

13 Varieties of Modern Japanese

13.1 The Edo period: Linguistic diversity and common language

In the Edo period, geographical and social mobility was very low, and most people stayed all their life in the same place within provinces which were in effect isolated feudal states. This situation resulted in a large number of fairly small and self-contained speech communities. The linguistic diversity with lack of mutual intelligibility between many dialects within Edo-period Japan is famous and is well illustrated by the following extract from Furukawa Koshōken's *Tōyū zakki* (東遊雜記 'Notes from a journey to the east'), an account of a journey in 1788 to northern Honshu and Hokkaido, accompanying inspectors from the central government in Edo, where he describes experiences with the local dialects they encountered (cited from Shibata 1998/1965: 184). Of the dialect in Tajima (in present-day Fukushima prefecture), Furukawa writes:

Both sides can understand only half of the other's language. There was nothing one could do but laugh about it even at the inns. When we asked for *cha-zuke* 'tea on boiled rice' they brought *yu-zuke* 'hot water with boiled rice' instead, and we would go into the inn kitchen each time and make it ourselves.

And about the dialect in Nanbu (in present-day Iwate prefecture):

The language of both men and women was gibberish, with only two or three words out of ten being comprehensible. The local lords usually give each inspector, in addition to his guides, two or three people well-informed about the castle town for the duration of his stay. The lord of Morioka Castle gave us two interpreters in addition because the speech of this part of the Nanbu domain is notoriously incomprehensible. But even the interpreters often could not understand what people say here.

13.1.1 Common language

Although the centre of political power shifted away from Kyoto with the establishment of Edo as the *de facto* capital by the Tokugawa shogunate at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Kyoto retained its position of the

prestige centre of high culture through the Edo period, and its language the position of prestige language. While not having the standing of a 'standard' language, a form of Kyoto Japanese was in use throughout Japan and functioned at the beginning of the Edo period as a common language among the political and military elites, high ranking officials, clergy, etc., in addition to the many dialects of great diversity all over Japan used by local people.

13.1.2 *The language of Edo*

Edo was a small castle town at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Its growth since then has taken place mainly by immigration. Through the Edo period, the system of 'alternate attendance' (*sankin-kōtai*) brought a constant flow of local feudal lords and their entourages to Edo, which also attracted significant numbers of unemployed warriors and which had a growing merchant and artisan population. Life in Edo was characterized by frequent and diverse social intercourse between the inhabitants and visitors and by a lively popular culture and entertainment industry. Through the second half of the Edo period, Osaka developed similarly to Edo as a socially diverse centre for commerce and trade, also with a rich popular culture. These two settings thus made for dynamic linguistic environments which were quite different from the rural settings in which most people lived, or from the socially segregated life in Kyoto, and the language of both Edo and Osaka developed accordingly.

The language of Edo/Tokyo took form during the Edo period, but the process of its formation is difficult to trace in detail. It is clear, however, that Edo Japanese is no direct continuation of any particular local dialect of Japanese, but came into being and developed through close contact between speakers of different varieties in an urban setting. In its formative phase, the language of Edo involved a significant component of the Kyoto-based common language, which was influenced by various dialects and by its use in the urban setting of Edo. The colloquial local language of Edo which developed through the period and which is attested particularly from the middle of the eighteenth century is certainly characterized by a wealth of occasional, fashionable, jocular or specialized vocabulary, by formal styles employing different honorifics, as well as by informal speech styles with noticeable phonological reductions; a stereotypical example is *arinsu* which was a polite auxiliary verb reduced from *arimasu*, used mainly by prostitutes in the red-light district of Yoshiwara. However, these are in many cases ephemeral features of ever-changing and renewing language usage, typical of a growing urban setting, and many of the special features which may be found in the colloquial language of Edo have not survived into the contemporary language.

Alongside the developing urban popular idiom, Edo Japanese, a form of the Kyoto-based common language continued to be used in Edo by the upper

classes and towards the end of the period also by the emerging educated middle class. This is the variety which eventually came to form the basis for standard cNJ. Although it was influenced by the local Edo language, it changed slowly, and it maintained its contiguity with the language in Kyoto. Differences between the versions of the common language used by the upper classes in Kyoto and in Edo developed, but the users of the common language continued to make up a socio-economically constituted, but geographically discontinuous, large speech community, with some internal variation, which played an important role through the NJ period, at least until the beginning of the twentieth century.

13.2 The Meiji period: Unification and standardization

Meiji was a period of unification in political terms: the creation or building of a unified, modern nation state. This unification effort also affected language, in two main ways: one was the unification, or alignment, of the spoken (i.e., contemporary) and the written language (13.2.1); and the other was the unification of the different varieties of Japanese spoken through the country as, or under, one national language, that is to say, the creation of a national, standard language (13.2.2).

