Kanji as Written Japanese, and the Character Code Problem

KATSURA Eishi: *The Library of Babel*, the exhibition currently running at the ICC [*an art exhibition featuring XU Bing, YAMAGUCHI Katsuhiro, KOHMURA Masao and SUZUKI Ryoji, which ran from September 18th to October 25th, 1998—ed.*] features a lot of work dealing with issues of Chinese characters in both informatics and written Chinese and Japanese, and in this context, I'd like to ask you, Professor SUZUKI, about your own research into the relationship between Chinese characters and the Japanese language. As for myself, until now, I've done a bit of reflection myself on the role of *kanji* within the context of both libraries and computers. I'd like to begin our discussion on the subject of *kanji* data exchange; and approach this linguistic issue from an information processing technology standpoint.

SUZUKI Takao: What do you mean when you say "data exchange"?

KATSURA: Simply put, that in order to display Chinese characters on the computer screen, different people have different ideas about which magnitude of data is appropriate to properly express the written Chinese script, and that there is some negotiation among the various interests involved right now. The strictly technical issue of standardizing these data exchange protocols has taken on the character of a political issue.

SUZUKI: Because somebody has to concede . . . .

KATSURA: Precisely. But it is already a matter of international standardization. On the east coast of the United States, for example, there is a very large library dedicated to Asian Studies. They are obviously collecting a lot of materials, for which they need to produce an inventory. They need to corroborate their files with those of other libraries, such as the National Diet Library here in Japan. But if their respective *kanji* code architecture is different, then the sharing or transfer of data becomes meaningless, to the detriment of both sides. This problem is commonly called the *kanji* code problem. My position has long been that this was something to be worked out between the various scientific and technical organizations. The problem is that the influence of the software industry, and companies like Microsoft, is sufficient to create de facto standards. The result of this is "unicode," an industry standard for *kanji* code architecture. And we see things like the Chinese letter for *one* "一" [a single horizontal bar which extends across one full character's space—trans.], and the character used for extending a vowel in the *katakana* syllabary "ー" [a single horizontal bar which extends across one half of one character's space] could be regarded as one and the same in their engineers' position. Of course if you want to call it a violence to the language you are certainly justified in doing so, though seen from an engineering perspective of popularizing global information processing standards, and the according establishment of rational devices for expressing Chinese character sets

Kanji as Cultural Mechanism

SUZUKI Takao and KATSURA Eishi

(including *kanji*) in information processing, it seems one of a set of naturally occurring issues, just, as I mentioned before, when trying to realize electronic libraries capable of providing and exchanging comprehensive records of various texts. The *kanji* code issues must normally face the dissecting block. In this sense, these new "global" commercial influences provide an excellent opportunity to discuss this relationship between differing standards for encrypting *kanji*.

What we are finding instead are things like the event "Save *Kanji!* A Symposium to Consider *Kanji* Code Issues" held in 1997 by the Japan Writers' Association chaired by ETOH Jun. What we saw at that time were professional wordsmiths who are obliged to use *kanji* offering a declaration of their position on the matter of digital confinement of their expressions when faced with a future of providing or exchanging their works through the Internet or electronic libraries. Of course, such declarations are not the problem. The problem is the content of their grievance. Their first missive was a reactive claim to "Save the Language!" rather than laying the foundations for a rational discussion on how *kanji* data should be exchanged. They were interested in creating a campaign for the preservation of written Japanese in absolutist terms.

SUZUKI: They are more concerned with the fact of Japanese being at the mercy of the global deluge of English?

KATSURA: Their argument was that computer languages (Operating Systems and their related machine languages) were written to process data within the 26 letters of the English alphabet. Now I'm not saying that this is mistaken, but rather that now, with computers this influential in all matters of science and economy, they are apprehensive about their powers of expression being confined through this technology.

SUZUKI: What exactly do you think they meant by "confined"?

