REVIEW


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The orthographic system of the Japanese language in place today is the result of more than eighty years of controversy over the relative merits of tradition and convenience in the area of script. The modernization, selection, simplification, and/or establishment of guidelines on the use of four types of scripts (explained below) have been planned and implemented to a large extent through the Japanese government’s language policy. The book Kanji Politics: Language Policy and Japanese Script traces and explores the history of this language policy as it relates to script in twentieth-century Japan — from the establishment of the National Language Research Council in 1902 to the completion of the postwar policy review by the National Language Council in 1991. Of the various reviews and discussions of language policy processes during the designated period, the book unquestionably is one of the most comprehensive currently available in the English language.

Not all language planning during this century has concerned the written language, of course; various matters relating to the spoken language, such as the issue of standardization and the use of honorifics, have been addressed by language policy as well. This book, however, focuses on the written language and its script. This focus is justified by the author on the basis of her preliminary assessment of policy documents since 1902; it is further supported by Haugen’s 1966 claim that language planning attempts primarily to shape the formal written manifestation of language. Additionally, the script and particularly the kanji script (Chinese characters) may merit particular attention from a sociolinguistic perspective, insofar as the tradition and history of writing systems of East Asian languages represent the cultural unity and identity of East Asian cultures.

A brief introduction to the Japanese writing system, which the book includes as a short section of the first introductory chapter, may be appropriate at this point. The Japanese language today is normally written in a mixture of three scripts: hiragana, katakana, and kanji. The first two are syllabaries known as kana; two kinds of kana, namely hira-gana ‘plain kana’ and kata-kana ‘partial kana’, have been developed as a simplification of the so-called mon’yoo-gana — the phonetic use of Chinese characters to provide a purely phonetic representation of words. Kanji (the word also appearing in the title of the book) refers to Chinese characters that are used as logograms in the Japanese writing system.
The earliest systematic written records of Japanese (for example, Kojiki, ‘Record of Ancient Matters’ A.D. 712) were written exclusively in Chinese characters, and by the time Man’yoshu (an anthology of Japanese verse, A.D. 769) was completed, the Japanese had developed the use of Chinese characters as a phonetic means of writing Japanese words. Although kanji and kana (hiragana and katakana) were used independently of each other for centuries, the contemporary writing system is characterized by a mix of these scripts, using kanji for content words, hiragana for grammatical function words such as particles and inflectional endings, and katakana for foreign loan words, telegrams, and certain onomatopoeic expressions. In addition to these scripts that originate in Chinese characters, there is a fourth writing system, called romaji, which is a phonetic transliteration system using the Latin alphabet. Two major systems of romaji have been developed. The first of these, the Hepburn system, was based on the third edition of the Japanese-English Glossary (1886)² written by the American missionary James Curtis Hepburn. Later, the Japanese government, in its attempt to unify all the different romaji systems, introduced the kunrei system ‘cabinet directive system’ in 1937, with a revision in 1954. Whereas the Hepburn system is designed to be accessible to English speakers who know English spelling and pronunciation, the kunrei system is phonemic in nature.

Romaji is not mentioned in Gottlieb’s introductory section in Chapter 1, but the romaji systems and their significance in the early stages of language planning are taken up in Chapter 2. Discussed in this introductory section, among other matters, is the size of the kanji vocabulary as found in kanji dictionaries and other documents in Japanese. The mention of such figures as 49,964 for the largest 12-volume Daikanwa Dictionary, and 9,921 for the Shinjigen, is instructive: it enables readers to appreciate the truly drastic reduction in the number of characters permitted for official use (to as few as 1850) through the language policy put forth in the year 1946, as discussed later.

The overall content of the book Kanji Politics is highly accessible to readers having no background in the Japanese language, and the topic and issues addressed in the book are of great significance and interest to researchers in general sociolinguistics and language policy, even those who do not know any Japanese. However, given the brevity of the book’s introductory discussion of the Japanese writing system and sound system, such readers may find it useful to refer to Chapters 6 and 8 of Shibatani 1990 in order to supplement what the book leaves unexplained. The first six chapters of Hadamitzky and Spahn 1981 may also be useful as a further general introduction to the Japanese writing system and particularly to the nature of kanji.³ For the history of the Japanese writing system prior to 1902, readers can refer to Seeley 1991.

