

## Keynote Address : The Comparative Study of Civilization as It Relates to Language and Writing

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journal or publication title	Senri Ethnological Studies
volume	34
page range	1-8
year	1992-07-15
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.15021/00003070">http://doi.org/10.15021/00003070</a>

# Keynote Address: The Comparative Study of Civilization as It Relates to Language and Writing

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This conference is the seventh on the study of civilization in the Taniguchi Symposium series. Over the years, it has become a tradition for me to present the keynote lecture at the first session. The focus of this year's symposium is on language and writing, so permit me to present my views on how language and writing should be understood from the vantage point of a comparative study of civilization. I hope my views will provide some ideas for the discussions among the various specialists participating in the symposium during the coming week.

## 2. FOCUS ON LANGUAGE

Language is a tool for the transmission of intentions. Human beings find themselves, from the moment of birth, in the midst of systems of pre-existing social arrangements; they must learn these systems and internalize them. Language is one such system. One can therefore say that language, from the viewpoint of the natural sciences, is part of the *environment*; from the viewpoint of the social sciences, language is just one of many *systems*. Among social systems, language is probably the most all-encompassing and long-lasting, and this is why we have to take up language as part of the study of civilization.

I consider civilization to be a system consisting of people, arrangements, and systems. Now, when remarkable strides are being made in the technology of communications, we are being deluged with various signs and images, *i.e.* varieties of language, that are supplanting natural language. Thus, one of the basic requisites of our time is to consider exactly what language is. The fundamental viewpoint that unifies this year's symposium is, as I have already stated, the study of civiliza-

tion, and a comparison of the systems of Japan with other countries. I feel that it is most appropriate at this time to take up language. For the Japanese language is, at present, entering upon an important phase of "internationalization." This is why we need to analyze various problems confronting the Japanese language as it now exists, and look at them in comparison with the situation of languages in other countries. Let me begin therefore by taking up issues related to language and writing in modern China, and then discuss the Japanese language and its future.

### 3. LANGUAGES OF THE MODERN CIVILIZATIONS

What kind of language can become a vehicle of modern civilization? First, the language must be functional, possessing characteristics of clarity and speed. It must permit the accurate manipulation of massive amounts of information in such fields as economics, modern technology and science; to put this into sharp focus, a language must provide an efficient interface with information processing systems and computers. Despite all this, however, functionality is not necessarily the be-all and end-all of language. Languages are cultural entities and contain elements from which the accretions of the past cannot be eliminated; *i.e.*, culture offers some resistance to civilization.

The case that immediately comes to mind in this connection is China, which long ago built a great civilization; furthermore, in view of its population of over one billion, one can hardly ignore China when discussing writing systems and languages of the modern world. What is occurring there now? What kind of language are they aiming at? How is the writing system that supports it evolving?

The characters that constitute the writing system of the Chinese language were first devised about four thousand years ago; they were established as a formal system roughly two thousand years ago, and are still with us today. In Chinese characters, the fundamental principle of one-character/one-word has been consistently followed. There are therefore as many characters as there are words—and what a number! The grand total exceeds 50,000. On the one hand, characters that are ideograms can be understood even if one cannot read them, for they have the "power" to expand beyond the barrier of phonetic language. This has made it possible to unify into a single nation a great number of peoples covering the vast area we now call China; *i.e.*, the unity of China would have been impossible had it not been for the existence of the vast system of ideograms called *kanji*. If one were to phoneticize the Chinese language by means, for example, of Latin letters, China would, I am sure, immediately disintegrate.

From a historical perspective, Chinese writing, with its large number of complicated and difficult *kanji*, was the monopoly of the ruling class; if one were to investigate rates of literacy, they would be extremely low. *Kanji* existed in a realm far beyond the general public. Consequently, as a means to simplify and popularize the Chinese language, the Latinization (*i.e.* romanization) movement came into being. The history of Latinization is old, and towards the end of the 19th century,

Latinization was used as a means to oppose the political control of the Qing Dynasty in the provinces. It is well known that Mao Zedong was in the forefront of the writing-reform faction. In the midst of civil war, during the Yen'an period, he strenuously argued every day for the use of alphabetic writing. Colleagues around him managed to quiet him down only by saying that the success of the revolution should take precedence over writing reform. Ironically, after the revolution finally succeeded, Mao discovered, when he tried to light the signal fire for romanization, that it was not romanization that the public wanted but "those difficult *kanji* used by the privileged class who had exploited and persecuted us." That he could not help abandoning romanization may be considered an irony of civilization.

