

Power in Modernization of Language and Literature in Eighteenth-century Britain and Modern Japan

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Abstract

In the process of modernization, we can observe in general a shift of the written form of each language to adapt to the written culture of the new society. Both in eighteenth-century Britain and in nineteenth-century Japan, the initial phase of the shift was carried out by private individuals like authors, journalists and translators. Then, the written form invented by them became public and contributed to making canons through print culture and education. Examining comparatively the process of modernization and the shift of written language in both countries, this paper will discuss the transformation of the power of individual men of letters and some of the damage accompanying modernization of society and language, taking the post-modern situation of the twenty-first century into account.

Keywords: modernization, written language and culture, private and public spheres, eighteenth-century Britain, nineteenth-century Japan

In teaching classes of English language and literature in Japanese universities, I often refer to some characteristic aspects observed both in the history of the English language and that of Japanese, in order to encourage in students an objective view of their mother tongue. In particular, the shift of the written form of each language in the course of modernization is of special interest. Without the shift or improvement of the written form of language, the products of modern language—accurate documentation of political, economic, historical, or scientific events and phenomena, journalism, novels, biographies, and encyclopedias—that all feature in modern society would have been impossible to be effectively expressed, described, and accumulated. In this paper, I'd like to examine comparatively the shift in the written form of language in eighteenth-century Britain and that in mid-nineteenth-century Japan, and discuss the nature of the power of modernization of language and society, taking the post-modern situation of the twenty-first century into account.

1. The Power of Written Language—Modernization and Print Culture in Early Modern Britain

It was in the late seventeenth century that print culture obviously came to be influential in Britain after the revolutions. Certainly, as Keith Thomas states, “oral communication remained central” even in this period, “whether as speeches in parliament, pleadings in the lawcourts, teaching in the schools, or preaching and catechizing in church.” “Despite their reliance on the Bible and the Prayer Book,” he goes on, “the clergy still expected their flock to learn their article of belief by heart and to listen to spoken sermons” (1986, p. 113). The importance of orality in modern society is also mentioned by Jürgen Habermas in association with the concept of the “public sphere.” Tracing the progress of British print culture in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas claims the importance of oral culture observed, for example, in coffeehouse discussion in early eighteenth-century London (1989, p. 42). However, the emergence of print culture was not so unnoticeable, nor was it so harmonious with “oral communication.” In fact, it should be noted that the Royal Society of London, founded in 1660, held up the improvement of written English as one of its most urgent tasks and intended to make a new written form. Thomas Sprat, a founding member of the society, records the society's enthusiasm:

And, in few words, I dare say; that of all the Studies of men, nothing may be sooner obtained, than this vicious abundance of *Phrase*, this trick of *Metaphors*, this volubility of *Tongue*, which makes so great a noise in the World. . . .

They [the members of the Royal Society] have therefore been most rigorous in putting in execution the

only Remedy that can be found for this *extravagance*: and that has been, a constant resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style; to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many *things*, almost in an equal number of *words*. They have exacted from all their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness as they can; and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that, of Wits or Scholars. (1667, pp. 112–113)

Similar to Italian and French royal academies, the Royal Society of London was well aware of the necessity of improving written English. Without a written language that can bring “all things as near the Mathematical plainness as they can,” the basis of modernization—the progress and accumulation of knowledge in natural sciences as well as in social sciences—could not have been formed at all.

Unfortunately, however, the Royal Society suffered in the plague and the great fire of London in the 1660s, and the royal or national project died out. The task of the improvement was naturally given into the private hands of eighteenth-century British authors, journalists, scholars and lexicographers. This is one of the characteristic points observed in the process of the improvement of written English; different from the situation in France and Italy, written English was substantially improved by the strenuous efforts of individual talents.

2. Improvement of Written English—Power of Private Hands

So then, what problems did eighteenth-century British people commonly have with their written English? We can point out at least two serious difficulties. One of them is, as Thomas Sprat claims, the stylistic problem of “amplifications, digressions, and swellings” with which we can easily characterize the euphuistic prose in the seventeenth century. But the other was more serious in basic writing and communication: the chaotic situation of orthography. A story from *The Tatler*, one of the most popular periodicals at the origin of British journalism, well shows the situation:

