわかってもらえるんです。そういう意味では喜ばれたんじゃないでしょうか」。(Murakami 2003, pp. 268-299)

«Really. I cannot understand as far as that. Since he said “Let’s meet and discuss” it is a matter of course on which I cannot agree. Besides, the fact that what I said becomes a book is an important fact. Speaking bla bla of my own experience, the people of my family and all the other people around will certainly respond saying to me “annoying”. I will keep only for myself the publishing of the book and reading it». «Ah! Is it like that!» so that all people around can understand. In this sense, is it not something for which to rejoice?

In both cases we have *kanji-kana majiri*, but the ranges of Chinese compound words and Japanese words, and consequently of phonographs and logographs are very different, as is their visual impact. In the first case, the percentage of sinograms is 58.2%, whereas *kana* are 36%. In the second case, sinograms are a scanty 14% and *kana* soar to 78%. As is evident, the sinicised style employs a larger number of sinograms, on the contrary the (almost) pure Japanese style has many more *kana* phonographs. The reason for this is that Chinese *kango* words need to be written exclusively in sinograms, while Japanese *wago* words are normally, though not always, written in *kana*.

Let’s see the following examples in two variations:

1. 事業継続性強化支援 *Jigyō keizokusei kyōka shien* (Business continuity reinforcement support) (dense form);
2. 事業の継続性を強化するための支援 *Jigyō no keizokusei o kyōka suru tame no shien* (diluted form);

or

3. 家庭用電源 *Kateiyō dengen* (Home power supply) (dense form);
4. 家庭で用いる電源 *Katei de mochiiru dengen* (diluted form).

This feature has the advantage of transmitting messages in different ways, or more precisely, of adapting the form of the written language to the content and purpose of the message. The sinicised form is dense, concentrated, deeply meaningful, rapid and immediate. It is appropriately used in the titles of the articles in newspapers, and occasionally in the transmission of concentrated messages. It avoids redundancy and unnecessary information, limiting its scope to the essential.

On the other hand, when the purpose is aesthetic or the nuances of the language play a role in creating a particular atmosphere, such as in novels, it is possible to use a more sophisticated language capable of exalting the intricacy of human sentiments, one that is less abrupt, more diluted, rich in grammatical and syntactical modulations.

To a certain extent every language possesses this capacity. However, the case of the Japanese writing system is a case apart because of the impressive range of variations. It is also reflected in the visible aspect of the language, given the choice of the characters that appear on the sheet of paper.

McLuhan would say that each medium produces a different message or effect on the human sensorium. Or, put it in another way, different messages can be better expressed by different mediums (that is, different kinds of written language), meaning that the medium participates in the formulation of the content.

Elasticity, flexibility, versatility and sophistication are qualities that require complexity of the medium. Richness of expression is only possible with a rich linguistic code, and here there is no shortcut.

In 1993, the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs («Kokugo shingikai hōkoku» 1993) declared that the reform on language aimed to produce «a clear, precise, beautiful, rich language», condensing in few words an ideal language for modern Japan. It is interesting to note that out of the four adjectives, two of them are concerned with efficiency: ‘clear’ and ‘precise’, and two are concerned with sophistication: ‘beautiful’ and ‘rich’, with a balanced view.

The dilemma between efficiency and sophistication is a difficult one, and is mostly a problem of balance. How to conjugate the two is a matter of speculation. But in any case, the very fact of having such a balanced aim in modern Japan is remarkable in itself.

4 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, how can we assess the writing system of modern Japan in light of the above considerations?

It can be said that when the Japanese carried out the reformations of the writing system starting from the Meiji period, a conservative approach prevailed, and simplification was limited to removing the biggest obstacles: a radical reform was never their aim. This was probably due to their intention to preserve their own cultural tradition, which was largely expressed in written form. For this reason, the Japanese writing system fundamentally maintains the ancient structure even in modern Japan.

In order to give the writing system the role and the function that it deserves, we must remember that language, and the writing system which is part of it, is not only a means of communication, but also has a symbolic function within society. A concrete example of this is its importance as a means for preserving and transmitting the traditional culture of the past. We must not neglect the fact that 'language is culture', and that the written language has a special role in this process. Besides, it is the concrete expression of the spirit of the people who speak and write it, as the German thinker Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) says: «since language, in whatever shape we may receive it, is always the mental exhalation of a nationally individual life» (Losonsky 1999, p. 51).

Therefore, approaching a writing system only from the point of view of its communicative capacity may be reductive.

In Japan, simplifying language has always been considered a way of impoverishing the cultural environment. Reform was carried out only when inevitable. The quality of the written language in pre-modern Japan is undoubtedly one of the greatest expressions of an equally rich cultural-social background. In Japan, the equation between cultural richness and linguistic (especially written) richness, which implies complication, is a matter of fact that cannot be denied. The critical point in reformation is a balance between efficacy and economy, and the preservation of past tradition and cultural brilliance.

