

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people: to Anna Allott and Okell, who, over a number of years, have shared their own materials with me and guided me in my study of Burmese; to them, to Jim Matisoff and to Graham Thurgood, for providing extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper; to the Social Science Research Council, who supported my research on Burmese in London and Burma from 1978-9; and to the many Burmese people who have looked after me and assisted me in my endeavours to learn their language.

References

- Allott, A. 1967. 'Grammatical Tone in Modern Spoken Burmese', *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Karl-Marx Universität Leipzig, Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, vol. 16, pp. 157-62.
- 1985. 'Language Policy and Language Planning in Burma', in D. Bradley (ed.), *Papers in South-East Asian Linguistics*, No. 9, *Language Planning and Sociolinguistics in South-East Asia*, pp. 131-54. *Pacific Linguistics A-67*, 1985.
- Bernot, D. 1963. 'Esquisse d'une description phonologique du birman', *Bulletin de la Société Linguistique de Paris*, vol. 58, pp. 164-224.
- 1980. *Le Prédicat en birman parlé* (Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris)
- Judson, Rev. A. 1888. *A Grammar of the Burmese Language* (Baptist Board Publications, Rangoon)
- Okell, J. 1965. 'Nissaya Burmese: A Case of Systematic Adaptation to a Foreign Grammar and Syntax', *Lingua*, vol. 15, pp. 186-227.
- 1969. *A Reference Grammar of Colloquial Burmese*, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, London)
- 1971. *A Guide to the Romanization of Burmese* (Luzac and Co., London)
- Roop, D.H. 1972. *An Introduction to the Burmese Writing System* (Yale University Press, New Haven)

43 JAPANESE

Masayoshi Shibatani

1 Introduction

Japanese is spoken by virtually the entire population of Japan — some 115 million people as of 1 March 1980. In terms of the number of native speakers, it is thus comparable to German and ranks sixth among the languages of the world. Yet, despite its status as a world's major language and its long literary history, Japanese is surrounded by numerous myths, some of which are perpetuated by Japanese and non-Japanese alike. There are a number of factors which contribute to these myths, e.g. the uncertainty of the genetic relationship of Japanese to other languages, its complex writing system and the relatively small number of non-Japanese (especially Westerners) who speak it.

One of the persistent myths held by the Japanese concerning their language is that it is somehow unique. This myth derives mainly from the superficial comparison between Japanese and closely related Indo-European languages such as English, German and French and the obvious disparities which such work reveals. Another persistent myth is that Japanese, compared to Western languages, notably French, is illogical and/or vague. This belief, remarkable as it may be, is most conspicuously professed by certain Japanese intellectuals well versed in European languages and philosophy. Their conviction is undoubtedly a reflection of the inferiority complex on the part of Japanese intellectuals toward Western

civilisation. After all, Japan's modernisation effort started only after the Meiji Restoration (1867). Prior to this, Japan had maintained a feudal society and a closed-door policy to the rest of the world for nearly 250 years.

However understandable the historical or cultural causes may be, the widespread characterisation of Japanese as a unique and illogical language grossly misrepresents the true nature of the language. In fact, in terms of grammatical structure, Japanese is a rather 'ordinary' human language. Its basic word order — subject-object-verb — is widespread among the world's languages. Also other characteristics associated with an SOV language are consistently exhibited in Japanese (see section 5). In the realm of phonology, too, it is a commonplace language, with five hardly exotic vowels, a rather simple set of consonants and the basic CV syllable structure (see section 4).

As for the claim that Japanese is illogical or vague, one can argue that Japanese is in fact structurally superior to Western languages in the domain of discourse organisation. As we shall see in section 6, Japanese enables a speaker to distinguish clearly between the simple description of an event and a judgement about someone or something.

While the notion of uniqueness as applied to the entire domain of a given language is dubious, especially in the case of Japanese as pointed out above, each language does possess certain features that are unique or salient in comparison to other languages. For Japanese, these include honorifics, certain grammatical particles, some of which are distinct for male and female speakers, and the writing system. In this chapter, I shall attempt to include in the discussion those aspects of Japanese that constitute a notable feature of this language which I believe is not shared by many other languages and which makes learning Japanese difficult for many foreigners.