Many a Man has lost his Way and his Dinner by this great Want of Skill in Orthography: For, considering that the Painters are usually so very bad, that you cannot know the Animal under whose Sign you are to live that Day, How must the Stranger be misled, if it be wrong spell'd, as well as ill painted? I have a Cousin now in Town, who has answer'd under *Batchellor* at *Queen's College*, whose Name is *Humphrey Mopstaff*. . . . This young Man going to see Relation in *Barbekin*, wander'd a whole Day by the Mistake of one Letter; for it was written, *This is the BEER*, instead of, *This is the BEAR*. He was set right at last, by enquiring for the House, of a Fellow who could not read, and knew the Place mechanically only by having

been often drunk there. (Vol. 1, pp. 145–146)

The author of this article is Richard Steel, a Whig statesman and essayist, and his narration is even humorous. But the problem was serious; without established orthography, we cannot communicate properly by written language. Written documents, records, journalism, novels and print culture are virtually impossible without orthography.

After the failure of the project of the Royal Society, the improvement of written English was finally left in the hands of individual authors and lexicographers. English dictionaries published in the early eighteenth century show that the problematic orthography was gradually settled; authors and journalists like Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding were all trying hard to find a suitable style in their works. Different from France and Italy where prerogative authorities promulgated refined written forms of the language, modernization of written English owes much to the collective power of individual authors and scholars. And in this process, the language seems to have acquired diversity, flexibility, and popularity, different from prerogative-oriented standardization. Written English in private hands was now ready as the apt tool for written communication that was essential for modernization of the society.

3. Private to Public—Accumulation of Knowledge and Formation of Canon

Print culture based on the modernized, or improved, written English was now an important driving force for accumulation of knowledge in the collective forms of printed texts. The rapid development of written culture in eighteenth-century Britain took a unique route and helped to form the social and literary canons, having a great impact on the modernization of British society.

As mentioned above, we can regard *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, both of which were published in early eighteenth-century London by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, as the most important origins of British periodicals, or journalism.¹ Their neutrality of content and language, and their objective distance from the twists and turns of the actualities of society, attracted a wide readership. Interestingly, these qualities that *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* offered for journalistic publication were succeeded not by private hands but by a collective form of individual authors. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, published from 1731 to 1914, is one of the most typical periodicals that used such a collective form. Edward Cave, the founder of the monthly periodical, states in the preface to the first issue of the magazine that he dares to

¹ According to the *OED*, the word “journalism” does not seem to have been used in English until 1833, though the word was described as “sadly wanted” in its first example.

transform the meaning of the word “Magazine,” which originally meant a storehouse or a warehouse, into a repository, or a collection, of various subjects and information. And what Cave tried to do for the publication was not to write an enterprising article by himself, nor to imitate simply the neutrality and objective distance observed in Addison’s and Steele’s essays, but to collect the articles appearing in other periodicals, select, and edit them in a well-balanced way. Though it seems quite simple, Cave’s method substantially improved upon the merits of *Tatler* and *The Spectator*, and came to be the basis of the modern journalism on which John Walter’s *The Daily Universal Register* (later *The Times*) was based upon its first publication in 1785. We can observe here an interesting route for creation of knowledge in modern society—knowledge created by accumulation of information.

Needless to say, accumulation of knowledge can be observed in many other genres of eighteenth-century British print culture; among them were modern editions of Shakespeare’s plays which were published one after another from the early eighteenth century to the first variorum edition of 1821; Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary*, which was, as mentioned above, considered to be an arbiter of the long controversy of English orthography; *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, whose first edition was published in 1771; and Alexander Chalmer’s famous anthologies of British essayists, novelists, and poets, which were published in the early nineteenth century. And what should be noted in those many examples is that the accumulation of knowledge gradually forms canons or criteria for knowledge, learning, and literary or aesthetic works. Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets*, published from 1779 to 1781, is, for example, a production of Johnson’s idiosyncratic writing, but nevertheless is regarded as the first collection of critical biographies of English poets, and greatly helped to form English literary canons. Alvin Kernan says of this that “Johnson’s real achievements in *The Lives*” is to combine “the hitherto scattered pieces of English literary lore” and to work them “into a structure of biography, social history, and criticism sufficiently firm to constitute for the first time a history of English letters” (1987). And we should not forget that, in concurrence with the trend of publication of language dictionaries, literary anthologies, and encyclopedias, national, regional, private, or circulating libraries were built one after another; they well symbolized the importance of accumulation of knowledge and formation of canons. Now, the improvement of written English wrought by private hands or individual talents had a great influence on the public sphere.