Chapter 1 also outlines the major intellectual issues which have shaped the debate around language policy and script, referring to influential linguists (including Masatsugu Ando, Motoki Tokieda, Tatsuo Miyajima, and Susumu Ono) and novelists and language activists (e.g., Yuzo Yamamoto), as well as sketching the historical, political, and philosophical background of the time under investiga-
tion. This discussion also serves to preview the major themes to be detailed in Chapters 2 through 5.

Chief among the issues raised regarding the formulation and implementation of writing system policy during the period from 1902 to 1991 are the following three: first, the modernization of kana usage (kana-zukai); secondly, the selection of major script type(s) — i.e., whether kana only, romaji only, kanji-kana mixture, etc.; third, and most importantly and pervasively, issues concerning the kanji vocabulary itself. Major matters relating to kanji included the readings and shapes (mostly simplification in this period) of the kanji characters, and the matter of okuri-gana (i.e., kana added on to kanji characters in inflected words to show which part of the word inflects). The determination of the size of the kanji vocabulary permitted for official use and education was, however, by far the most crucial issue. This last issue engendered a long and vitriolic debate and post-reform review cycle around the limitation of the NUMBER of the kanji characters for general use, the SELECTION of particular kanji characters to be included in the general-use list, and the NATURE of such a list (i.e., whether it should rigorously prescribe limitations for public use or only recommend such guidelines).

Rather than structuring the presentation of materials according to these issues, however, the book organizes the remaining chapters 2 through 5 chronologically, according to the major events and policies planned, announced, and implemented in each period of time. This presentational scheme, to be sure, has the advantage of serving better as documentation and review of the major steps in the language planning process that have taken place since 1902. Indeed, for just this reason, the book stands a good chance of becoming a major reference work on language planning and policy in Japan for international audiences. Such a mode of presentation, however, may give some readers the impression that the presentation (and possibly the analysis itself) is weak on synthesis. The addition of a comprehensive concluding chapter after Chapter 5 would perhaps have resolved this problem without sacrificing the organizational strength of the book.

Chapter 2 presents the beginning of Japanese language policy during the pre-war period, covering the activities of the National Language Research Council (Kokugo Chosa linkai, established in 1902) and its successor the Interim National Language Research Council (1921 — 1934), and the setting up of the National Language Council in 1934. Also significant during this period, as described by Gottlieb, are the influence of the press, the role of private pressure groups in promoting script reform, and the rise of ultranationalism and its role in thwarting reform.

Chapter 3 moves on to the war years, a period of increasing tension in Japan, with the growing power and influence of the military, culminating in the invasion of China in 1937 and the war in Asia and the Pacific. Gottlieb first discusses the myth of kotodama, the ‘spirit of the Japanese language’ (‘logopneuma’), a loaded term used to convey the idea prevalent at that period that this somehow ‘unique’ language was inextricably bound up with the essence of the Japanese national spirit and hence must never be tampered with. Chinese charac-
ters and historical kanazukai (kana usage based on the old Japanese sound system) in particular were highly venerated in this connection; advocates of kana or romaji, on the other hand, became the target of right-wing persecution. The chapter then discusses (i) military moves for script reform as a matter of practical necessity, (ii) unsuccessful reform proposals by the National Language Council, and (iii) the language policies formulated for the teaching of Japanese in the colonies and later as the common language of Asia in the occupied territories. Despite the recognized expediency of the language reform that had been implemented by the military and formally proposed by the National Language Council, the ultranationalists were not disposed to allow the new character limits to pass into wider society. Six ultranationalists, led by a prominent right-winger, Toyama Mitsuru, submitted a petition to the Ministry of Education stressing the long history of characters in Japan and their close connection with the life of the Japanese people. To continue opposition to all forms of language reform, a pressure group, the Nihon Kokugokai [National Language Association of Japan], was established. Also opposing the reform proposal was the Bungaku Hokokukai [Patriotic Literary Association].

