

On the Stylistic Function of Japanese Script

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The writing system of Japanese is so complex and permissive that one and the same word or sentence often can be written in more than one way, taking the opportunities provided by various forms of the same kanji, various combinations of kanji and kana, and various typefaces and handwritings. The purpose of the article is to show that the choice between the possible notations of a speech unit is not arbitrary, if not always conscious. The difference in notation tends to be interpreted as a difference in meaning, as a kind of aura or flavor that usually is described as stylistic. It is suggested that the relatively new field of research that deals with such means of expression existing solely in script and not paralleled in speech be called graphostylistics, with a subdivision into orthographic stylistics (a part of linguistics proper) and calligraphic stylistics (a part of paralinguistics). The necessity is stressed of explaining these phenomena when teaching Japanese to foreigners. An attempt is made at describing stylistic connotations of the use of various notations (standard and nonstandard kanji, kanji vs. kana, hiragana vs. katakana) in terms of such semantic oppositions as old: new, basic: derived, soft: hard, inner: outer, Yin: Yang and the like.

Foreigners who start learning Japanese often are discouraged by the unique and unrivaled complexity of the Japanese writing system. There are many instances when you cannot tell how exactly a written word is pronounced even if you know all the characters it consists of; and vice versa, sometimes it is not enough to know how a spoken word sounds to write it properly. In Japanese, the choice of sounds for a given chain of characters and of characters for a given chain of sounds is not just a matter of sound/character correspondence: it is, as a rule, a matter of meaning.

This is only partly due to the fact that the Japanese writing system is Chinese by origin and inherits all the logographic features of Chinese script, such as the principle

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of differentiating homophones in writing. When we write in Japanese we often have to choose between two or more kanji denoting not homophones but what is commonly described as one and the same word (usually a *wago*), and sometimes we have to decide which set of characters will be more appropriate for the word we have in mind: kanji, hiragana, or katakana (or perhaps a mixture of those three). All such problems are purely Japanese, not shared with other languages that use Chinese script.

The purpose of this article is to show that the choice in such instances is not arbitrary. It is governed by the meaning of the word or words used, most often by that specific kind of meaning which is usually called stylistic. Sometimes the difference of meaning is so subtle that it may not be perceived consciously by those who write as well as by those who read what is written. Those shades of meaning need not to be *thought of*: they are just *felt* by any educated native user of Japanese. Not so with foreigners. When teaching Japanese as a foreign language, one has to describe such subtleties in an explicit way.

Let us try and enumerate all possible ways of writing down a simple sentence in Japanese—for instance, the standard formula of gratitude towards a customer: *Maido arigatō gozaimasu* “Thank you for frequenting us.” The most widely used orthographic notation for this sentence in today’s Japanese probably is as follows:

(1) 毎度ありがとうございます。

But you can come across a version of this sentence with *arigatō*, or *gozaimasu*, or both written in kanji as well:

(2) 毎度有難う御座います。

On the other hand, the sentence can be written completely in hiragana:

(3) まいどありがとうございます。

or in katakana:

(4) マイドアリガトウゴザイマス。

All these different orthographic versions of the same sentence are not just theoretically possible, they are actually used in daily life, although some of them are usual, others rare. What is, then, the difference? Would it be right to regard these notations as completely synonymous? Do the users of Japanese choose between them at random?

Certainly not. It is obvious that version (4) can be found almost exclusively in shop receipts printed by cash registers. Versions (1), (2), (3) are all common enough in letters and advertisements, but version (3) looks as if written by a very young person who does not know enough kanji, and there is a certain air of oversimplicity about it, while version (2) is imbued with overtones of stiffness and perhaps old age. Only version (1) is more or less neutral and devoid of any additional nuances of meaning.