4. Language and Modernization in Nineteenth-century Japan

The publication of collective forms thus became an influential direction taken by British society in the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century. Interestingly, Victorian Britain

was one of the important Western models that the people of a certain Far Eastern country tried to introduce in the process of modernization. Japan secluded itself from the world for more than two centuries, from 1639 to 1854, and it was when Japan reopened the country that its people really got involved in international contacts.

One of the biggest problems Japanese people faced when they tried to communicate with Western people and modernize the country in step with Western countries was undoubtedly the language. Japanese language is in many ways unlike every language of the Indo-European family; its vocabulary is different and the grammar is quite distinct. And yet, the improvement of the written form was the most urgent task in Japan at the time, as in early eighteenth-century Britain, because written language played a more important role in the explanation of a great variety of imports and documents.

Different from the confusion of orthography in early modern Britain, the most serious problem in written Japanese was to fill the gap between its written and spoken forms. The writing systems of Japanese language chiefly consist of *kanji* and *kana*, both of which were based on Chinese characters that came down to Japan in the early fifth century. There had been no substantial written system indigenous to Japan before the import of Chinese characters. As the Japanese language was quite different from Chinese in terms of pronunciation and grammar, Japanese people, first of all, needed to give their pronunciation to each Chinese character. Then, in the process of assimilation of the Chinese characters, Japanese people divided the function of the characters mainly into two parts: one for simply expressing Japanese pronunciation and the other for substantives of things and concepts. The characters for the former function gradually shifted into *kana* and those for the latter continued to be used as *kanji* in Japan as in China, though their pronunciation was different and their meanings were gradually Japanized over many centuries. Japan's close relationship with China of course continued after the introduction of Chinese characters; Buddhist scriptures, political systems, and many products of culture were imported from China. Throughout the relationship, *kanji* characters were convenient: Buddhist scriptures, for example, were directly introduced in the form of Chinese characters, and Japanese Buddhists simply gave them Japanese pronunciation and some grammatically supportive alterations in order to make them understandable for Japanese people.

Thus, until the middle of the nineteenth century, two writing systems had been used in Japan: *kanbun*, which mainly consists of *kanji* characters, and the *wabun* of *kana*. The former was used in the main in scriptures, philosophical (and mainly Confucian) writings, laws, edicts, official documents, and histories, and the grammar of *kanbun* was, though fairly Japanized, yet different from spoken Japanese. In other words, many people could read

kanbun, but sentences in *kanbun* were quite different from their spoken language. Some children learned famous passages of *kanbun* by heart to absorb highbrow culture, but the passages were spoken only as quotations in daily conversation. Therefore, *kanbun* was a typical written language and, in a sense, it was like Latin for modern Europeans. On the other hand, *wabun* was used as the written form for daily conversation and popular culture. What many children learned in academies was *wabun* that was enough for their daily life, and the number of children who moved up to the education of *kanbun* was limited. Of course, over many centuries, the two writing systems were gradually mixed, and in particular, from the early nineteenth century, popular stories written in the form of *wakan-konkōbun* (a mixed written form of *wabun* and *kanbun*) were successively published by popular novelists like Ikku Jippensha and Bakin Kyokutei.² And yet, *kanbun* still remained persistent at the time of the reopening. In fact, the language owed its enormous vocabulary of substantives, ideographic visibility, and the capacity to invent new words to *kanji* characters; *wabun* could not fully express the religious, philosophical, and political concepts and entities that had been highly dependent upon *kanji*.

However, the situation was clearly disadvantageous when Japanese people tried to absorb new sciences, technology, and culture of Western origin. It is certain that *kanji* has an excellent ability to invent new words for new concepts, making use of existing characters, but *kanbun* is different from spoken Japanese, and making *kanbun* for each newly imported event and thing was obviously inconvenient. *Kanbun* had been convenient partly because Japanese people could import the contents of Chinese books, keeping them intact. But the situation had now changed.

The most practical solution to the problem was to establish a new written form by harmonizing *kanbun* and *wabun* with reference to *wakan-konkōbun*, which was increasing its power among popular stories and the early stages of journalism. This movement is now called *Genbun-itchi-undō* (the movement for the harmonization of spoken and written language), and we should notice here that the movement was carried forward at least in its early phase not by governmental enforcement but in the private hands of individual authors, scholars, journalists, and translators. After the short period of frantic scrambling to imitate and adapt *wakan-konkōbun* before and after the reopening, Shōyō Tsubouchi, who was a novelist and translator and became a professor of Waseda University, newly founded in 1882, published *Shōsetsu-shinzui* (*The Essence of the Novel*, 1885–86) and showed the importance of a written language that reflected the daily conversation of the common people. Consulting with

² Ikku Jippensha published *Tōkaidōchū-hizakurige* (*Travels of Tōkaidō*) in 1802, and Bakin Kyokutei published *Nansō-satomi-hakkenden* (*The Adventures of the Eight Samurais of Nansō*) from 1814–1842. Both were called *gesaku* (popular novels) and spread widely among common readers.