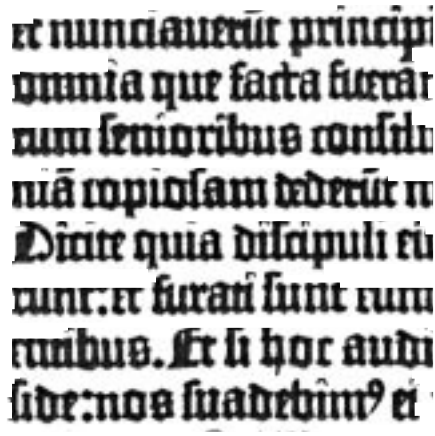
KATSURA: For example, when an author writes his manuscript by hand, they might want to use *kanji* not included in the JIS Standard or Unicode databases. Common examples include the 鷗 (*oh*) in the famous Meiji Era author MORI Ohgai's name, or the 閒 (*ken*) in the author UCHIDA Hyakken's name. Their concern is that the confines of *kanji* available to the computer user will become the confines of the author's linguistic palette. My objection to this is the logic which equates the *kanji* code issue with the expressive potential of the Japanese language. The potential for symbolic representation within Japanese language as a whole, versus the potential for symbolic representation of *kanji* alone are, while related, entirely different issues which, I feel, warrant entirely different discussions. And I find a discussion, by those who are using the Japanese language for artistic expression, which identifies itself solely on the role of *kanji*, to be a bit impoverished.

SUZUKI: Throughout the world, there are any number of writing systems besides the Roman script. Chinese (including *kanji*), Cyrillic, Arabic, Armenian, Hebrew and Greek, to name only a few. And while Cyrillic and Arabic script can be classified with *kanji* in that they are not Roman script, their essential character is not lost in conversion to Roman script. On the other hand, some scripts, including Japanese, gain a great level of anomaly in the transfer to Roman script. I'm continually doubtful as to whether there is anyone out there with a real grasp of this issue, actually discussing it.

The national language researchers seem unaware of it, and the general linguists are not interested in writing systems. As you know, linguists consider writing systems like one might think of apparel: the "no matter what you wear, the body inside is the same" approach. "Language is who we find beneath the clothing . . . ." The world of Japanese language studies are ruled by such modern linguistic methodologies—the result is that graphemes (elements of writing systems) are not considered language itself, but externals. I have been saying all along that the Romanization of Japanese changes its very character. Their response is that it is actually an external element, but, like ill-fitting shoes that cut into one's foot, it incrementally influences the form of the wearer. I will concede that their origins may have been external, but given that Japanese has been using the graphemes of *kanji* for over a thousand years, we must consider that the application of an entirely different graphemic structure (Roman script) opens up a completely different world of linguistic issues. Whether these issues are a distraction or not can be discussed separately, but I do believe that we should begin from a recognition that they are indeed different.

KATSURA: The Japan Writers' Association's discussions were unable to focus on the fact that Japanese is a language composed of *kanji*, *katakana* and *hiragana*. It was this point that I found shocking. The sense of discontinuity inherent in a text with several coexistent writing systems is an essential feature of Japanese, with such ruptures in any given sentence. Writing in Japanese inside of wordprocessing software, the fact that one is required to hit the character conversion key, (typically the "space bar" which pulls up a submenu of *kanji* choices for the phoneticized Roman-based keyboard input) is a physical recognition of the language's discontinuity. It is a form of discontinuity distinct from simply partitioning words with spaces or collecting scattered syllables to make word compounds. As long as our use of the language is predicated on the use of several coexistent writing systems, all of it, including authors' names should be considered "Japanese" script.

SUZUKI: Making *kanji* alone into an issue, you soon find people wringing their hands because it was originally Chinese. I, however, am always proclaiming before the National Language Council that the two are completely unrelated. For over thirty years now! (Laughs) Back in those days, MAO Zedong was proposing that the People's Republic of China abandon the use of Chinese characters, and I was asserting that the relationship between Chinese



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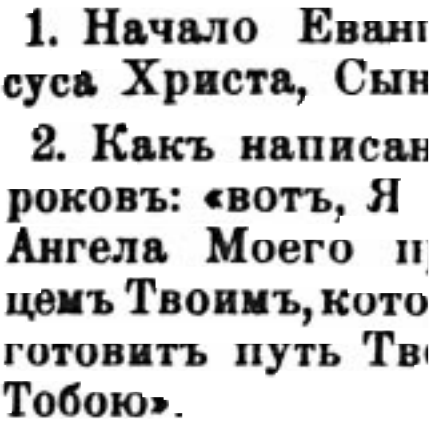

