

The Kokugo Revolution

Education, Identity, and Language
Policy in Imperial Japan

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アイデンティティ、言語政策

Paul H. Clark

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Paul H. Clark

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This study chronicles the development of the Japanese national language in the Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa eras. The issues I examine here—the movements to reform the language and education system, the nationalization of language, the creation and manipulation of an ideology that placed the Japanese language at the center of modern cultural identity—were a part of the second series of reforms initiated by the authorities in the middle and late Meiji years. The first series of reforms instituted by the Meiji leadership in the years immediately after the Meiji Restoration had been farsighted and generally successful. Japanese society had been restructured, a new system of government had been put into place, and the new economy and military were transforming Japan into a regional power. Yet one issue seemed to plague the Meiji leadership: the reform of education.

The Education Ministry, which had been formed in January of 1872, seemed unsure of its mandate in the early years of its existence and unable to successfully reform the education system. The problems, which were both ideological and practical, were intimately connected to the numerous difficulties reflected in the Japanese language itself. For example, the Education Order of 1879 stated that primary schools were to be “a place where children received ordinary education and where they took their first steps in reading and writing, math, geography, history, and ethics.”¹ However, this decree and those that followed proved surprisingly difficult to implement in part because the Japanese language, the mode through which knowledge was to be transmitted, was neither standardized nor codified. In this, an era of centralization, education reform could not be effectively carried out

¹ Yamane Yasutarō, *Kokugo Kyōikushi Kenkyū* (Hiroshima: Shitanda Insatsu Kaishiki Kaisha, 1967), 75. This directive was one of forty outlining the purpose and scope of education in Meiji Japan.

without language reform. Thus, the linguistic chaos of the Meiji years threatened not only to undermine education reform but also to retard Japan's development as a nation. Unrecognized and underappreciated by the early Meiji leadership, language reform gradually became a priority in the second phase of reforms initiated in the third decade of the Meiji era.

Language and the Problem of Basic Communication

In the immediate post-Restoration years, the Japanese language was distinguished by linguistic regionalism, cultural decentralization, and class differentiation. Communication between provinces and among the various classes of society could be problematic. While it is difficult to determine with certainty the extent to which poorly educated peasants were able to communicate orally with others from outside their *han* in the latter part of the Edo era, fragmentary and anecdotal evidence suggests that some level of linguistic interaction, while possible, was often difficult. For example, Furukawa Koshōken recorded in his travelogue of 1783 that government officials on an inspection tour of Japan sometimes had great difficulty communicating with the local population. Even with translators they were, at times, unable to order a meal in a restaurant.² Conversely, peasants in the early nineteenth century often made pilgrimages, especially to the Grand Shrine at Ise, and seemed to have had the language skills necessary to travel from place to place. Individuals from the highest levels of society also had sufficient language skills to enable them to communicate in different regions of Japan. Richard Rubinger writes in *Private Academies of Tokugawa Japan* (1982) that the oldest sons of ruling daimyo traveled to schools outside their *han* for instruction. He makes no mention of the need for remedial language instruction or of communication difficulties.³ However, second sons of ruling daimyo were sometimes not schooled in the Edo dialect and were able to communicate effectively only in provincial dialect.⁴

² Shimonaka Kunihiro, ed., *Nihongo no Rekishi*, vol. 6: *Atarashii Kokugo e no Ayumi* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1965), 344–346.

³ Richard Rubinger, *Private Academies of Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 15–38.

⁴ For a fictionalized account, see Ryotaro Shiba, *Drunk as a Lord* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2001), 137.

CHAPTER TWO

Writing, Literacy, Language Reform, and Education Reform in Early Meiji Japan

I have divided Meiji-era language movements into two discrete eras distinctive for their orientation to education reform and the introduction of the concept of a Japanese national language. In the years before 1887, many Japanese scholars and intellectuals participated actively in a lively and far-ranging public discussion on the reform of the Japanese language. Some sent petitions to government agencies, others wrote journal articles or newspaper editorials, and a small number taught or wrote using a simplified form of the Japanese language. Later, societies devoted to the advancement of one or more language-reform options were established. Many scholars assumed positions consistent with one of three prominent philosophical schools of the Meiji era: *kokugaku*, the “national learning” school; *kangaku*, the “Chinese learning” school; and *bunmei kaika* or the “civilization and enlightenment” school associated with “Western learning.” For these scholars, issues of language reform reflected their broader vision of the future Japan. Still, language reform was in its infancy during the first two decades of the Meiji era. There was little consensus on the shape and function of language in the modern era. Even those who advocated radical change were largely unable to enunciate precisely how it should be carried out. Many government officials and intellectuals also believed that no change at all should be made to the language.