Tsubouchi about possible Japanese written forms, Shimei Futabatei published *Ukigumo* (*Floating Clouds*, 1887–89) and other novels, referring especially to some spoken narratives of *rakugoka* (popular story tellers) like Enchō San'yūtei. Following Futabatei, Bimyō Yamada, Kōyō Ozaki, Ōgai Mori, Sōseki Natsume, and many others successively published novels and translations in a new written form and contributed to the establishment of the new written Japanese.

It is interesting to note here that, though written Japanese finally changed into a modern style, the route was complicated and filled with the twists and turns of individual authors and translators. For example, Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), one of the popular stories read among the students of high schools and universities at the time, was translated into Japanese six times from its first translation in 1886 to the fairly readable version in 1905. In the progress of the translation, we can clearly observe that each translator groped for a suitable written form; old forms like *kanbun* and *wakan-konkōbun* were sometimes used, and other times strange new forms different from normative Japanese grammar appeared. The 1905 version is undoubtedly the result of every translator's desperate trial and error.³

After the initial stage of the *Genbun-itchi-undō* in private hands, new written language came to be used officially in the government and the authorized form was widely spread through the textbooks of primary education. In other words, the new written form became public, as in Britain.⁴ However, its amazingly rapid development contained some problems. As the new written Japanese was invented under the necessity of the quick absorption of the items, technology, and concepts of Western origin, it inevitably included some unnatural words newly invented for translation. Japanese people in general now use the word *jiyū*, which was newly invented in the process of the *Genbun-itchi-undō* for the English words “freedom” and “liberty,” but they do not usually differentiate them. The concepts of Western “society” and “individual,” too, were introduced in the middle of the nineteenth century and the equivalent Japanese words were hastily invented, but they were separated from traditional

³ For more detail, see Noriyuki Harada, “Translation and Transformation: Japanese Reception and Adaptation of Eighteenth-Century English Literature,” in *Essays and Studies in British and American Literature* (Tokyo Woman's Christian University) 58 (2012), pp. 1–22.

⁴ It should not be overlooked that the swift change of printing style was helpful for the wide spread of the new written form. Although woodblock printing was popular before the reopening of the country, Japanese printers succeeded in changing their system to movable-type printing, accommodating many *kanji* characters. Woodblock printing had a limit to the number of copies printed by one typesetting; printers needed to repeat typesetting many times especially for bestsellers like popular novels and textbooks. In order to satisfy common readers' curiosity and desire for new knowledge and information of Western origin, printers now needed to print a large number of copies in one typesetting. As an example of the number of printed copies of a book, *Saigoku-risshihen* (1872), a translation of Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859) and one of the most popular books of the time, is often mentioned; it sold one million copies up until the end of the nineteenth century.

concepts in Japan. Certainly, these are examples of problems of Japanese vocabulary itself and not of the written form, but it is not too far from the truth to say that the Japanese modernization of written language caused serious simplification of vocabulary. Scientific inventions can be exhibited in general as the actual things; people can deliver things “almost in an equal number of words,” as the Royal Society of London thought in the late seventeenth century. But if we translate new ideas and concepts of society into a thoroughly different language, we cannot avoid simplification or substitution to some degree.

More serious for modern Japanese people was that the new written form involved separation from the long history and products of traditional written language. In fact, almost all Japanese classics, not only in *kanbun* but also *wakan-konkōbun*, produced before the modernization are now unintelligible for many people. It is certain that new knowledge was accumulated in numerous books, periodicals, and textbooks printed in the new written form, but such accumulation was made at the expense of traditional culture fostered by books and documents in the old written form. In particular, as the scientific aspect of modernization was instrumental in the *Genbun-itchi-undō*, the new written form was fatally defective in inheriting sentiments written in the old form. Mitsuo Nakamura, one of the twentieth century’s leading Japanese critics, criticizes the *Genbun-itchi-undō* and says that the movement “corrupts the tradition of the written Japanese itself” (1971, p. 17).