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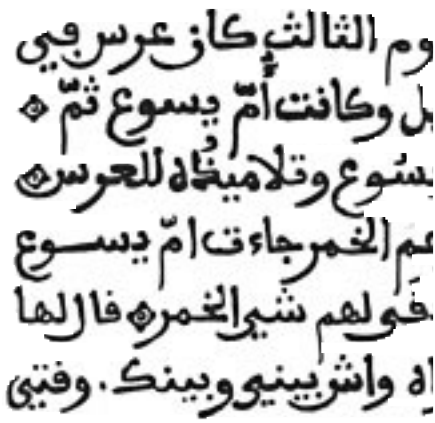

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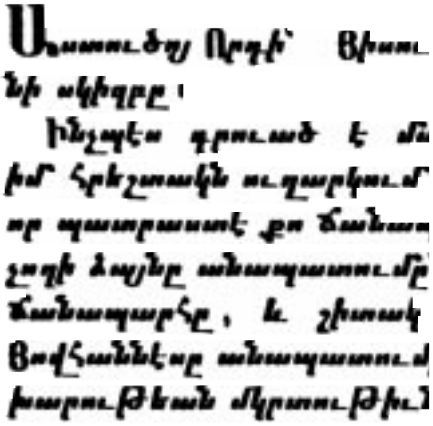

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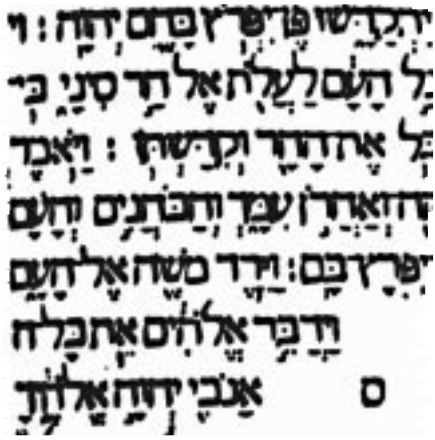

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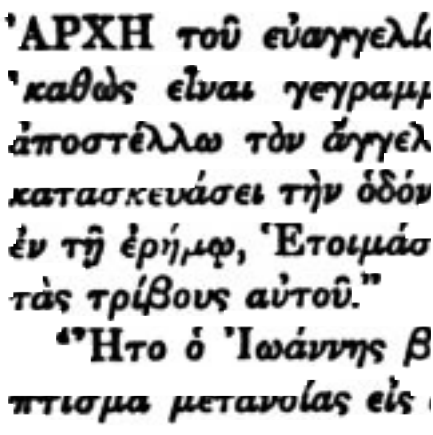

Greek

and *kanji* were a separate issue from the relationship between Japanese and *kanji*. *Kanji*, because it is employed along with *hiragana* and *katakana*, simply exhibits complex effects in Japanese unthinkable in other languages—whether in its interrelations between constituent elements which can not be dissected in the same manner as European languages, or in being used for punctuation in ways that Chinese is not.

It is common for the Japanese to describe their language in terms of its extraordinary peculiarities. Even when mapping linguistic families to say that it is isolated, but this is just another Japanese pathology to describe that they feel isolated from those languages which are presently leading the world—to once again decry their sense of inferiority towards Europe and North America in this "international" era. This is ludicrous. Look at Hebrew. It was dead for two thousand years until after WWII, when it was specially resuscitated. Now there's a language whose peculiar script has no international currency whatsoever. If we want to be able to debate the functions and effects of Japanese writing systems, we must first separate them from this invariable global status pathology. In this sense, I'm in favor of non-linguists like yourself, Mr. KATSURA, helping to organize issues of international linguistic exchange.

KATSURA: Well, whether I'm capable of organizing issues of international linguistic exchange or not, my affiliation with *kanji* to present includes a relationship with an international movement towards a framework for "international cooperation" between Chinese, Japanese, and Korean's use of Chinese characters, and it is something which I am quite uncomfortable with. The means and applications by which *kanji* acts as a symbolic representation of the Japanese language is, or has a history which must be entirely distinct than that of the very same or similar Chinese characters' functioning within the Chinese and Korean languages, and it is my opinion that only through an understanding of these very indigenous idiosyncracies that we can come to a realistic apprehension of what *kanji* is. And in order to begin to gain such an apprehension, it is absolutely essential that we first have a clear understanding of the nature of Japanese's coexistent writing systems, and to the extent that we rigidly confine our discussions of our written language to the origins or shapes of specific written characters of only one of these, outside of this essential cultural context, we are, in effect, prohibiting ourselves from having meaningful discussions about the means and applications of written Japanese as a whole. Studying the Japanese written language according to cause and effect, it seems, is considered rather unorthodox though . . . .