Let us, further, take one of these versions—say, version (1)—and diversify it by using different typefaces and handwriting. Let the first of those derived versions—we shall denote it as (5)—be in standard *minchōtai* typeface, the next one (6) in cursive *gyōsho* script, and the last one (7) in *maruji* handwriting popular with publishers of youth magazines (Kikuchi, 1992). Note that not only kanji will look different in those three versions but also hiragana: in spite of the fact that hiragana is cursive by nature, there is

a doubtless visual difference between the hiragana that goes with printed *minchōtai*, with brush-written *gyōsho*, and with pen-scraped *maruji*. Anyone readily will tell you that versions (5), (6), and (7) are not identical—in feeling, if not in meaning. Version (5), being probably the closest to a neutral standard, in a certain way seems to be a bit too formal. Version (6) brings us to a very marked and rather limited world of traditional elegance; at the same time it is less formal. Version (7) creates an atmosphere of leisure and young age, it is the least formal of the three.

I would like to stress two points here. Firstly, the distinctions described above are a matter of connotation, not denotation; affective meaning, not cognitive. In short, a matter of style. *What* is told always remains the same: it is *how* it is told that varies. It looks as if the same sentence were pronounced in different voices: versions (1) or (5) by a mature and self-confident adult, version (2) by an elderly person, (3) by a child, (4) by a machine or by a foreigner, and so on. Incidentally, it is one of the reasons why the phenomena we are discussing here cannot be reduced to the well-known and sufficiently clarified phenomenon of homophones differentiated in writing. Homophones, or homonyms, cannot have the same meaning by definition. This also leaves out the problem of kanji puns, although it certainly has to do with stylistics.

Secondly, stylistic shades are conveyed in all the examples analysed above only through the visual channel, not through both the auditory and the visual channels in a parallel manner. In speech, sentences (1) to (7) *sound* just the same: they only are different as far as they *look* different when written. Stylistic information contained in orthographic or calligraphic features is completely lost when those sentences are heard, not read.

There is an established field of linguistic research called phonostylistics, or phonic stylistics (Léon, 1971), which deals with stylistic values expressed by features of pronunciation. By analogy, we could say that the phenomena discussed in this article belong to the field of graphostylistics, or graphic stylistics—a domain quite recently outlined¹ and still insufficiently explored, but promising plenty of exciting discoveries, especially in such a language as Japanese.

The field of graphic stylistics can be roughly divided into two areas: one of them deals with choice of letters (characters), as in our examples (1) to (4), and can be called orthographic stylistics, the other with choice of handwritings (typefaces), as in our examples (5) to (7), and can be called calligraphic stylistics (provided that “calligraphy” is understood in a broad sense, not only as “art of writing,” but also as “art of lettering”). To use D. Hofstadter’s witty wording (Hofstadter, 1986: 285), orthographic stylistics operates with Letter, calligraphic stylistics with Spirit. The former pertains to linguistics proper, the latter to paralinguistics: the phonic parallel would be the relation between, say, dropping one’s Hs (a linguistic feature) and speaking in a coarse, vulgar voice (a paralinguistic feature).

¹ I would like to draw the readers’ attention to a Russian publication of more than forty years ago which I believe is the earliest treatise on the graphostylistics of modern Japanese ever written: Konrad, 1949. The term does not appear there yet but all the relevant points are exposed and a surprisingly keen analysis given.

For the present I shall confine myself to some aspects of orthographic stylistics of Japanese as I see it. I am going to show that most orthographic means of stylistic expression in Japanese can be explained in terms of the following basic oppositions:

1. standard kanji: nonstandard kanji, comprising,
 - 1-a. standard kanji: obsolete kanji and,
 - 1-b. standard kanji: simplistic kanji;
2. kanji: kana;
3. hiragana: katakana.