13.2.1 Genbun'itchi

As mentioned above, Japanese was throughout the Edo period written in a variety of ways which had in common that they reflected the contemporary language very indirectly or not much at all, mostly being very convoluted and involving some form of the classical written language. In addition to the fact that there was no established way of representing the contemporary language in writing, the effort and time required to become literate were considerable. In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the opening of Japan and establishment of commercial and diplomatic contact with European countries and the US, an appreciation grew among educators, reformers and modernizers that the way in which Japanese was then written hindered literacy, education and, more generally, modernization. From the 1860s through to the first decade of the twentieth century, there were fierce debates over whether, and how, to write the contemporary language, with lines sharply drawn between proponents and opponents of reform. From the mid 1880s authors who wanted to write realistic novels joined the movement, or campaign, for vernacularization of the written language, which came to be known as *genbun'itchi* ('unification of speech and writing', 言文一致). The serial publication in 1887–9 of Japan's first modern novel *Ukigumo* by Futabatei Shimei (1864–1909), which was written in the vernacular, was an important landmark which gave the campaign

additional momentum. From then onwards more literature written in the vernacular became published, and also newspaper editorials gradually adopted a vernacular-based written form. The first school textbooks with large proportions of vernacular language were issued by the Ministry of Education in 1903–4. Although a form of the classical written language was still used in many newspaper articles until the 1920s, and until the end of WWII in official documents and government decrees, and even in some academic publications (for example Yamada Yoshio's grammars of OJ and EMJ from 1913), the reformers had for all practical purposes won by the mid 1910s, with the vernacular adopted for education, literature and much public written discourse. As mentioned in 6.1.3, reform of the *kana* orthography with its etymological spelling principle (for example spelling /kyoo/ 'today' as けふ "ke.fu"), did not take place until after WWII.

13.2.2 *A national language; standardization and dialect eradication*

Part of the modernization effort and the establishment of a unified nation-state was also the notion of a unifying national language. Especially after the publication of an essay collection entitled *Kokugo no tame* 'For the national language' by Ueda Kazutoshi in 1895, in which he drafted in the SJ word *kokugo* (国語 'country-language') for this notion of Japanese as national language, the word *kokugo* has become widely used to refer to the Japanese language, and the word still has strong emotional value for some. For example, the renaming in 2001 of the 'Society for Japanese Linguistics' from *Kokugo gakkai* to *Nihongo gakkai* caused rifts in Japanese academia which have yet to be healed. *Kokugo* is an exclusive, somewhat nationalistic term, for it can only be used to refer to the Japanese language by and for the Japanese. However, both the notion of national language and the term for it were in the twentieth century exported to Korea, where 国語 *kug-ŏ* means 'the Korean language'.

Both the notion of *kokugo* and the practical purposes of the vernacularization of the written language (spreading literacy and education) pointed in the direction of establishing a standard language, that is to say, privileging one variety over others for use in public life, including education, and as an emblem of the nation. Thus, in 1901, the Ministry of Education decreed that the Japanese language taught in schools should be that of Tokyo, whereby was meant *not* the language of the common people of the downtown area, but the language of the middle and upper classes of the Yamate area, in other words the descendant of the Edo-influenced variety of the common language (13.1). One example from phonology of a well-attested Edo feature which did not pass into the standard language is the monophthongization of /ai/ as [e:]. This is attested from the early eighteenth century and is still today a colloquial feature of Tokyo speech, but is not sanctioned in the standard language.

In 1902, the *Kokugo-chōsa-iinkai* (国語調査委員会 ‘National Language Research Council’) was set up, charged with surveying the state of the national language and making recommendations, amongst other things, for establishing a standard language. The *Kokugo-chōsa-iinkai* was dissolved as a body in 1913, but its recommendations regarding a standard written language were published in *Kōgohō* (口語法 ‘Grammar of the vernacular’, 1916) and *Kōgohō bekki* (口語法別記 ‘Supplement to Grammar of the vernacular’, 1917). It was in these volumes that the normative grammar of standard Japanese as we know it today was set out and where it was clearly said that standard Japanese was based on the speech of the educated middle and upper classes of Tokyo. The chief editor for these two volumes was Ōtsuki Fumihiko (1847–1928), so if any individual is to be credited with the creation, or at least codification, of modern standard Japanese, it is he.

