The Complexity of Modernization: How the Genbunitchi *and* Kokugo *Movements Changed Japanese*

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In 1914, the novelist Natsume Soseki published his novel *Kokoro*. Incorporating themes of isolation and detachment into the tragedy of the main character Sensei, *Kokoro* solidified Soseki as one of Japan's earliest and greatest modern Japanese writers.[1] Yet more than their themes made Soseki's novels modern. By 1914, writers like Soseki used a simple, colloquial style of writing which radically differed from the more complex character-based system used by writers even thirty years prior. What fueled this change? Many point to the language reform movements of the Meiji Era, especially the *genbunitchi* and *kokugo* movements. These language reforms attempted to pioneer a new Japanese, one united and tailored for a modern world. Although they had a far-reaching effect in their own period, the long-term impact of these movements is more difficult to assess. Academics and politicians were most receptive to the calls for change, often leading the campaigns themselves. However, those in other circles had different, occasionally hostile attitudes towards the movements. Those involved in literature usually disliked the idea of script reform that would render their mastery of old styles obsolete. Educators in rural regions, though open to Western influence, resisted the attempted suppression of their local dialects. Due to the debates in academia, politics, literature, and education, the general public ended up accepting some of the ideas of the movements while rejecting others. Despite the attempts of the intellectuals and politicians to impose their language reforms upon the populace, the *genbunitchi* and *kokugo* movements only successfully modernized language once writers, educators and, most importantly, the general public adopted some of the reforms and drove a bottom-up linguistic modernization.

Of the many linguistic crusades of the Meiji Period, the *genbunitchi* and *kokugo* movements had the largest and most vocal following. *Genbunitchi* focuses on unifying written and spoken Japanese into one easily learnable language.[2] Advocates of *genbunitchi* argued that the old Tokugawa *wakankonkobun, kanbun,* and *sorobun* were far too complicated for anyone without huge amounts of time to learn. Instead, they wanted a simplified, colloquial style that allowed for greater literacy and ease of communication.[3] The desired form of writing varied among *genbunitchi* advocates, however. Some, like Fukuzawa Yukichi, simply reduced the number of *kanji*, or Chinese-style characters, in their writing, while others like Nishi Amane wanted a wholesale adoption of *romaji*, or a Latin alphabet.[4] Yet for many reformers, changing written Japanese could only be useful after spoken Japanese had been united. The *kokugo*, or "national language" movement, pushed to eliminate the dialectical variance that had existed in Japan for so long.[5] Men like Ueda Kazutoshi wished to "exterminate" the dialects of Japan by imposing *Tokyogo*, or Tokyo dialect, over the entire country.[6]

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[1] David Pollack, "Framing the Self. The Philosophical Dimensions of Human Nature in *Kokoro*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 43, no. 4 (1988): 417.

[2] Nanette Twine, "The Genbunitchi Movement. Its Origin, Development, and Conclusion," *Monumenta Nipponica* 33, no. 3 (1978): 333.

[3] Twine, "The Genbunitchi Movement. Its Origin, Development, and Conclusion," 337.

[4] Nanette Twine, "Toward Simplicity: Script Reform Movements in the Meiji Period," *Monumenta Nipponica* 38, no. 2 (1983): 121-132; Nishi Amane, "Writing Japanese in the Western Alphabet," in *Meiroku Zasshi: Journal of the Japanese Enlightenment*, ed. and trans. William Reynolds Braisted (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 1.

[5] Hiraku Shimoda, "Tongues-Tied: The Making of a 'National Language' and the Discovery of Dialects in Meiji Japan," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 3 (2010): 720-721.

[6] Shimoda, "Tongues-Tied: The Making of a 'National Language' and the Discovery of Dialects in Meiji Japan," 723.

To understand the extent to which the *genbunitchi* and *kokugo* movements actually changed language in Japan long term, one must first analyze whom adopted the recommendations of reform.

Academics and politicians often led the charge for linguistic change, probably because they stood the most to gain from the reforms. Academics, especially those in Western studies, had to grapple with introducing new ideas into Japanese. Scholars struggled to find translations for Western ideas that had not previously existed in Japan, such as liberty, civilization, and even separations between fields such as religion and philosophy.[7] The *genbunitchi* movement often found its most passionate leaders from this group, as these scholars saw a clear need to make dissemination of Western thought easier.[8] Although scholars held differing ideas, a majority of the advocates wanted a full-scale conversion to *romaji*.[9] Academics used the new and extremely popular newspapers as their main platform, publishing articles and sparking debates.[10] While politicians could also see the benefits for script reform in terms of aiding mass communication, they showed much less enthusiasm for the movement than the academics.[11] Politicians more vehemently fought for *kokugo*, or the national language. This idea posed a clear political advantage as uniting the nation under one dialect would help promote a sense of "Japanese-ness" and patriotism that would help hold the country together in the face

of rapid modernization.[12] Scholar-officials like Ueda Kazutoshi, a linguistics professor and Head of the Ministry of Education, described a national language as the "spiritual lifeblood" of Japan if it wished to unite and compete with the West.[13] The *kokugo* movement reached a fever pitch after the Sino-Japanese War, and the government seriously began to implement policies to promote *kokugo*.[14] Clearly, the ideas of linguistic reforms took great hold of those in academic and political circles in the Meiji Era.