Changes in written language can be observed as common to many countries in the process of modernization. In particular, both in Britain and in Japan, a large number of private individuals took the initiative of the movement in its first phase, and then the new written form became public through print culture and education. However, the modernization of Japanese written language also caused damage to the language, partly because it was carried out under the necessity of Westernization and partly because of the exigencies of scientific and technological demands. Both of the causes might be due to the timing of the modernization of society: Britain achieved modernization comparatively earlier than other countries, while Japan was a latecomer. But before drawing such a hasty conclusion, we need to hear the voice of an early eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish author.

5. An Irony—The Power of Individuality in Modernization

In the modernization of written language in Britain and in Japan, one of the important points to note is that the product of the strenuous efforts of private individuals became public and formed a new canon. In other words, the diversity observed in making a new written form was finally brought together into an authoritative uniformity. Thus in the process of modernization, does the power of individual talents finally come down to that of its public manifestation?

Further, is the initial diversity produced by the power of private individuals forced to fade away?

Jonathan Swift, an author famous for his *Gulliver's Travels*, would answer “no” to these questions, for he was always critical about compelling the standardization of culture and society and hated the absurd rationalization, or integration, of various humane idiosyncrasies. In language, too, he loved diversity rather than uniformity, and made great satirical works with complicated allusions. In *Gulliver's Travels*, he severely criticizes the attempts of language professors at the academy of Balnibarbi, which obviously overlap with the advocacy of the Royal Society of London:

The first Project was to shorten Discourse by cutting Polysyllables into one, and leaving out Verbs and Participles; because in Reality all things imaginable are but Nouns.

The other, was a Scheme for entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever: And this was urged as a great Advantage in Point of Health as well as Brevity. For, it is plain, that every Word we speak is in some Degree a Diminution of our Lungs by Corrosion; and consequently contributes to the shortening of our Lives. An Expedient was therefore offered, that since Words are only Names for *Things*, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such *Things* as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on. . . .

Another great Advantage proposed by this Invention, was, that it would serve as an universal Language to be understood in all civilized Nations, whose Goods and Utensils are generally of the same Kind, or nearly resembling, so that their Uses might easily be comprehended. And thus, Embassadors would be qualified to treat with foreign Princes or Ministers of State, to whose Tongues they were utter Strangers. (2012, pp. 270–273)

But the new scheme of the professors of the academy was obviously unrealistic. Swift never forgets to describe its result derisively:

[The new Scheme of expressing themselves by Things] hath only this Inconvenience attending it; that if a Man's Business be very great, and of various Kinds, he must be obliged in Proportion to carry a greater Bundle of Things upon his Back, unless he can afford one or two strong Servants to attend him. (Ibid, p. 272)

The description is humorous, but Swift's skepticism toward the easy equation of language with things was deep. Of course, as a distinguished man of letters he disliked “amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style” in written English. But at the same time, he also disliked

standardization, or reduction, of the ample ambiguity that language can express. We have discussed the standardization of written language in the process of modernization and have observed that this standardization was advanced by private individuals and then became public and formed the basis of canons. But now we can hear an important objection from an author whose work has been beloved continually since from its first publication in the early eighteenth century. If the ending of *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver's expulsion from the Huyhnhnms' land, suggests the author's misanthropy, an ending foretelling a catastrophe, genocide, or collapse of human society after modernization, as some critics actually point out,⁵ diversity, rather than uniformity, was for Swift the real power, and the modernization observed in the standardization of language and culture was only a degradation of the power of individuals.

Swift's satire reminds us of early voices of skepticism about modernization of language. And yet, modernization in general advanced in spite of his fear, and Japan desperately tried to catch up with the modernized countries. In the process, Japanese people were impelled to harmonize their written and spoken language, or to simplify their written language, but the *Genbun-itchi-undō* came to damage the written language; in Swiftian terms, we may say, the damage was in the end one of the inevitable consequences of modernization itself. Thinking of Swift's satire in *Gulliver's Travels*, we need, first of all, to reexamine the complicated, and sometimes contradictory, relationship between the power of private individuals and that of public standardization in the process of modernization. An ideal form of power in the modernization of language and culture will be found in the harmonization of individual efforts and their effective organization, something to which the postmodern world should give careful consideration.

⁵ See, for example, Claude Rawson, *God, Gulliver and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination, 1492–1945* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

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