In short, the Japanese writing system is a complicated writing system that combines the fundamental structure of the past with some of the non-standard features that became consolidated during the later centuries. Certainly, this causes communication difficulties and creates obstacles for internationalisation. However, the Japanese writing system reveals a high degree of flexibility and versatility. Above all, it retains a richness of expression and sophistication that may justify the will to preserve it and, according to recent trends, to reduce efforts towards a more simplified system.

The Japanese writing system makes us reconsider the profile of an ideal writing system for modern society. How important is its richness and sophistication, especially in relation to its simplicity? And, in conclusion, is

the role of writing limited to ‘allowing easy communication among the members of society’, or does it have a more demanding role?

The considerations above come from a mostly external point of view. They represent the perspective of a European (or American) who uses the alphabet as a writing system. Therefore, they should be considered as just one possible opinion. In order to have a balanced view, we need to consider also the internal perspective, i.e. that of the Japanese themselves.

Now, what do the Japanese think of their writing system? The answer can be found in the questionnaires of the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs.

The first in 1998, inquires about the consciousness of *kanji*, asking: «Do you think that *kanji* are important and convenient?».

The second in 2006, inquires about the real use of the restrictive list of sinograms in everyday life, asking: «Do you consider the list of *Jōyō kanji* when writing?».

The third, of the same year, is concerned with writing by means of computers and other electronic devices, asking: «In comparison to the questionnaire of the year 1995, do you think that the sinograms that you have forgotten have increased?». The reason for this inquiry is that the use of electronic devices for writing is supposed to favour the oblivion of sinograms.

As the results of the questionnaires show, the Japanese consider sinograms indispensable in the Japanese writing system. Moreover, the most interesting response is the one to the 5th question. When asked if, «Are *kanji* characters that make the Japanese writing system difficult?» only 12.2% responded «yes». This means that few Japanese consider sinograms difficult. This may be surprising to Western eyes, but we must remember that Japanese people learn them while they are young and therefore find them less burdening.

To summarize, the Japanese writing system is objectively complex. As viewed from the outside by neutral eyes and considering its structure, it is complex and cumbersome. It is rather irregular and scarcely efficient, at least from the point of view of smooth, rapid and efficient transmission of information. However, as seen from the inside, it has a great capacity of modulation and richness of expression.

The two perspectives – from the outside and from the inside – can provide different evaluations. It is just like saying that, objectively, the Italian language is much more difficult than the English language at a spoken level, for example, in terms of grammar. However, if you ask Italians, they will say English is much more hard.

In short, ‘difficulty’ in languages is highly personal, and varies according to the point of view. While for an Italian the French language is easy, to a German it is certainly not. Proximity to the mother tongue and apprehension at a young age are elements that greatly change one’s perspective and contribute to a personal view at the expense of objectivity.

Appendix

Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs.

Questionnaire among the population in 1998

Consciousness about <i>kanji</i> – Do you think that <i>kanji</i> are important and convenient?		
1	They are important and indispensable for the Japanese writing system	72.8%
2	They are convenient because by looking at them, one can immediately grasp the meaning	61.7%
3	It is indispensable to continue to learn <i>kanji</i> notwithstanding the significant use of electronic appliances like computers	52.0%
4	I do not have much confidence regarding the use of <i>kanji</i>	42.4%
5	<i>Kanji</i> are characters that make the Japanese writing system difficult	12.2%
6	I am confident in using <i>kanji</i>	11.9%
7	Due to the diffusion of computers, the need to write <i>kanji</i> will decrease	9.3%
8	Since it is difficult to learn <i>kanji</i> , it is better not to use them	3.7%

Questionnaire among the population in 2006

1.

Do you consider the list of <i>Jōyō kanji</i> when writing?				
Consider		Do not consider		Do not know
Consider	Somewhat consider	Do not consider very much	Do not consider at all	
19,2%	20.4%	37.6%	22.8%	
39.6%		60.3%		

2.

Consideration of writing by means of computers and word processors		
In comparison to the questionnaire of the year 1995, do you think that the <i>kanji</i> that you have forgotten have increased?		
1	I have forgotten the way of writing many <i>kanji</i>	50.8%
2	I use many more <i>kanji</i> in sentences than before	42.9%
3	Since I need to use my eyes, I get tired easily	39.8%
4	I write sentences more quickly	38.9%
5	I find that it is easier to write sentences	33.4%
6	(I forgot) the reading and accents (of <i>kanji</i>)	24.5%
7	It takes more time to write sentences	9.8%
8	I have improved my ability in writing	7.5%

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