In the last years of the 1880s, a series of events converged that forever changed the discussion on the form and function of the Japanese language. First, there was the professionalization of the Japanese government bureaucracy. The first cohort of Japanese elites who had been sent abroad to be trained in the West began to return and assume positions of influence. Among the most

CHAPTER THREE

Creating *Kokugo* Consciousness: Education Officials and the Emergence of National Language Ideology

In the previous chapter, I described a few of the discussions about language reform in the early years of the Meiji era. While these discussions were important for defining language-reform issues and for bringing them to the attention of the Meiji leadership, they yielded no standard, codified language for Japan. In fact, as this period came to an end in the early 1880s, intellectuals and scholars seemed no closer to reforming the Japanese language than they had been at any time since the Restoration. Many interested parties had become frustrated and disillusioned by their inability to effect real changes to the language. Indeed, many scholars would argue that the movement to reform Japanese in the early Meiji years had, in fact, hardened resistance to language reform among government officials and proponents of the classical forms. For example, in 1873, the Ministry of Education had taken steps to revive interest in the classical forms of the language by insisting on the teaching of *kanbun* as the proper form of the written language in the new education system.

In the period of experimentation that characterized the first fifteen years of the Meiji era, issues of language reform had most often been raised by enlightenment scholars interested in "Western" learning. These included influential men such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, Nishi Amane, and Shimizu Usaburō, who were generally outside the government or who held relatively minor government positions. Language reformers had little official power to implement the changes for which they called. Maejima Hisoka was, of course, an exception. Later in the 1880s and early

CHAPTER FOUR

The Birth of the *Genbun'itchi* Movement and *Futsūbun* in the Middle Meiji Years

In the same period that policy makers, educators, and language specialists were beginning to conceptualize the language as a national entity, several literary and intellectual movements important to the development of a reformed Japanese language emerged to assume a position of prominence in the intellectual landscape. Two of these, the *genbun'itchi* and *futsūbun* movements, dealt mostly with issues of language reform and literary convention. The other was the movement to reenergize the *kokugaku*. As mentioned previously, many policy makers and intellectuals came to consider this ideology as the cornerstone of the nationalizing movements that would strengthen Japan and assist in the development of a more cohesive nation. These three movements converged in the late 1880s and early 1890s to lead to the first significant reform of the Japanese language in the modern era.

The *genbun'itchi* movement was distinguished by young, adventurous intellectuals who were not bound by the philosophical paradigms of the old Confucian order and who were seeking an appropriate outlet for literary expression. More traditional elements within the intellectual establishment who had sought some measure of language reform themselves became alarmed by the strength and speed of the radical language reform revealed in the early *genbun'itchi* movement. This reflected a generational divide between advocates of moderate language reform and adherents of radical language reform and a philosophical separation among members of the educated classes regarding the disposition of the Japanese language. The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates that, though the origins of the *genbun'itchi* movement can be traced back to the late Edo period to authors such as Terakado Seiken (1796–1868), the movement came into its own in

CHAPTER FIVE

Ueda Kazutoshi, Systemic Linguistics, and the Academic Legitimization of *Kokugo*

The discourse of *kokugo* ideology, which had come to dominate discussions of language reform, was still in a transitional phase in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Though it had become clear that many Japanese intellectuals had agreed upon the need for a new language and that, for the short term at least, it should be *futsūbun*, a new, entirely different era was ushered in during the 1890s. During this period, the Meiji authorities began to redouble their efforts to consolidate the “nation.” The appearance of the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890 and the Meiji Civil Code in 1898 demonstrated the extent to which the Meiji authorities were prepared to go to “shape the contours of subjecthood according to its view of an obedient citizenry.”¹ Carol Gluck describes this as the institutionalization of the *kokumin*, or more precisely “the effort to draw all people into the state, to have them thinking national thoughts, to make kokumin of them.”²

In addition, this period also coincided with the end of the golden era of the renaissance man in Japan. Men who had spoken with authority on a broad range of issues in the early Meiji years by virtue of their short experience abroad, former samurai status, or recent acquisition of other special skills began to be replaced by men with more professional, job-specific skills. This was a victory for the Meiji leadership and came to demonstrate the extent to which Japan had matured in the two decades since the Restoration. The new education system had begun to produce capable

¹ James A. Fujii, *Complicit Fictions: The Subject in the Modern Japanese Prose Narrative* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3.

² Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths*, 23.

CHAPTER SIX

The Genbun'itchi Society and the Establishment of the National Language Research Council

The various movements to reform the Japanese language had, by the end of the nineteenth century, begun to produce results. Though many of the early language-reform societies had disbanded by then or had stopped meeting, a broader coalition of language-reform advocates had emerged to promote the development of a new national language read, understood, and spoken by all Japanese. In addition to authors such as Futabatei Shimei, Yamada Bimyō, and Tsubouchi Shōyō, who had actually participated in the creation of *genbun'itchi*, the most promising form, educators and government officials with the power to implement substantive change had begun to consider seriously the development of modern *kokugo*. For Meiji policy makers and Imperial University educators, the issue was no longer one of simple language reform or of finding new forms of literary expression. Rather, the new language began to be characterized as one of the key components undergirding the new civic nationalism taking shape in the late Meiji era. This reflected the *kokugaku* agenda also embodied in the Meiji Constitution and Imperial Rescript on Education. Those who promoted the *kokugaku* agenda and who were interested in language reform—such as Katō Hiroyuki, Shiratori Kurakichi, and Ueda Kazutoshi—considered it their duty both to reform the language and to endow it with almost spiritual elements. For modern *kokugo* to succeed in all of these ways, it needed legitimization from the highest state organs. It also needed to be worthy of veneration, to be standardized and codified.