SUZUKI: My comments at the National Language Council that I just don't want to hear testimony from famous specialists in Chinese characters are regularly, how shall I say, frowned upon. (Laughs) I am just tired of listening to them tell us about how things are done in China, really. The British don't ask specialists in ancient Greek or Latin to their discussions about the spelling of modern English, after all . . . even should the word in question use Latin spellings . . . but when it comes to discussing written Japanese, the issue of Chinese characters shows up, and things get lost in intractable discussions of the ancients . . . and this is why I proposed that we just begin with the supposition that there is no other people on earth using Chinese characters as the Japanese do, and that we just let ourselves worry about ourselves. Let's discuss how the language functions as a whole, I said, whether it is efficient or not, and what those who live in the language are dissatisfied with, and not whether it measures up to some European language or another. Then someone pipes up with another chorus of "let's abandon *kanji* because it's uneconomical," that old tune from the Meiji Restoration of the late 19th century when Japan first opened it's doors to the west. Well, that very uneconomical *kanji*, is an essential part of the very same writing system that Japan used to leap from being a decimated nation to being one of the world's leading economic and technological leaders in the space of a few short decades. It's a dim craftsman that blames his tools.

Translation Systems as Seen Through Japanese

KATSURA: Considering *kanji* as a Japanese writing form, one confronts issues of translation. Words coined within Japanese's coexistent writing systems often carry a certain unique kind of abstraction. For example, there are many four-character idioms, technical terms like 情報処理 [information processing], etc. Especially in specialist contexts these kinds of highly abstract *kanji* combinations tend to stand out.

[*One of the features of the Chinese writing system, when compared to Romanized languages, is that the meanings of even unfamiliar words are quite clear—because you have a pictogram to work from. The art, then, of creating meaningful modern* kanji *representations for words as they enter the modern lexicon is one subtext of these conversations, because so many of the new words are coming from English, and coming without passing through the filter of* kanji *for a number of reasons. One result is that many new words become either strangely abstract* kanji *combinations or etymologically lost syllabic signifiers of whatever tongue they entered Japanese from. A further complication to this issue, in Japanese, is that* kanji *culture requires approval in a way that separates it from the spoken word, in a way that distinguishes Japanese and Korean from Chinese, and this approval process tends towards sophistic obfuscation rather than clarity.—trans.*]

SUZUKI: In medicine you have 白血病 [white blood disease=leukemia], in agriculture, you have 施肥 [to feed manure] for fertilization, or 潅水 [to pour water] for "watering."

KATSURA: Within Japanese as a written language, the power of abstraction within *kanji* is especially prevalent in the context of its coexistence with the other writing systems. Recently they have begun teaching computer literacy in the elementary schools, and the idea of making new characters is on the rise. And here what we see is the sudden rise of abstract new idioms, many of them imbued with a potential quite different, in my opinion, from what

we've seen come out of Japanese's coexistent writing systems until now.

SUZUKI: Can you offer examples?

KATSURA: Idioms have typically been noun combinations. One of the new idioms I have taken an interest in is the prevalence among the young to prefix words with 超 (*cho*) as a new adjectival form, meaning "Hyper" or "Super" . . . .

SUZUKI: In linguistic terms, Japanese has traditionally had very few adjectival prefixes. Perhaps "真" 白 ["pure" white] or "小" 気味がいい ["terribly" adorable], perhaps a few others . . . . If you think about it, "激" 安 ["ultra" cheap] is a fairly new form of coinage . . . .

KATSURA: If we start seeing more such coinages, with more idioms like we are used to seeing with noun compounds such as "information processing" and "leukemia," they may have entirely greater potentials for abstraction than current noun compounds. I think that we can also look forward to an even more dramatic rise in abstraction in a written language which is, at the same time, closer to the spoken word, fed by its relation to the potential inherent with the complex of writing systems that are the Japanese language. I see this movement really starting to stand out recently. Even in the halls of Tokyo University (the highest "elite" university in Japan) they have the new 超域文化科学専攻 [postgraduate course of interdisciplinary cultural studies] section lately. (Laughs)

SUZUKI: 超 used in the sense of going beyond?

KATSURA: It is a translation of "interdisciplinary" from the English, but with a very new sense of abstraction in their use of *kanji*.