Chapter 4 presents the climax of the script reform process during the postwar period. During this Occupation period, a cycle of reforms began in 1946 with the adoption of both the List of Kanji Characters for Interim Use, containing 1,850 kanji characters, and the policy of Modern Kana Usage. The former policy concerning kanji officially imposed tight limitations on the hitherto unrestricted use of kanji characters in the press, publications, and compulsory education. The latter policy concerning kana usage revised the age-old canons for usage of the syllabary (the historical kana-zukai), part of which no longer reflected the pronunciation of present-day spoken Japanese due to the natural process of sound change since the time kana was created. The Modern Kana Usage replaced this historical kana-zukai with a system reflecting the actual pronunciation of modern Japanese.

Gottlieb first explores 'the democracy argument' which underlay the reforms. She explains the socio-political background of this postwar period, which 'was characterized by a desire to forget the immediate past and to start again, rebuilding Japan from the ashes of defeat.' Guided by the Occupation authorities, various democratically oriented reforms were carried out in major political and educational systems (e.g., revision of the Constitution, land ownership reform, and educational system reform). In terms of script reform, this democracy movement adopted the view that the huge vocabulary of complex kanji characters and the remaining vestiges of archaic style were something that belonged to the old ruling class, and that these script systems should be changed in such a way that the entire nation could master and understand the written language easily. With this new direction, the advocates of romanization and kana, whose activities had been suppressed during the war, now surfaced again; instead of being censured as harmful to kotodama 'spirit of the Japanese language', their theories now gained the backing of the 'democracy argument'. Gottlieb's discussion of this matter encompasses various sources, including an editorial in a Japanese newspa-
per in 1945 which suggested that ‘the abolition of kanji would clear away the remaining feudal mentality and enable Japan to achieve American-style efficiency’; ‘[by] using the Western alphabet instead of [kanji] characters, there would be an increase in national intellectual standards which would lead to maturity as a democratic government and a civilized nation’. Also examined in this chapter is the reorganization of the National Language Council, and the setting up of the National Language Research Institute in 1951 to provide scientific research and data to inform policy decisions.

Another key problem dealt with in this chapter is the question of, and policy pertaining to, how best to organize the teaching of kanji characters on the new list (i.e., Toyo Kanji, the List of Kanji Characters for Interim Use, 1946) in schools through compulsory education. In 1948, following deliberations by a specially constituted subcommittee of the National Language Council, the Toyo Kanji Beppyo [Separate List of Characters for Interim Use] was announced. This list, which came to be known as the Kyoiku Kanji [Kanji Characters for Education], selected 881 kanji characters, out of 1850 on the larger list, to be taught for both reading and writing during the nine-year period of compulsory education.

As a result of the postwar reforms, in addition to the aforementioned two major reforms and the Kanji Characters for Education, the shapes of the kanji characters on the List were simplified by reducing the number of strokes, and the ways in which each particular kanji character were to be pronounced in different contexts were limited, reducing the number of readings people were expected to remember. Further issues investigated and planned during the 1950s by the Council and the National Language Research Institute were the characters to be used in personal and place names (an attempt at revision of the List of Characters for Interim Use), and the rules for using okuri-gana — an attempt to bring a degree of uniformity to okuri-gana usage. The gradual spread of these reforms was facilitated through their adoption in textbooks, government documents, and the printed media.