After the revolution, of course, something had to be done to make the Chinese language and writing system more workable. This was achieved by limiting the number of characters and simplifying the written forms of those characters. In 1952, the most commonly used 2,000 characters were divided into three groups: 1,010 so-called first-class characters, 490 second-class characters, and 500 supplementary characters. In 1956, the "Chinese Character Simplification Act" pertaining to abbreviated forms of these commonly used characters was enacted. Simplified characters were not invented anew; they were selected from commonly understood characters that had already been in use since the Song period, often in the ledgers of merchants. At the present time, the trend toward simplified characters has hit a dead end, and lately in the provinces, even some signs of reaction—the revival of older forms—can be seen.

There has also been a definite backlash against attempts to make language more functional by introducing romanization among minority ethnic groups, as seen in the case of the Uighurs, who reverted to the Arabic alphabet in 1983. This phenomenon is a good example of the conservative, reactionary side of writing systems, which favors historical precedent over function.

In contrast to what's happening to the simplified Chinese writing system, a standard spoken language, newly constructed on the foundation of Beijing dialect, has been spreading rapidly throughout the whole country. (A similar contrast can be seen in the case of Indonesian, a functional spoken language superimposed on other languages that is spreading and becoming a common or standard language.) One reason for this kind of phenomenon seems to be the diffusion of modern media such as radio, television, and motion pictures. Efforts such as dubbing movies and videos in standard Chinese and adding Chinese-character subtitles have contributed to the spread of the new standard language. Still, one must attach greater significance to the influence of the Latinization movement mentioned earlier.

In 1958, the *pin'yin* system of Latinization was established as the standard method for describing the standard language. The strength of Latin letters lies in the ease with which they can be read, provided one follows certain simple rules. For example, in Shanghai, where Wu dialects are spoken, one often observes *pin'yin* transcriptions under the names of shops. The people of Shanghai are thereby learn-

ing the difference between the pronunciation of the characters in their dialect and in the standard language, and coming to understand the standard language. In other words, modern Chinese has spread while changing over time, becoming a standard language of a single cultural area. If, however, I were asked which of the two—Chinese characters or Latin letters—are better suited for writing in terms of function, my answer would have to be Latin letters. The problem, as I said earlier, boils down to whether Chinese characters can in actuality support the burden of the post-modern civilization or, to put it more pointedly, whether can they interface with computers. Various attempts are being made to computerize the Chinese language, but it is my feeling that ultimate success is dubious. It is specifically on this point that the great issues of the future of the Chinese language hinge.

#### 4. THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

Next let us consider the Japanese language. The writing system introduced to Japan was based on Chinese characters (*kanji*), which one can find already in 4th-century archaeological relics such as swords and mirrors. Since then, many documents from China related to law, religion and literature were introduced into Japan; but in addition, the systematization of *kana* (whereby one makes use of *kanji* to represent Japanese phonetically) and *kun* readings (in which one reads *kanji* according to their meanings) was underway by around the seventh century. The Japanese writing system combining all these features was stabilized by and large by about the tenth century, and gave birth to many uniquely Japanese pieces of literature, including the *Chokusen Wakashū*, *Genji Monogatari*, and *Makura no Sōshi*, most of which were products of the imperial court. Developments of this kind are almost never seen in countries that utilized literary Chinese, as was the case in Korea and in Vietnam.