Any book in Japanese printed before 1946 has a strong, distinct, and immediately recognized flavor of “yesterday” (that is, “not today”) in the eyes of a modern reader, and this is due first of all to old kanji forms (partly also to old kana spelling). Other factors are less important. (By the way, a similar attitude is common in Russia towards books published before 1918, the year when old Russian spelling was replaced by the current one; I am sure that the same is true of any nation that has suffered a major orthographic reform.) There is a certain number of “classic” kanji forms now recognized nonstandard and replaced by simplified characters. Nowadays, whenever such an “antiquated” kanji form appears in a text it denotes not only what it is normally supposed to denote but something more: namely, it is a sign of a past epoch.

It is interesting that in some recent reprints of older writings, generally brought up to date with respect to orthography for fear they could prove too difficult to read, classic kanji have been carefully preserved, while old kana spelling has been mercilessly rooted out. When I was reading a modern reprint of Kuroiwa Ruikō's (黒岩涙香) story, *A Horrid Death* (無惨), written in the early years of Meiji era and said to be the earliest Japanese mystery story in the Western vein, I constantly felt that, to a modern reader, the old kanji forms appearing in that text are as much a part of Ruikō's vintage flavor as its *bungotai* grammar and half-medieval phraseology. Incidentally, in translating that story into Russian I tried hard to keep that Meiji flavor intact and found that for the archaic grammar and phraseology counterparts in the Russian language could be secured easily enough, but no one-to-one equivalent could be invented to those period kanji forms as a stylistic feature. They are uniquely Japanese.

No wonder old kanji forms are retained in many proper names. Of course I am not suggesting that any person who happens to have such forms in his name clings to them purposely and refuses to change them to new standard forms in order to express some meaning. The names just have to be written exactly the way they are registered by law, and this reason may be quite sufficient. But it seems to me very likely that an old nonstandard kanji in one's name gives one a sense of distinction, or rather of being a part of an important and respectable tradition. Anyway, the preservation of obsolete kanji in the logotypes of some old-established and highly-esteemed institutions certainly is not a matter of mere chance: such is, for example, the old nonstandard 藝 *gei* in the logo of the *Bungei shunjū* magazine or the weighty multi-stroked 學 *gaku* in the logos of various *gakkō* (schools) and *daigaku* (universities).

On the other hand, when we come across such oversimplified nonstandard kanji forms as the four-stroked 斗 *tō* in *tōsō* “struggle,” or the minimized 机 *ki* in *kikai*, “machine,”

we cannot help sensing an air of non-conformism about them. One could retort that those simplistic forms are merely easier to write than the standard ones and are not supposed to convey anything more than their conventional meaning. But it is just because they are easier to write that they are so likely to be found in leftist slogans and frivolous graffiti. By using them a person asserts his right to write in an easy, irresponsible way and thus to do things in general in that manner. There certainly are people to whom the use of 竹 *dō* in *rōdō* “work” instead of the received 働 is an act of symbolic disenfranchisement (liberation), though in fact that is—if I am permitted to say so—merely a case of disenfranchisement (ripping out inner parts). Professor Yasumoto Biten (安本美典) once commented upon the nonstandard character 勝 *shō* in *shōri*, “victory,” that was made up by some aggressive demonstrators out of two elements, “flesh” and “life,” put together in a slogan: “To me, there is too much blood in it” (“*namagusai*”) (Yasumoto, 1985: 12). (Lovers of kanji will note Professor Yasumoto’s exquisitely subtle implicit reference to the standard kanji 腥 for *namagusai* “smelling raw,” or “smelling of blood,” easily derived from the malicious character commented upon by adding one more element.)

The opposition, kanji: kana, is no less important for the Japanese orthographic stylistics. Kanji without kana equals *kanbun* (Old Chinese), that is, something obscure and obsolete; kana without kanji makes one think of elementary school or of telegraph notation, compressed and disfigured out of sheer necessity—that is, gives one the impression of something immature or imperfect. The norm lies in between: it is *kanji-kana-majiri-bun*, the received combined writing, with kanji, so to say, for bricks, kana for mortar. The more kanji (and consequently, less kana), the more sophisticated it all looks. The less kanji (and more kana), the more simple-minded.