SUZUKI: If you think about it in simple terms, it is a dormant potential within Japanese finding realization and articulation—something to really be supportive of. Aesthetically and historically, there are those who may take the conservative path and claim these new attempts as "impossible" or "awful to the ear." Theoretically considered, these are things which should have been applicable, yet were somehow absent. And yet, through interference and contact with European languages, new forms of expression within Japanese would have been realized, and that would be a kind of development based on invention.

KATSURA: I agree. 超域 [super territorial] is one example, but translated phrases offer up other linguistic issues which had also been shelved for some time.

SUZUKI: Lately translators have shown intellectual sloth, transliterating when they should be translating, unlike the Meiji period [a little over a century ago, when Japan first opened the doors of its feudal society to the world], when they tried to absorb several hundred years of civilization. The translators back then worked feverishly to see that these new concepts found meaningful Japanese linguistic foundations. They would look back to an English word's Greek or Latin roots, attempting to draw out its meaning and find ways to make it easier to digest for the average Japanese. But nowadays, all we get is transliteration in *katakana*—for example, ターミナルケア *"tahminaru kea"* for terminal care. English coined most of its big words from Greek and Latin, as did the wordsmiths of the Meiji period, though they were working from the familiar foundations of classical Chinese. To those today for whom such knowledge of how to make such cultural artifacts has faded, the idea of composing *kanji* into new idioms only brings a sense of unease. We see a sense of rejection of new words that our forefathers of a century ago could never have imagined.

KATSURA: And what becomes an issue at this point is the abstractive potential of *katakana*. [*Katakana* is the writing system typically identified today with imported vocabulary—trans.] When someone says ターミナルケア [terminal care] or コミュニケーション *"komyunikehshon"* [communication] to you, there is yet another sense of abstraction at work. The way public figures often use imported words in order to make their statements more ambiguous seems to me to resemble the way *katakana* is used for technical terms . . . .

SUZUKI: There may be points of coincidence, but I think that they are generally quite different. When forging *kanji* for technical terms, such as 白血病 [leukemia—white-blood illness], there is room to apprehend the fact that this disease affects the white blood cells. With ターミナルケア *"tahminaru kea"* [terminal care], even if they happen to know what "terminal care" is, the average Japanese probably has no idea what "terminal" means, or even "care"—I'm sure that the actual percentage of people using that phrase with knowledge of what they're saying is extremely low. It's like seeing a sign for a "foot manicure." (Laughs) Native English speakers know that mani=hand, and pedi=foot and so use pedicure, while in Japan, amongst the flood of rushed imports, things don't go quite as smoothly. This is a direct result of too many imported words which were merely transliterated. Because the constituent elements were not understood, the entire things can only be memorized by rote. That's a lot of strain on our memories. Everyone speaks with the intension of being international by using English, when in fact they're merely reinforcing a new sense of isolationism and ignorance, and placing needless burden on the internationalization of their language. They themselves probably believe that because this is the era of internationalization, that they ought to prioritize English words over *kanji* words.
I guess that we should feel fortunate that 白血病 has yet to be turned into ルーキミア *"ruhkimia"* in Japan yet. As I explained a moment ago, in Japanese, 白血病 gives a chance for the layman to make some sense out of what they're faced with, whereas even in English speaking countries, the uneducated are not always able to differentiate where they ought to go in a hospital, for instance. On one door, for child care, "pediatrics" is written, while on another, for treatment of women's reproductive organs, "gynecology" is written. To a person with a

while on another, for treatment of women's reproductive organs, "gynecology" is written. To a person with a rudimentary knowledge of Greek, "gyne" means woman, but for the majority, who are not schooled in the classical languages, it is an issue of rote retention and experience. This is an irrefutable basis for the intellectual gap between the common and the intellectual in England. And if we, in Japan continue to just adopt English words in their transliterated form, we will be unwittingly adopting the intellectual hierarchy that we find in the English language. In postwar Japan, we've finally realized a level of intellectual parity, to then lose it, in the name of "internationalism" bearing disparity that in fact is the opposite of providing the intended national language that all can understand.
When things can be called by a limited number of proper nouns I'm sure that rote memorization is more effective, but when those numbers increase, you need to give meaning to the constituent parts for the mnemonic faculties to function. In short, you need knowledge of the relations between objects of which you speak. And the transliterative culture that has been increasing in Japan is obstructing our potential for this.

KATSURA: You're certainly right when it comes to *katakana*, but for translated technical terms, the example I always give is 写真, the Japanese translation for "photograph."