Literature had a far more lukewarm response to the Meiji Era language movements. Most of those involved in literature held the traditional Tokugawa period style of writing in the highest regard and therefore resisted linguistic change.[15] This meant a considerable number of writers continued with Tokugawa-style fiction well into the end of the nineteenth century. To start, political novels of the early Meiji period relied heavily on Tokugawa story structures to introduce new Western ideas and terms in a familiar way.[16] Even the old Tokugawa style booksellers survived through the Meiji period.[17] In fact, P.F. Kornicki argues literature changed more in the Tokugawa period due the introduction of the modern printing press than the Restoration and related movements.[18] Many writers used their works to criticize the unabashed and rapid devotion to material progress that colloquial language represented, and by the 1890's, a strong

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[7] Douglas Howland, "Translating Liberty in Nineteenth-Century Japan," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62, no. 1 (2001): 161-181; Nishimura Shigeki, "An Explanation of Twelve Western Words: Part One" in *Meiroku Zasshi: Journal of the Japanese Enlightenment*, ed. and trans. William Reynolds Braisted (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 446-449; Gerard Clinton Godart, "'Philosophy' or 'Religion?' The Confrontation with Foreign Categories in Late Nineteenth Century Japan," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 1 (2008): 71-91.

[8] Nanette Twine, "Standardizing Written Japanese. A Factor in Modernization," *Monumenta Nipponica* 43, no. 4 (1998): 429-454.

[9] Twine, "The Genbunitchi Movement. Its Origin, Development, and Conclusion," 341-356.

[10] Twine, 341-356.

[11] Twine, "Standardizing Written Japanese. A Factor in Modernization," 429-454.

[12] Shimoda, "Tongues-Tied: The Making of a 'National Language' and the Discovery of Dialects in Meiji Japan," 717.

[13] Ueda Kazutoshi, "Kokugo to kokka to," cited in Hiraku Shimoda, 721.

[14] Neriko Musha Doerr, "Standardization and Paradoxical Highlighting of Linguistic Diversity in Japan," in *Japanese Language and Literature* 49, no. 2 (2015): 393.

[15] Twine, "The Genbunitchi Movement. Its Origin, Development, and Conclusion," 350.

[16] Christopher Hill, "How to Write a Second Restoration: The Political Novel and Meiji Historiography," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 33, no. 2 (2007): 337-356.

[17] P. F. Kornicki, "The Publisher's Go-Between: Kashihonya in the Meiji Period," *Modern Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (1980): 331-344.

[18] P. F. Kornicki, "The Survival of Tokugawa Fiction in The Meiji Period," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41, no. 2 (1981): 461-470.

literary backlash against the *genbunitchi* and related movements formed.[19] This is not to say literature did not change, only that the rapidity with which large political and academic movements adopted language reform had a markedly slower response from the literary community. For example, the *genbunitchi* movement did successfully convert literature to a more colloquial style of writing. However, it would be 1908 before 100 percent of the books published in Japan were in the new simplified style.[20] Also, academics like Nishi Amane and Maejima Hisoka would be sorely disappointed with the resulting colloquial style in literature. Instead of the wholesale elimination of *kanji* and adoption of either *kana* or *romaji*, the selected style ended up as a blend, with many "core" *kanji* remaining and everything else written in either *hiragana* or *katakana*, the traditional Japanese phonetic alphabets.[21] The literary community settled on this style as it was the most accessible to readers and they found that good writers, such as Ozakai Koyo, could write well in this colloquial style.[22] In short, literature did not respond to the top-down reformist ideas of politicians or academics, but its readers, who wished for a colloquial and accessible style, eventually convinced the writers to change.