So much for text level (a whole). What about word level (a part)? Here the meaning of the kanji: kana opposition is not so obvious. But one can at least note that vast semantic opportunities are offered by the device of switching a word from kanji (if it has an accepted kanji notation) to kana. Sometimes this helps to distinguish between the lexical and grammatical uses of such words as *kuru*, “come,” *iku*, “go,” *hito*, “person” and the like, which are supposed to be written in kanji when used as full-words and in kana when as structure-words. Sometimes kana notation marks a derived, narrow, special meaning of a word, as in the case of やま・ヤマ *yama*, “profiteering” (held distinct from the usual 山, “mountain”), or やみ・ヤミ *yami*, “black market” (held distinct from 闇 “darkness”). An eloquent example of this tendency is the widely spread practice of katakana notation for Japanese city names when they are not just plain proper nouns but the symbols for something important that took place in those cities—for example, ヒロシマ, “Hiroshima” and ナガサキ, “Nagasaki.” I recall an article in the *Mainichi Shinbun* (29. 12. 1978) entitled *Narita kara Narita e no gekidō*, “The leap from Narita to Narita,” where the first *Narita* was in kanji 成田 and the second in katakana ナリタ. It is evident that the *Narita* printed in kanji was supposed to be understood as an ordinary place name, while the *Narita* printed in katakana, as a very special name—the name of the international airport, then newly constructed (the article was about how it was built). Thus we could suggest—though I am reluctant to

commit myself and prefer to be extremely careful here—that on word level, kanji notation tends to symbolize something basic and/or ordinary, in contrast to kana notation which implies something derived and/or special. The symbolism seems to be fully justified if we take into account that kanji are originally *honji* or *mana* “the genuine symbols,” and the term *kana* goes back to *karina*, “the borrowed symbols.” This is not just a dead etymology: on the contrary, I think it is very much alive.

Now we proceed to the most interesting problem: which kind of kana? Does the distinction between hiragana and katakana mean anything? Some facts seem to suggest that neither of those syllabaries has any positive semantic potential not observed in the other: it is only the contrast between the two that matters. For instance, I don't think that katakana is recommended for beast and fish names thanks to the fact that there is something intrinsically beastly or fishy about it (there is nothing). I think it is merely because one has to switch from one syllabary to the other to show where the stem ends and the ending begins. Usually, this delimitating part is played by kanji, being their secondary function, a very important one in the absence of European-type word-spacing. When kanji cannot be used because the necessary character is not in the limit and not likely to be known to many, katakana is second best. Or take a more picturesque example: in one of the stories by Ōe Kenzaburō (大江健三郎) (*The forest hermit of the nuclear age* 核時代の森の隠遁者), the mad shrieking voice of a man who has lost his patience is symbolized by an unexpected switch from the normal notation “kanji plus hiragana” to an expressive one: “kanji plus katakana” (p. 284). (I am sure that devices of this kind can be found also in many other works of fiction.) So what? Must we conclude that katakana *is* a shrill thing or *means* a shriek? Of course not, one feels compelled to say; it works the way it works in Ōe's story merely because it is different and unexpected. Normally, there should be no katakana where the author uses it—and only for that reason is it expressive. Its value is purely differential, as a strong-principled structuralist would put it.

Tempted as I am to keep strictly to the respectable structuralist lines of reasoning, I still feel inclined to think that each of the two Japanese syllabaries has a distinct semantic aura of its own which can be defined in quite positive terms. To put it short, hiragana is Yin, katakana, Yang. Hiragana equals passive, female, inner; katakana means active, male, outer.

Historically, these respective properties go back to the early times when katakana and hiragana were first developed, the former in a predominantly masculine circle, the latter in a feminine milieu. Don't say it doesn't mean much today: it does. The old discrimination is remembered. Psychologically, the “Yangness” (Yangitude? Yangth?) of katakana owes much to the squareness and laconism of its graphic form, just as the “Yinness” of hiragana is somehow related to its visual roundness and whimsicality. And of course each of the syllabaries has a long and rich “personal history,” a dragging train of memories of having been used in such-and-such ways. Those memories pile up, recorded, so to say, in a “Yinness” book, and make each system what it is.

Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (谷崎潤一郎) made use of this contrast between the two syllabaries in his novel *The Key* (鍵), where the man's diary is in “kanji plus katakana” notation,

the woman's, in "kanji plus hiragana." Incidentally, in such languages as Russian or Hebrew, the sex of the writer easily can be indicated by purely grammatical means (in fact, one just cannot help indicating it), but Japanese has no grammatical gender, and so Tanizaki's orthographical contrivance is something of a conjuror's trick: he did what can't be done. Alas, this specific way of gender indication is possible only in Japanese, and the charm of the trick is irretrievably lost in translation.

Another, better-known shade of the Yin: Yang relation is the use of katakana in foreign words. I see it like this: hiragana is for the plain and soft, for things inner, innate, and intimate; katakana for the strange and hard, for things outer, exciting and enticing (ages ago for Chinese book-learning and imperial solemnity, in recent times for westernization and modernization).

Hence katakana in loanwords and foreign proper names (hiragana, everywhere else, far more useful but not given much thought to).² Hence katakana notation of whole sentences and paragraphs to symbolize foreigners' speech in fiction. This also accounts for the common use of katakana for the *on* (Chinese) readings of kanji in dictionaries, contrastive to hiragana for the *kun* (Japanese) readings (never vice versa), as well as the less noticed practice of using katakana as a kind of phonetic transcription for any (not only foreign) words in Japanese linguistic papers: here katakana marks word in an unusual function, word as an object of attention, not a mere instrument, never noticed though always at hand.

One could add that the gradual retreat of the "kanji plus katakana" notation, which was characteristic of Japanese public writing in the first half of this century and can be seen as a parallel to the decline of classic *bungotai* grammar, probably was one of the many manifestations of an important shift in Japanese society: from hard to soft, from warlike to peaceful, from the stiff realm of official duties to a gentler world of private aspirations. The shift (or rather drift) was slow, and at times the flow seemed to turn back, as in the thirties and the early forties, but when in 1946 katakana finally gave way to hiragana even in the most solemn official papers, it was not just a part of a "technical" orthographic reform: it was (together with the simplified kanji and spelling) a very meaningful and necessary part of the general transition from tyranny to democracy—or let us say that in a softer, more Yinnish way: from a state-centered society to a more home-centered one. In a sense, from Yang to Yin.

Katakana took its revenge in the last half of the century, which was marked by a flood of loanwords. It may seem that this time its meaning was just the opposite: not the old rigid values but the modern spirit of freedom and challenge. Not quite so. First of all we should bear in mind that katakana in old Chinese-like texts was used for endings *after* kanji (as "mortar"), while in modern English-like writings it serves as stems ("bricks") *instead* of kanji, so in a way it is a different object, if only by position, not in substance. Now with the old katakana for endings, the Yin: Yang opposition was actualized more as soft: hard, with the new katakana for stems it is actualized rather as

² This of course is only true of hiragana proper as it is used in modern times, not of *hentaigana* and the rich tradition of *sōsho* writing in general.

inner: outer. The Way of Yin and Yang has many paths; the meaning of graphic styles (I would be glad if someone coined a better term) is fuzzy and prone to change.

Much has been said on the difficulties that arise before both native and foreign learners of Japanese script because of its extreme complexity. The absence of strict orthographic rules also has been commented upon mainly in tones of lament (Kabashima, 1979; Umesao, 1988). I would like to emphasize that the Japanese writing system, trying though it may seem to a lazy student, is very flexible and has the merit of providing a rich variety of means of stylistic expression, based solely on writing and not paralleled in speech. So, in the end, the professed handicaps turn out to be feathers in the nation's cap.

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