SUZUKI: The two-character idiom, to "reflect truth."

KATSURA: The English word's origins describe a "graphical description by light." But the Japanese word has created an entirely other context.

SUZUKI: And you're right that in cases like 写真 [photograph], the original English is not reflected in the transliteration. The same can be said of 飛行機 [airplane] and many others. The Meiji Era translations can be classed into two types. One, that coined Japanese like 自動車 for automobile—technically flawless, component-to-component renditions in Japanese of the original word. 白血病 [leukemia] falls into this category. The other type of translation focused not on the root word, but on the phenomenon that it expressed, the qualities and functions of the subject, and how to express this in *kanji*. 写真 [photograph] is one such example. These two types are the literal and so-called "free" translations. A look into the merits or demerits of these two approaches offers up some interesting issues.

KATSURA: Not only a rational basis, but perhaps even an emotional one. Let me offer an example. I'm teaching at an arts university, where part of my job is to describe "photography" in understanding media. There are a lot of students studying photography at this university, and while none of them are unaware of the English word "photography," when you explain to them that the word's linguistic origins are "graphical description by light" there is always a sense of awe and renewed appreciation for photography that fills the room. I, on the other hand, am always left feeling awkward. On one hand, holding forth about linguistic roots in foreign languages is something that seems really too pedantic, embarrassing really, but because I feel that *kanji* idiom 写真 actually hides the essence of the medium, there I am, carrying on each school term about English and Latin roots, feeling embarrassed. (Laughs) Just as the example of the idiom 写真 suggests, including the structure of media, the *kanji* idiomatically assigned by the "free-style" translation can create analogic semantics rife with confusing messages . . . .

SUZUKI: I guess that I'm a conservative while at the same moment a revolutionary, because I just don't believe that all things need to be expressed in *kanji*. One example would be that I consider that a word like 蛋白質 (*tanpakushitsu*), which means proteins, or albumen, should be changed to 卵白質 (*ranpakushitsu*), which is not currently the Japanese word for proteins in general. My reasoning is that the *kanji* for proteins is used only once in our language, for proteins, while the *kanji* for egg white, which is more visually familiar, and therefore more "intuitive," means effectively the same thing. Such *kanji*, which are only used in such specialized situations only serve to make the language needlessly sophistic, and should be eliminated. I believe that we should choose, instead, to provide fewer linguistic elements (*kanji*) with greater emphasis on the potential for complexity of recombination. One look at 卵白質 (*ranpakushitsu*) offers a light of meaning in recognition, while 蛋白質 (*tanpakushitsu*) is simply one more *kanji* which, if remembered, offers recognition. In this sense, I am not always a proponent of preserving our heritage of *kanji* too reverently. I would prefer to prioritize functionality. We ought to first consider what is most effective, and discard that which is an impediment to understanding.

Radio Languages and TV Languages

KATSURA: I would like to ask about your phrase, that "Japanese is a TV language," which I understood as being a reference to the extraordinary visual complexity of symbolic representation in the Japanese language—a complexity which is often mentioned when speaking of our present "multimedia era"—and yet I don't believe that we have a sufficient theoretical basis for understanding the Japanese language's many interrelated audio and visual aspects.

SUZUKI: When I say Japanese is a "TV language," what I mean is that it's a language that communicates meaning always carrying visual information of hieroglyph, and therein differs from "radio languages" that can rely solely on distinctions in the spoken word. One reason that Japanese had to become a "TV language" is that Japanese has such a small number of phonemes available to it—even within the set of all languages worldwide. French, for example, has 36 phonemes, German 39, and English 45. Japanese has only 23. This becomes a real impediment when it comes to composing a lot of different short words. And to make matters worse, the number of possible phonetic

combinations is even more limited—broadly speaking, only one consonant/one vowel combinations. In other languages, vowels and consonants can be compiled in more complex configurations, or made into very compact and easy-to-use words. But in Japanese, there is too little room for freedom for combinations in short words, and they become homonyms.

In all of the languages of the world, Japanese is the only one with numerous, sometimes as many as 80 different meanings for the exact same sound. We're both native speakers of Japanese. Try to imagine what I mean when I say "*kou*." There are 80 different meanings—甲, 港, 黄, 紅, 口, etc.—for one pronunciation. The average Japanese can probably give thirty or forty meanings for this pronunciation right off of the top of their head, and all of them are entrusted to the vocalization "*kou*," taking away any possibility for its having a singular meaning. Only through the mnemonic attachment of its written counterpart that meaning is fixed to the pronunciation. In a dictionary for a European language you will find no more than five such polysemic homonyms. For example, the word "bay" in English, or *"sot," "seau"* and *"saut"* in French, which all have the same sound [o].