Perhaps the education system responded most slowly to the call for linguistic reform. For the most part, schools did not resist Western styles of learning as Sapporo Agricultural College will attest. This small rural university brought in Dr. William Smith Clark, former dean of Amherst College in Massachusetts, to revolutionize their teaching methods. He introduced Western styles of learning, military discipline, and independent thought, which helped raise this agricultural college to an institution that would regularly send graduates to the best universities in Japan.[23] This process of

Western acculturation was not unusual to Sapporo, but present in many places throughout the nation.[24] Despite their openness to westernization, education often resisted language reform. Well into the 1880's, schools continued to only teach the Tokugawa scripts of *kanbun* and *sorobun*, partly because no age-appropriate textbooks in the colloquial style existed, and partly because the educators, who came from the historical samurai class, held respect for the old styles.[25] Only after literature began its conversion to the colloquial did education begin to follow suit.[26] In contrast to the slow, but eventual adoption of the ideals of the *genbunitchi* movement, many educators took an active dislike to the elimination of dialects proposed by the state. Although language education took up the majority of a student's day, educators often avoided dialectical correction.[27] Although government officials would repeatedly send inspectors to regional schools, they had little effect on the type of language instruction in use. As such, almost no evidence exists for a broadly implemented language reform curriculum in regional schools in the nineteenth century.[28] When the state finally decided to crack down schools in regional areas like Fukushima to put dialectical "correction" in their education manifestos, the schools made sure to use broad terms and avoid specifics. The fact that similar vague statements, sometimes quoted verbatim from the first 1900 publication, appear in the yearly declaration of policy until 1931 show the persistence of the problem and the educators' distaste towards the attempt to eliminate dialects. Some schools actively promoted dialects, calling them the "wild grass that grows naturally in this fine

[19] Ronald Loftus, "The Inversion of Progress. Taoka Reiun's Hibunmeiron," *Monumenta Nipponica* 40, no. 2 (1985): 191-208.

[20] Twine, "The Genbunitchi Movement. Its Origin, Development, and Conclusion," 355.

[21] Twine, "Toward Simplicity: Script Reform Movements in the Meiji Period," 130-132.

[22] Twine, "The Genbunitchi Movement. Its Origin, Development, and Conclusion," 352.

[23] Hiroko Willcock, "Traditional Learning, Western Thought, and the Sapporo Agricultural College: A Case Study of Acculturation in Early Meiji Japan," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (2000): 977-1017.

[24] Willcock, "Traditional Learning, Western Thought, and the Sapporo Agricultural College: A Case Study of Acculturation in Early Meiji Japan," 977-1017.

[25] Shimoda, "Tongues-Tied: The Making of a 'National Language' and the Discovery of Dialects in Meiji Japan," 727; Nanette Twine, "The Genbunitchi Movement. Its Origin, Development, and Conclusion," 341.

[26] Twine, 341.

[27] Patricia E. Tsurumi, "Meiji Primary School Language and Ethics Textbooks: Old Values for a New Society?," Modern Asian Studies 8, no. 2 (1974): 247-261; Shimoda, "Tongues-Tied: The Making of a 'National Language' and the Discovery of Dialects in Meiji Japan," 727.

[28] Shimoda, 727.

pasture called national language."[29] These teachers insisted that dialects needed to be managed, but they kept the "pasture" of Japanese language healthy. Even when language correction was taken on in earnest, students continued to use their local tongue when speaking and no teaching efforts seemed to remedy this. This was perhaps because the teachers themselves often struggled to maintain the official speech, as they usually hailed from the same region in which they taught.[30] Inspectors lamented this failure of instruction, but had little power to do anything about it, as bureaucratic inactivity meant that almost no oversight in regards to dialect education could actually be enforced.[31] As such, the high ideas of the language reforms often met dead ends in the educational system, as they found forcing a top-down method of linguistic regulation increasing difficult. As Hiraku Shimoda put it, "'Wild grass' would not be weeded out so easily."[32]

Despite their influence or lack thereof in academics and politics, literature, and education, the real changes to the language reform movements came from the public's shifting attitudes. To start, the political encouragement of *kokugo* struggled to gain any real traction, mainly because of the attempt to eliminate dialects. As the reluctant response of the education system to the imposition of *Tokyogo* shows, people do not let their dialects go that easily. Because of its lack of success, the push to eliminate dialects faltered after only a few years, with even its main supporter, professor Ueda, admitting it was a mistake.[33] Although *kokugo* did not take the shape its founders necessarily intended, the idea of encouraging a unified language did reach the public. Dialects actually were encouraged as parts of a romanticized Japanese diversity, which allowed the idea of *kokugo* as a form of Japanese encompassing all dialects to take hold in the public imagination.[34] Despite its survival as an idea, the *kokugo* movement