2 Historical Setting

Like Korean, its geographical neighbour, Japanese has long been the target of attempts to establish a genetic relationship between it and other languages and language families. Hypotheses have been presented assigning Japanese to virtually all major language families: Altaic, Austronesian, Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, and Dravidian. The most persuasive is the Altaic theory, but even here evidence is hardly as firm as that which relates the languages of the Indo-European family, as can be seen in ongoing speculations among both scholars and linguistic amateurs.

With regard to individual languages, Ryūkyūan, Ainu and Korean have been the strongest candidates proposed as possible sister languages. Among these, the Japanese-Ryūkyūan connection has been firmly established. Ryūkyūan, spoken in Okinawa, is, in fact, now considered to be a dialect of Japanese. A Japanese-Ainu relationship has been hypothesised, but evidence is scanty. On the other hand, the Japanese-Korean hypothesis

stands on firmer ground and perhaps it is safe to assume that they are related, though remotely.

The earliest written records of the Japanese language date back to the eighth century. The oldest among them, the *Kojiki* ('Record of Ancient Matters') (AD 712) is written in Chinese characters. The preface to this work is written in Chinese syntax as well. What was done is that the characters whose meanings were equivalent to Japanese expressions were arranged according to Chinese syntax. Thus, the document is not readily intelligible to those who do not know how the Chinese ordering of elements corresponds to the Japanese ordering, since Chinese word order is similar to English, e.g. *Mary likes fish*, as opposed to the Japanese order of *Mary fish likes*. Furthermore, it is not clear how such characters were read; they may have been read purely in the Chinese style in imitation of the Chinese pronunciation of the characters used or they may have been read in a Japanese way, i.e. by uttering those Japanese words corresponding in meaning to the written Chinese characters and inverting the order of elements so as to follow the Japanese syntax. Perhaps both methods were used. This means that a character such as 山 'mountain' was read both as *san*, the Chinese reading, and as *yama*, the semantically equivalent Japanese word for the character. This practice of reading Chinese characters both in the Chinese way and in terms of the semantically equivalent Japanese words persists even today.

By the time the *Manyōshū* ('Collection of a Myriad Leaves'), an anthology of Japanese verse, was completed (AD 759), the Japanese had learned to use Chinese characters as phonetic symbols. Thus, the Japanese word *yama* 'mountain' could be written phonetically by using a character with the sound *ya* (e.g. 夜 'evening') and another with the sound *ma* (e.g. 麻 'hemp'), as 夜麻. In other words, what stands for 'mountain' could be written in two ways. One used the Chinese word 山, as discussed above. The other way was to choose Chinese characters read as *ya* and *ma*. It is this latter phonetic way of writing which gave rise to the two uniquely Japanese syllabary writings known as *kana*.

Since things Chinese were regarded as culturally superior to their native equivalents, the Chinese manner was a formal way of writing. The phonetic representation of Japanese was considered only 'temporary' or mnemonic in nature. Thus, the phonetic writing was called *karina* 'temporary letters' while the Chinese way of writing was called *mana* 'true letters'.

Present-day *karina* (now pronounced as *kana*) have developed as simplified Chinese characters used phonetically. There are two kinds of *kana*. The original *kana* were used as mnemonic symbols in reading characters and were written alongside them; hence they are called *kata-kana* 'side *kana*'. *Hira-gana* 'plain *kana*' have developed by simplifying the grass style (i.e. cursive) writing of characters. These two *kana* syllabaries are set out in table 43.1.

Table 43.1: Japanese Kana Syllabaries

Hiragana										
A	KA	SA	TA	NA	HA	MA	YA	RA	WA	
あ	か	さ	た	な	は	ま	や	ら	わ	
I	KI	SI	TI	NI	HI	MI		RI		
い	き	し	ち	に	ひ	み		り		
U	KU	SU	TU	NU	HU	MU	YU	RU		
う	く	す	つ	ぬ	ふ	む	ゆ	る		
E	KE	SE	TE	NE	HE	ME		RE		
え	け	せ	て	ね	へ	め		れ		
O	KO	SO	TO	NO	HO	MO	YO	RO	WO	N
お	こ	そ	と	の	ほ	も	よ	ろ	を	ん
Katakana										
A	KA	SA	TA	NA	HA	MA	YA	RA	WA	
ア	カ	サ	タ	ナ	ハ	マ	ヤ	ラ	ワ	
I	KI	SI	TI	NI	HI	MI		RI		
イ	キ	シ	チ	ニ	ヒ	ミ		リ		
U	KU	SU	TU	NU	HU	MU	YU	RU		
ウ	ク	ス	ツ	ヌ	フ	ム	ユ	ル		
E	KE	SE	TE	NE	HE	ME		RE		
エ	ケ	セ	テ	ネ	ヘ	メ		レ		
O	KO	SO	TO	NO	HO	MO	YO	RO	WO	N
オ	コ	ソ	ト	ノ	ホ	モ	ヨ	ロ	ワ	ン

Note: Voicing oppositions, where applicable, are indicated by the diacritical dots on the upper right hand corner of each *kana*; e.g. *gi* ぎ as opposed to *ki* き.