While standardization and vernacularization of the written language has had many positive effects in terms of spread of literacy and education and increased popular participation in public life and eventually also in the political process, the flipside was a directed and quite successful effort to eradicate dialects, especially through the first half of the twentieth century, leading to a marked loss of linguistic diversity in Japan which is regrettable, at least to linguists and ethnographers. In the pre-war years, users of dialect in schools were subjected to public ridicule and even punishment. For example, in some schools those overheard using the local dialect rather than the standard language were forced to wear *hōgen fuda* ‘dialect tags’. It was only after WWII that the active discouragement of use of dialects was relaxed, but even today many people are ashamed of speaking their local dialect in public. Recently, an Osaka-based variety of Kansai Japanese is getting wider public exposure, especially in popular culture, and is even thought fashionable and imitated by some young people. Even so, many speakers of Tokyo Japanese will profess – somewhat disingenuously – an inability to understand Kansai Japanese.

13.3 Sources

Present-day Japanese is observable and well described. We have a large amount of material from the Meiji period onwards (second half of the nineteenth century), both in Japanese script and in alphabet writing, which shows that the language has not changed much since then. Before Meiji, throughout the Edo period, Japanese was written in a variety of ways which had in common that they reflected the contemporary language very indirectly or not much at all, mostly being very convoluted and involving some form of the classical written language. These ways of writing ranged from (*hentai*) *kanbun* over various forms of Classical Japanese to highly formalized versions of post-Classical Japanese, which was, however, still heavily influenced by the

classical written language. There is, however, also a large body of popular fiction and drama in which the contemporary vernacular was used, especially in renditions of spoken language, namely in lines in plays and in dialogue parts of novels. Until the middle of the period, the language reflected in these sources was mostly that of Kyoto, but from the second half of NJ, literature which reflects the emerging urban idiom of Edo was increasingly published. The Edo sources are far too numerous to name.

In addition to *kabuki* and puppet play scripts, the drama material includes *kyōgen*, which are lively short comedies or sketches, originally performed in between *noh* plays as a kind of comic relief. *Kyōgen* plays gained independent popularity from the Muromachi period and at that time they were performed in the contemporary spoken language. However, over time a formulaic style of language evolved which is reflected in the great majority of the surviving texts which date from the mid seventeenth century onwards. As the plays were originally handed down in performing traditions, the NJ *kyōgen* texts in fact reflect many features of the language of the Muromachi period.

13.3.1 *Material in alphabet writing*

We have a wealth of material in alphabet writing from the second half of the nineteenth century which is very close to the contemporary language. Two earlier descriptions of Japanese are, however, worth mentioning. The first is a seventeen-page article, published in 1792 in Uppsala, ‘Observationes in Linguam Japonicam’ by the Swedish botanist Carl Peter Thunberg who stayed in the Dutch trading post in Dejima off Nagasaki for around a year and a half during 1775–6. In it Thunberg gives a brief description of the Japanese language. The language he describes seems to be common educated Japanese, including, however, identifiable Kyushu dialectal features. Thunberg is clearly no linguist, but his little piece contains valuable information on late eighteenth-century Japanese. Phillip Franz Balthasar von Siebold was a German physician who taught medicine in Japan from 1823 to 1829 (when he was expelled from Japan accused of being a spy because he had collected maps). His seventy-page long *Epitome linguae japonicae* was written in Nagasaki in 1824 and, again, has valuable information about Japanese from the early part of the nineteenth century.

13.4 **From Late Middle Japanese to standard contemporary Modern Japanese**

As outlined above, the colloquial urban idiom of Edo and Tokyo, Edo Japanese, is not a direct descendant of the language of Kyoto OJ, EMJ or LMJ reflected in the written sources, because of its multiple sources and influences (although

its initial main component was the common language). However, the situation is different for the version of the common language used in Edo/Tokyo upon which the standard language came to be based. Although it was undoubtedly influenced by Edo-Japanese, it represents a fairly unbroken tradition of the Kyoto-based common language. Thus, comparing the language of for example *Esopo*, which is from the very end of LMJ and which reflects the common language of Kyoto, with cNJ, what is really striking is how relatively speaking few and small the structural differences are. In fact, there are very few features of cNJ which are not straightforwardly derivable from LMJ as reflected in the sources from the end of the period. In the following the main phonological and morphological differences between LMJ and cNJ will be outlined. In a few cases differences between LMJ and cNJ seem to reflect influence from eastern dialects (mediated through Edo Japanese). However, most phonological and morphological changes took place through the common language and are reflected in both Kyoto and Tokyo cNJ, demonstrating the coherence and influence of the common language speech community at least until the beginning of the twentieth century. These changes, outlined in Chapters 14 and 15, are describable as simple linguistic changes between LMJ and cNJ. Features which are now part of the standard language, but were not used in Kyoto LMJ or NJ, and which are thought to reflect eastern dialect influence, will be discussed below (in Chapter 16).

REFERENCES

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