The fifth and final chapter covers the period of the policy review cycle from the 1960s through 1991, which can be characterized as a period of reversal reforms. Gottlieb examines the increasing tension between conservatives and reformers in the late 1950s, the building of a power base by the former, the tactics they used to impede and finally stall the progress of further activities, LDP (the Liberal-Democratic Party) complicity in this matter, and finally the process of review and partial reversal of the earlier changes. For example, the drastic limitation on the number of kanji characters (to as few as 1850) in the postwar reform of the 1940s was questioned, and gradually loosened. The size of the List of Kanji Characters for Interim Use increased to a total of 1900 characters in the revised list proposed in 1977. This revised list was reported to the Minister in March 1979 under a new name — the Joyo Kanji-hyo An’ [Proposal of the List of Characters of General Use]; the name joyo kanji (joyo means ‘daily use’) gained the most votes in a questionnaire circulated to all members, and this list was now implemented as the official recommendation of guidelines for general use. Gottlieb’s discussion of this report also includes the Council’s proposal for education, to the
effect that with the appearance of this list the earlier separate list of 881 characters for education was to be repealed; the matter of how to teach the new list was reserved for separate enquiry along with that of name characters. With further additions and revisions, the *kanji* list was finally fixed at 1945 characters in 1981, and promulgated under the new name Joyo Kanji Hyo [the List of Characters for General/Daily Use].

The bibliography of the book merits particular praise. The references to Japanese materials, and particularly government documents and reports, are very impressive; they include various materials that are difficult to obtain outside of libraries and research institutions affiliated with the Japanese government. Gottlieb’s research is obviously based on extensive fieldwork in Japan, including the National Language Research Institute, and her bibliography reflects this breadth.

In terms of style and presentation, the book should be very readable by laymen having no knowledge of Japanese history and society or background in language planning and policy in Japan. However, one surprising lack, considering the general purpose of the book as a useful reference and documentation in addition to its theoretical contribution, is the total omission of summary tables, charts, or lists. The addition of several key tables schematizing major reforms of various aspects of the scripts, or a table chronologically summarizing the major language policies implemented, could have helped novice readers get past the preliminary stage of establishing a clear factual overview of the relevant language policy issues, thereby enabling them to concentrate better on the more crucial conceptual issues underlying the policy process.

As pointed out by the author, the language planning and policy issues explored in the present book for the case of modern Japan are different in nature from many other cases of language planning, in that they center around selection of scripts rather than selection of language. Further, except for the brief initial section of the first chapter, no explicit cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons are attempted even within East Asia in the book. Nonetheless, its careful review and investigation yield an important case study, both for future cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison and for more general theoretical work.

NOTES

1 Throughout the book, with the exception of the title and initial mention, Gottlieb uses the term ‘characters’ to refer to the Chinese characters used in the Japanese writing system (i.e., *kanji*). For clarity, I will instead use the Japanese term *kanji* in my discussion to refer to the same. Notice that the term *Kanji* appears in the book title.

2 *Wa-ei gorin shusei* (Japanese-English Glossary) was first published in 1867.

3 Shibatani 1990 and Hadamitzky and Spahn 1981 are not included in the bibliography of the book; Seeley 1991 is included.
During the last stages of this period, finally, yet another issue regarding foreign words was taken up: how foreign words should be spelled in *katakana*. In 1990 the *Gairaigo no Hyoki* (*An*) [The Writing of Foreign Loan-words: Proposal] was put forth and officially adopted by the Cabinet in June, 1991.

This, however, never resulted in romanization or *kana*-only writing system; as explained at the beginning of the present review, the writing system used at present and throughout the reforms involves a mixture of *kana* and *kanji* characters.

The *Joyo Kanji-hyo* *An* [Proposal of the List of Characters of General Use] reported in 1979 contained 1926 characters. For this list, see the National Language Council Report 13.309-467, or the National Language Research Institute’s Annual Report *Kokugo Nenkan* 1979. The list of characters that were not included in the earlier *Toyo Kanji* [the List of Kanji Characters for Interim Use] of 1946 but were added to the *The Joyo Kanji-hyo* *An* can also be found in this report (p. 49).

See the National Research Institute’s Annual Report *Kokugo Nenkan* 1981 (Date and Materials, 37-190), or the National Language Council Report 14.129-298). Both the list (*Joyo Kanji Hyo ‘The List of Characters for General/Daily Use’*) and the whole text of the official proposal submitted in 1981 (Shintaro Fukushima, chairman of the National Language Council, 14th Period) can be found in these reports.

**REFERENCES**


174

STUDIES IN THE LINGUISTIC SCIENCES 29:1 (SPRING 1999)