This chapter outlines the development of two organizations that were to play a key role in the creation of modern *kokugo*. Though different in many ways from their predecessors, the

CHAPTER SEVEN

Grammar, Textbooks, and the Implementation of the National Language

Though the struggle to gain official government sanction at the legislative level for the reform of the Japanese language had taken more than twenty years, most of the actual work of linguistic codification still lay ahead for the members of the National Language Research Council. The efforts of many language reformers in the early and middle Meiji years had been focused primarily on shifting attitudes among intellectuals and redefining language ideology in order to fulfill the requirements of education reformers and the Meiji governing elite. As a result, the form and function of the written Japanese language, which for several hundred years had served more to delineate the educated from the noneducated classes than to provide the basis for effective communication, would be forever changed. Most of the work that would produce a standard language, however, had yet to be carried out in 1902. In addition to deciding upon grammar and standardizing orthography, several high-profile members of the National Language Research Council initiated a process implied in their mandate, but not explicitly stated in the council's rules: to teach Japanese subjects the new, standard language. Indeed, the actual wording of the applicable directive indicated that the NLRC was "to *investigate* ways of bringing the colloquial style into use in the written form."¹ Some of these men, therefore, used their positions as members of the NLRC, as Ministry of Education officials, and as textbook authors to carry out more thoroughly the work of language reform. The implementation of the standard language, though secondary to their primary task, took on greater impor-

¹ *Kampō*, July 4, 1902; emphasis added.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kokugo, the State, and Yamada Yoshio

The original movement that led to the creation of modern *kokugo* was largely finished by the end of the Meiji era. Men such as Ueda Kazutoshi had employed the power of the state to transform the colloquial form of Japanese from an experimental prototype used by novelists and writers to a more mature, rational form that could be used to mold Japanese culture through education. The standardization and implementation phase of *kokugo* development was also well advanced. Success, though difficult to measure for several years, seemed assured. From the perspective of education officials and language specialists charged with overseeing the language, the new *kokugo* was making Japan stronger because it facilitated literacy, encouraged a heightened sense of national identity, and strengthened the spiritual bond between emperor and subject. Learning *kokugo* had become the sacred duty of all Japanese. As Ueda had hoped, *kokugo* had been transformed into the “spiritual blood of the Japanese people.”¹ From the perspective of pure scientific linguistics, however, the language still required further simplification and rationalization. Ueda and his colleagues would continue to press for additional reforms.

Advocates of the new *kokugo* had succeeded in large part because they were able to shape the contours of the discussion in the middle Meiji years. They had characterized language reform as an essential element of the emperor-centered, statist system and as necessary for the continued development of moral education. Ueda and Inoue Kowashi had portrayed it in patriotic terms and had linked *kokugaku* ideology and *kokugo* to create a discourse that still resonates today. Though Inoue died in 1895, Ueda and his protégés such as Hoshina Kōichi maintained moral and temporal

¹ Ueda, “Kokugo to Kokka to,” 12.

CHAPTER NINE

Conclusion

Reforming the Japanese language was neither a quick nor an easy task. Indeed, the process that led to modern Japanese spanned nearly the entire Meiji period and continued into the Taishō and early Shōwa eras. As demonstrated in this study, advocates of language reform encountered two principal problems as they considered how the Japanese language might be transformed. The most intractable issue was ideological. For Japanese intellectuals in the early Meiji years, *kanbun* was more than a system of writing based on the Chinese model. It was the foundation of an entire ideological system that had served to inform and undergird Japanese culture, politics, and education in the preceding millennium. The early Meiji governing elite, though moderate revolutionaries in their own right, could not countenance the abandonment of the classical forms in favor of the vulgar, colloquial form in the first decades of the Meiji era. The second issue with which language-reform advocates struggled was practical. Since no form of the colloquial language had been codified grammatically, a great deal of work would be required to determine the form and function of the new language. Before that work could take place, however, a new ideological paradigm would have to emerge as a discourse into which issues of language reform could be situated. The ideological model that allowed for the development of modern Japanese was that of the “nation.” This is reflected in the name of the new language itself: *kokugo* or “national language.”

The long and difficult path to the modern language began with the determination that the language in use in the early Meiji years was insufficient for the needs of a modern, cohesive state. This study demonstrated, in chapter 2, the pioneering efforts of language-reform advocates to characterize the deficiencies of the language. Men such as Maejima Hisoka, Nishi Amane, Fukuzawa Yukichi, and Mori Arinori, who were clearly influenced by

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