Katakana were originally used in combination with Chinese characters. *Hiragana*, on the other hand, were mainly used by women and were not mixed with characters. The contemporary practice is to use Chinese characters, called *kanji*, for content words, and *hiragana* for grammatical function words such as particles and inflectional endings. *Katakana* is used to write foreign loanwords, telegrams and in certain onomatopoeic expressions.

In addition, there is *rōmaji*, which is another phonetic writing system using the Roman alphabet. *Rōmaji* is mainly employed in writing station names as an aid for foreigners, in signing documents written in Western languages and in writing foreign acronyms (e.g. *ILO*, *IMF*). It is also used in advertising. Thus the word for 'mountain' can be written as 山 in *kanji*, as ヤマ in *katakana*, as やま in *hiragana* and as *yama* in *rōmaji*. Sometimes all these four ways of writing can be found in one sentence; e.g. the sentence *Hanako is an OL (< office lady i.e. 'office girl') working in that building* can be written as below:

花子	は	あのビル	で	働いている	OL	です。
Hanako	wa	ano biru	de	hataraitte-iru	ozeru	desu.
		top. that building	at	work-ing	OL	cop.

The traditional way of writing is to write vertically, lines progressing from right to left. Today both vertical writing and horizontal writing, as illustrated above, are practised.

As may be surmised from the above discussion, learning how to write Japanese involves considerable effort. Japanese children must master all four ways of writing by the time they complete nine years of Japan's compulsory education. Of these, the most difficult is the Chinese system. For each *kanji*, at least two ways of reading must be learned: one the *on-yomi*, the Sino-Japanese reading, and the other the *kun-yomi*, the Japanese reading. For the character 山 'mountain', *san* is the Sino-Japanese reading and *yama* the Japanese. Normally, the Sino-Japanese reading is employed in compounds consisting of two or more Chinese characters, while in isolation the Japanese reading is adopted.

An additional complication is the multiplicity of Sino-Japanese readings. This is due to the fact that Chinese characters, or rather their pronunciations, were borrowed from different parts of China as well as at different times. Thus, dialectal differences in pronunciation also had to be learned by the Japanese. One of the two major sources of borrowing was the Wu area of China during the Six Dynasties period. The reading reflecting this dialect is called *go'on*. The other reading called *kan'on* reflects a newer dialect of *Chang-an*, which is believed to be the standard language of the Tang period. The character 米 for 'rice' is pronounced *mai* in *go'on*, *bei* in *kan'on* and *kome* and *yone* in the Japanese reading. Unlike the *on-yomi* versus *kun-yomi*, there is no systematic rule for determining whether a given character is to be read in *kan'on* or in *go'on*; each expression must be learned as to which way it is read. The character 米 for 'rice', for example, will be read in *go'on* in a form like 外米 *gai mai* 'imported rice', but in *kan'on* in a form like 米田 *bei koku* 'America'. That is, the *go'on/kan'on* distinction is purely historical and speakers of Japanese must simply live with the fact that in addition to the Japanese way of reading, most *kanji* have two or more Chinese ways of reading them and that the same *kanji* is likely to be pronounced differently depending on which expression it is used in.

Because of this kind of complexity caused by retaining all these writing methods, there have been movements for abolishing Chinese characters in favour of *kana* writing and even movements for completely Romanising the Japanese language. All these, however, have so far failed and it is safe to say that Chinese characters are here to stay. What has been done instead of abolishing Chinese characters altogether is to limit the number of commonly used characters. In 1946, the Japanese government issued a list of 1,850 characters for this purpose. The list was revised in 1981, and the new list, called *Jōyō Kanji Hyō* ('List of Characters for Daily Use'), contains 1,945 characters recommended for daily use. This is now regarded as the basic list of Chinese characters to be learned during elementary and intermediate education. Also, most newspapers try to limit the use of characters to these