As indicated by the alternative name “women’s letters,” however, *kana* were considered part of a culture one notch lower than the Chinese. The use of *kana* did not occur in the world of religion and the legal system, where males were involved; there, *kanji* alone continued to be used. Subsequently, an autonomous development toward Japanization was seen in the Japanese developments of *kanbun* and in *kanamajiribun*. For that reason, when judged by the standards of literary Chinese, *kanbun* written by the Japanese was awkward and held up to ridicule by the Chinese, the original users of the characters, and by the literati of the Korean court of the Yi Dynasty. It seems that the Japanese themselves felt that they could not compose *kanbun* well, something which has a parallel in the inferiority complex among Japanese about their foreign-language abilities today. Despite these unique aspects of the history of the Japanese language, it eventually became settled into what we might call the East Asian or “*kanji* civilization” sphere.

Contact with the Western civilization has nonetheless created relentless pressure for change. At the same time, people started to pay more attention to unique cultural characteristics of Japan and to move further away from China. When

people recognize that an opposing civilization is overwhelmingly superior and that its incorporation into their own is indispensable, then language, which must serve as the medium of communication, begins to search for effective pathways of change. One extreme idea that can arise in such a situation is to abandon one's own language and replace it with the language of the civilization one is trying to adopt. In Japan, Ogyū Sorai in the 17th century proposed that the Japanese abandon their own language and adopt Chinese; in the late 19th century, Mori Arinori proposed English; and after the Second World War, Shiga Naoya suggested French. These proposals are examples of short-circuited thinking based on astonishing optimism about the feasibility of language reform, though they were taken seriously when they were put forward. We should not be surprised by this: such trial-and-error thinking is, as we all know, repeated in the developing countries of the world today. When seen from the perspective of Japanese civilization in the context of the modern world, the Japanese language since Meiji contains the seeds of various problems that are likely to occur in the future.

On the other hand, it is also true that Japan has skillfully managed many difficult problems in her own way. The thing that perhaps catches our attention more than any other is the ways in which words have been borrowed. During those periods when European concepts new to Japan were being introduced, Japanese devised Sino-Japanese compounds to represent them. These were not traditional Chinese words but rather compounds made up in Japan, including such words as *shakai* 'society', *keizai* 'economics', *kagaku* 'science', and *kenkyū* 'research'. It is well known that these words were exported to China and are used there today. Today the dominant trend in devising new vocabulary is to take foreign words over into Japanese in *katakana*, contracting them as needed. Many scholars of the Japanese language, it seems, frown on this, saying that the proliferation of such words confuses and contaminates the Japanese language.

## 5. STANDARD LANGUAGE AND ORTHOGRAPHY

It is astonishing but true that, since the Meiji period, a standard language for the verbal communication has not been systematized. Although arguments that one should create a standard language were thoroughly aired during the Meiji period, no such standard language was, in the end, established. If there is any standard language today, it is only the language used by the NHK, which is a kind of language of the masses. The nation has never recognized even this NHK language as a standard. By contrast, *kyūkanazukai* (the prewar *kana* usage rules) was established for the written language so that it could be taught in public schools. Since it was based on the literary Japanese axiom that writing should preserve etymological distinctions among words, there was a huge difference between it and the actual spoken language. After World War II, *kyūkanazukai* was abolished; simultaneously, a limit was imposed on the number of *kanji*, their shapes were simplified, the use of *okurigana* was regularized, and new rules for *kana* spelling (a

*shinkanazukai*) were established. This reform resulted in something of a compromise and lacked logical consistency due to the strong reactionary pressures brought to bear by conservatives favoring the *kyūkanazukai*.

Despite the revision of the writing system that followed, the language has been allowed to run its own course and a true orthography has yet to be established. I therefore entertain certain misgivings about the future of the Japanese language. I have already expressed my personal opinion on language reform in my writings [UMESAO 1987, 1988, Forthcoming]. Although I will not repeat them here, I hope you will also discuss the future of the Japanese language in this symposium.

## 6. INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

It is remarkable that Japan uses a language in its modern civilization that has been left free to develop in whatever way it will without special direction. There are extreme nativist opinions to the effect that the Japanese language has, in its own way, functioned satisfactorily, at least so far, and that the concept of a standard language and orthography are European ideas that Japan, with its altogether different traditions, does not need. I, however, have grave doubts as to whether Japan is really becoming internationalized or whether the present Japanese language can be internationalized.