This is probably one of the reasons for the low illiteracy rates in Japan. Without a comprehension of the written language, daily life would be near impossible. In Europe, literacy is something for the educated, while daily life takes place in the spoken word. In short, they can survive with just the "radio" on. The Japanese need "TV." I'm not making qualitative judgment about one or the other, but TV has more component elements by an order of magnitude. Information is fully contained in written European. There is virtually no overflow or loss in its transference to sound. With Japanese, on the other hand, only a fraction of the information comes from the aural aspect of the language. The written language is required to clarify the vagaries of its polysemics. When learning foreign languages, Japanese students, who have the habit on relying on visual linguistic stimuli from their formative years, tend to ask how words are spelled more than students from other linguistic cultures. That's also why teachers who rely on non-literate oral teaching methods of language instruction always have problems with Japanese students.

KATSURA: I've heard that Japanese foreign exchange students studying in the US often ask during listening exercises how things are spelled! (Laughs)

SUZUKI: I'm sure that is the result of cultural conditioning. It's not that it's an inherent trait of the Japanese, but from their early years, their training has been so focused to think in terms of how language is visually represented that even when dealing with foreign language, whether it be English or Korean, they first want to see it written. The problem is that foreign language teachers are often reluctant to spend that much time on all of the spellings, because it takes time away from practicing "the living language." And for this reason, Japanese is said to occupy rather a unique position among world's languages. Whether for good or bad, they must confront these basic realities.

Japanese Language Research for Native Japanese by Non-Japanese

KATSURA: Now I would like to consider Japanese and *kanji* issues in terms of changes in society. For example, Japan is presently an ageing society (高齢化社会) which will continue to need to rely on an increasing supply of foreign labor. Obviously this necessitates a demographic shift, in order to avoid a hollowing out of industry. The Japanese language will not pass through this phenomenon unscathed. As a work force not raised within the language come to manage their lives in Japan, we can expect that the percentage of the population unfamiliar with *kanji* should increase, and propose a challenge to the ways in which we deal with issues of "correct" or "beautiful" Japanese.

SUZUKI: I'd have to agree. If we really wanted to preserve the purity of our national language then we would need to stop propagating Japanese abroad. Otherwise, it would soon be contaminated by nonnative speakers.

English is a good example of this. In Shakespeare's time there were only about four million native English speakers in the world. Then, by the time that there were four billion, it had become a language that the British were questioning the validity of, in some sectors. I guess that when you finally let your darling little girl out of the house, you really don't know what kinds of questionable creatures are likely to begin showing up at your door. But then if you lock her away she may just pass her prime without ever learning to test her wings and leave the nest. (Laughs) Gaining international currency may have its merits, but it seems unavoidable that you also have to tolerate a lot that is aesthetically distasteful along the way. The Japanese language will continue to be popular as long as the Japanese economy is robust. And it will receive some rough trimmings at the hands of foreigners in the process, but we need to be aware of the potential for nonnative speakers to effect both qualitative and quantitative changes in our language.

Then again it may just be that it is the foreigners who produce the interesting results in researching our language. At present, it is common to consider foreigners' research into Japanese as preoccupation of postgraduate students doing basic explorations. But again, if we take the example of English, it was historically the fact that English language research on continental Europe was superior to that at home, and this is what got the British serious about researching their own language. Foreigners are able to bring valuable new perspectives into their research, and in some cases these may be improvements on our own methods. This is why I believe that, while there are things that only we can really resolve, we should at least be more open and encouraging of nonnative researchers into Japanese. The first thing that we need to work on is the common preconception that Japanese is a cult language inaccessible to foreigners, because, besides being nonsense, it engenders ill will.

KATSURA: There are a lot of foreigners doing brilliant research in Japanese literature.

SUZUKI: There really are. And yet their work is not seen as relevant by most of those working in the national language institute or even among the literati. Donald Keene's work on the history of Japanese literature is only one example of an essential project that no Japanese has ever attempted. This is not surprising when one considers the example of how European language research developed—an excellent book on the history of French literature has been written in Britain, and the French researchers are some of the best on the British language.