failed in its attempts to unite Japanese into one dialect. Interestingly enough, some people in the public did take to an idea of a unified language, albeit not a unified Japanese. Esperanto found a remarkably large and diverse following in Japan from the 1880's on. Although support came in waves, Esperanto had followers from the intelligentsia to working men and women with clubs often meeting at nights in coffee shops and rural homes.[35] Esperanto found uses in magazines, religious settings, and radio programs just to name a few.[36] In this, the public showed a great desire for Japan to take its place in the modern world, an idea which can be traced all the way back in *kokugo*. Although the public only had a limited response to *kokugo*, the *genbunitchi* movement had far more success. The battle of ideas waged in newspapers like *Meiroku Zasshi* brought the ideas of intellectuals to the public, as scholars and academics like Nishi Amane, and Nishimura Shigeki debated their ideas for script reform.[37] Although not all recommendations for the new writing style were adopted, the *genbunitchi* ideas did reach the public. As such, newspapers publishing in the colloquial script began to appear as they discovered a new, greatly expanded market.[38] This in turn led to and was accelerated by a switch to the new colloquial script in literature and subsequently education. This would come to form the simplified modern Japanese script that exists today. From this, one can see that the success or failure of the linguistic movements of academics and intellectuals hinged largely on the public's willingness to adopt their ideas.

The *genbunitchi* and *kokugo* movements typifies the difficulties Japan had in modernizing. High-

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[29] "Shogakunen jidō toriatsukai ni kansuru kitei," in *Fukushima-ken kyoiku jiseki* (Fukushima, 1914), cited in Shimoda, 728.

[30] Shimoda, 727.

[31] Shimoda, 728.

[32] Shimoda, 728.

[33] Shimoda, 729-731.

[34] Doerr, "Standardization and Paradoxical Highlighting of Linguistic Diversity in Japan," 389-403.

[35] Sho Konishi, "Translingual World Order: Language without Culture in Post-Russo-Japanese War Japan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 1 (2013): 91-114.

[36] Ian Rapley, "Talking to the World: Esperanto and Popular Internationalism in Pre-war Japan," in *Japan Society Proceedings* 152 (2016): 89.

[37] Amane, "Writing Japanese in the Western Alphabet," and Shigeki, "An Explanation of Twelve Western Words: Part One" in *Meiroku Zasshi: Journal of the Japanese Enlightenment*, ed. and trans. William Reynolds Braisted (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 3-20.

[38] Twine, "The Genbunitchi Movement. Its Origin, Development, and Conclusion," 333-356.

minded academics and politicians tried to learn from Western languages, even going so far as to advocate emulating them almost entirely. However, their top-down approach meant that many of the changes forced on the public had little lasting effect. Those in literature resisted script reform and educators loathed the dialectical extermination proposed by those in government. The only real change occurred when the public adopted the ideas of the academics themselves, with cultural change in the public fueling linguistic reform. However, the public would never fully adopt the ambitious, sweeping ideals of the academics and politicians. Instead, the resulting language would end up as a bit of a jumble, with a blend of traditional and modern ideas and scripts. This patchwork modernization reflects the nature of the Meiji restoration as a whole. If we look at the literature of the late Meiji and early Taisho era, some contemporary voices expressed this same discontent as to the nature of the changes taking place.[39] Natsume Soseki, the author of *Kokoro*, describes the modernization of the Meiji restoration in a speech he made in 1902 as follows: "People say that Japan was awakened thirty years ago, but it was awakened by a firebell and jumped out of bed… Japan has tried to absorb Western culture in a hurry and as a result has not had time to digest it."[40] In fact, Soseki's novel *Kokoro* is probably one of the most accurate and poignant stories about the difficulty of Japan's modernization. The tragic story of traditionally-minded Sensei and his thoroughly modern friend K reflects the internal conflict within the people and external friction of society during the Meiji period.[41] Language in particular provides an important microcosm of this conflict because language is a cultural construct. In other words, the cultural nature of language necessitates that any change must be bottom-up or majority driven, and the politicians' attempts at top-down modernization came into direct conflict with this. In the end, the language reform movements typified how much of the modernization during the Meiji era was

superficial, with the elite's top-down imposition of modern ideals clashing with public retention of old beliefs. Indeed, the rapidity of industrialization can make Meiji era modernizations appear painless, as though something about Japan's people or situation made it immune to the internal friction that other nations had while modernizing. However, as the case of language reform shows, this rushed surface modernization only obscures a societal discordance perhaps even more acute than that experienced by other industrializing nations. The result is a society that, for all its surface progress, struggled to find its footing; caught mid-step, with one foot moving to the future and the other rooted in the past.

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[39] Isamu Fukichi, "*Kokoro* and the "Spirit of Meiji," *Monumenta Nipponica*, 48, no. 4 (1983): 469; Loftus, "The Inversion of Progress. Taoka Reiun's Hibunmeiron," 191-208.

[40] Fukichi, "*Kokoro* and the "Spirit of Meiji," 469.

[41] Fukichi, 469-488.

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