I consider Japan's present economic success to be something of an isolated case. History shows that countries that achieve power within an international community dependent on their economic prosperity also acquire an unwanted shadow of arrogance; they are perceived by other countries with envy if not contempt. This is immediately reflected in languages as well. At one time, British English in Europe and American English were, following World War II, in this unenviable position. Although English, especially in its American variety, has come to occupy an indisputable position of preeminence, Europeans consider English to be a language of the provinces, and the British do not accept American English. Perhaps something similar can be said of the Japanese language.

From ancient times Japan has used China as a cultural model. Since the Meiji period, however, Japan has been veering away from China, and the separation has gradually widened. As I have already noted, as adaptation toward modern civilization progresses, new cultural elements have started to flow in the reverse direction. This must have been galling for the Chinese, who, for a long period of time, claimed to be the leading power of the East Asian civilization. The other day, a presentation about Chinese feelings toward Japanese at a symposium was given in this conference room. The speaker stated that Japan, a small country on the periphery of China, had grown in spurts of energy throughout history and finally eclipsed China. I think this is a workable and interesting approach to the theory of civilization.

Japanese, as languages go, is not especially difficult if we set aside subtleties of expression and nuance. At least in terms of its grammar, it is fairly orderly and

shows a high degree of simplicity. Lately, Nomoto Kikuo has advocated a simplified Japanese that foreigners can learn in a short period of time. His proposal is still incomplete; although objections to it have been raised, I feel that this kind of attempt should be made more often. In Britain, there have been repeated arguments, from around the 18th century, that one must simplify English for the sake of letting foreigners understand and for that reason many grammar books have been published. I feel that, as a result, English has become simplified and has thus attained the position of an international language. Surely this kind of transition will be necessary for the Japanese language too. To give my own prediction of the future of the Japanese language, I feel that, while its grammatical content will not change much, there is the possibility that English vocabulary will enter it in as great quantities as Chinese vocabulary once did.

In fact, it is entirely possible that someday perhaps as much as half of all Japanese words will have English roots. English words assimilated into Japanese are typically modified in their phonology to accommodate the Japanese language and contracted. For example, today, the *katakana* sequence *puro* is often encountered, but it is a fragment of several different Japanized English words, such as *professional*, *proletariat*, *program*, and *processor*. It is thus conceivable that a situation might arise similar to that of Sino-Japanese, in which many homonyms were generated when loanwords were introduced. Since *katakana* does not have the capability of indicating meaning, as do *kanji*, confusion may be even greater. If this should happen, communicability might decline between the public and the intelligentsia and between members of different generations. In addition, I suspect that, as more foreigners begin to speak Japanese, their influence will begin to reach Japan and affect the Japanese language. Perhaps by accepting such changes, the Japanese language will become truly international for the first time.

Long pending issues such as the abolition of *kanji* and the establishment of a rigorous orthography may finally be resolved through this kind of internationalization; *i.e.*, in the future, the Japanese language—not to mince words—is going to become a rather horrible mess. The Japanese are simply going to have to endure this messiness though to do so will be a trying experience culturally; one simply must endure it for the sake of civilization. What I have in mind is how the British tolerate American English, Indian English, Singaporean English and, after all that, dreadful Japanese English!

When we think about the languages of modern civilization, we see that there is a well-established common cultural matrix in which they exist; nations that are outside this matrix may be considered foreign. I feel that internationalization is something that occurs by mutual interaction of both groups of nations; both gradually change over time as a result of being in contact with one another. That this happens with language is just a special case of a general principle that governs the history of civilizations.



## 7. IN CONCLUSION

Finally, as the person who proposed these symposia for the comparative study of civilization, I hope we will have an opportunity to discuss such issues as political, economic, religious, and racial interactions and conflicts using language as a point of entry. Although a society without a language cannot exist, there are many societies without written language. In the modern world, we coexist with people who do not have written languages. If to have a written language is a precondition for the rapid development of civilization, can we definitely say that people who do not have written languages are incapable of being civilized? In the history of human civilization, what kind of impact did the appearance of written language and the discovery of printing technology have on civilization? Perhaps we can launch some inquiries and discussion into this sort of large-scale question.

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