KATSURA: The character code problems I mentioned when we began talking are only one example of ways that Japanese is already being infringed upon by internationalization. And this makes right now an excellent time to ask tough questions about *kanji*, and the nature of the Japanese language today. Before even the living legions of foreign workers destined to come work in Japan, the very nature of networked computer communications such as the internet are urging a rationalization of Japanese through an encoding system. And this actuality is a rationalization of the Japanese language which far exceeds the strictures of traditional Japanese studies. In the long term, computers are creating an environment for foreigners to research the nature of Japanese, and its coexistent writing systems. Of course it would be nice if not too non-linguist laymen like myself are sacrificed along the way. (Laughs)

SUZUKI: Well, I'm just a conservative old man, but even *I* don't believe in trying to preserve forever the ancient beauties of our language. It would only mean locking it away in a box. And yet, even without the ravages of internationalism, there are generational issues, and reasons like inadequate education for passing down culture which will create gaps all on their own, so it will change, even without the help of exterior influences—even if these outside influences cause the changes more instantaneously. In either event, it is futile to fear such changes. There is nothing immutable in this world.
Japanese is historically a relatively stable language. Ancient English is indecipherable to most contemporary scholars, to the extent that one barely senses cultural continuity in it. A Japanese person can, for example, read a text for the first time, whether it be an article or the earliest classic texts such as the Manyo poetry collection and still recognize it as his own culture, whereas a British person reading a text written before 14th century England might as well be reading something from another country. The fundamentals of British culture have been drastically reconsolidated four times in England. In pre-Christian times there it was unified as part of the Roman empire under Caesar. Next the invasions of migrating Germanic tribes pushed the indigenous Celts into Wales, or across the water to Ireland. Next came the second wave of Germanic people, through Scandinavia, and then with the Norman Conquest the British Isles were occupied for 300 years under France. That's why English is a hodgepodge of languages.

KATSURA: My hopes are with the potential for foreign researchers into Japanese's coexistent writing systems.

SUZUKI: Well, it's something that I'd obviously love to see attempted, though I believe, as I mentioned before, that the graphical composition of the language is an issue plagued by being considered something outside of the realm of linguistics, so it may be a difficult aspiration to achieve. Especially in a place like the US. Maybe there is a better chance in France? They have a history of researching Egyptian hieroglyphics. Perhaps it is something that interested young researchers in Germany or France could collaborate with Japanese scholars on. Then again, if I may digress for a moment, Japanese language research is apparently considered cursed in France, with a reputation for young linguists being alienated, committing suicide or becoming neurotic. Whatever the reason, Japanese culture does not seem to get a fair hearing. The French are usually so good at researching other cultures. There are some Japanophiles in France, but their knowledge is not really in demand. Japanese literature doesn't sell well, and so they have trouble employing their knowledge, and remain, more or less in obscurity.

KATSURA: Perhaps their shot at notoriety is a media theory approach as you mentioned earlier, such as "TV Language."

SUZUKI: And we Japanese should be more sympathetic to, and supportive of, their plight. But then you get the mid-50s bureaucrats and educators who are afraid that such an active move might be criticized as "cultural invasion" and shrink away, taking the position that it's all good and fine for nonnative speakers to research Japanese, but nothing that should be any too heartily encouraged.
In any case, financial support is imperative. If books are in need to be shipped from Japan, the Japan Foundation should pay for it. The real difference will be felt simply if such agencies would extend financial support to those who are engaged in the struggle, instead of just administering by rote.
This is the problem with Japanese bureaucracy; they have too little awareness of where Japanese culture can make positive contributions to global culture. They're only focusing on flower arrangement, tea ceremony, Origami, at best Kabuki and Sumo wrestling . . . .

KATSURA: Reverse Orientalism strikes again! (Laughs)

SUZUKI: In other words, the Japanese bureaucrats would support culture that may embellish life-styles but wouldn't really affect the root of things. And yet, when Japan decided to open its doors to the west, it reformed from the roots up. And in the aftermath of the War in the Pacific, it was again transformed under America's influence. In fact Japan is amazingly resilient in the face of the affects of foreign influence, whereas foreign cultures wouldn't recognize nor allow mutual influence from Japan. And changing this point, in short, working to have Euro-American cultures influenced in whatever small degree by Japanese culture is probably the greatest issue we face. Just as Japan has already made its

contribution felt in economic and technical terms, it needs to have its language and contemporary culture find just appreciation.

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