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Author

Wong, Elaine S.

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Interlingual Encounter in Pierre Garnier and Niikuni Seiichi's French-Japanese Concrete Poetry¹

ELAINE S. WONG

Trinity University

E-mail: esivong@gmail.com

In the latter half of the 1960s, without meeting each other and without knowing each other's language, French poet Pierre Garnier and Japanese poet Niikuni Seiichi 新国誠一 collaborated to create French-Japanese concrete poems. This essay examines the interlingual encounters in the two poets' bilingual poems that facilitate exchange beyond linguistic boundaries. It argues that Garnier and Niikuni's bilingual concrete poems are grounded not so much in metaphorical significance as in interlingual contiguity, with reference to Jakobson's view of the poetic function. Since the creation of a syntagmatic dimension between the two languages is a basic step in the making of the French-Japanese poems, the prevalence of contiguity affects both combination and selection of poetic materials. In light of Garnier and Niikuni's collaboration, the essay proposes the beginning of an interlingual poetics that, in contrast to the primacy of equivalence in Jakobsonian poetics, foregrounds the role of contiguity in bridging the languages involved and staging an interlingual encounter. The instigation of an interlingual poetics also involves the creation of interlingual contiguity through spatial syntagms, an approach that Garnier and Niikuni's collaboration demonstrates as viable. By opening up the text to invite contingencies and accidents in the combination of words, spatial syntagms contribute to a reevaluation of the relationship between metaphor and metonymy in the operation of language.

INTRODUCTION

The International Concrete Poetry Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a major development in global literary history that involved multilingual creativity and exchange.² As a form of experimental poetry, concrete poetry incorporates the materiality of written signs and elements of page layout into poetic creativity to subvert normative usage of language. Due to its geographic span from North and South Americas to most countries in Europe, the movement featured poems created in a large variety of national languages. In addition, experimentation with foreign languages had a strong presence in the movement, a noticeable example being the translingual adaptation of the ideogram by the Brazilian group of poets who called themselves the *Noigandres*.³ In the second half of the 1960s, Pierre Garnier (1928-2014) of France and Niikuni Seiichi 新国誠一 (1925-1977) of Japan collaborated on concrete poems, each using his own native language. Calling their work *supranational poetry*, Garnier and Niikuni aimed to open up linguistic borders and encouraged language encounters through spatial means between French, a Romance language with an alphabetic writing system, and Japanese, an East-Asian language using three script-forms, namely *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*.

Garnier and Niikuni's collaboration uncovers a dimension of poetic creativity seldom

explored: the treatment of two (or more) languages, neither one predominating the other, in a poetic space focusing on an interlingual encounter that facilitates exchange between the languages. Through this kind of treatment, interlingual encounter and poetic process become one and the same. From a semiotic perspective, the French-Japanese poems reveal a new organization of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships that could form the basis of a prefatory interlingual poetics. I argue that Garnier and Niikuni's bilingual concrete poems are grounded not so much in metaphorical significance as in interlingual contiguity. Since the creation of a syntagmatic dimension between the two languages is a basic step in the making of these poems, the prevalence of contiguity affects both combination and selection of poetic materials. I also observe that in the collaborative poems that involve graphic composition, similarity relationships between word and image are created as part of the contiguity relationships among interlingual materials.

THE TWO POETS AND SUPRANATIONAL LANGUAGE

“I have not been to this land [of yours] and have not met [you,] the poet. [You] have aimed almost at the same goal as mine, and have produced works quite similar to mine, even though [you] and I work in different languages. I feel a kind of spiritual tremble inside me. That is why I decided to participate in the international movement” (Kanazawa, 2008a, p. 192).⁴

The above was the message Pierre Garnier in France conveyed to Niikuni Seiichi in Japan after reading *Zero-on* / 0 音 [Zero Sound] (1963), Niikuni's collection of sound and visual poetry. The network of the International Concrete Poetry Movement of the 1950s and 1960s brought the two poets into contact: upon the recommendation of the Brazilian composer L. C. Vinholes, who, during his stay in Japan, became a key figure in facilitating exchange between Japanese and Western experimental poets, Niikuni sent Garnier a copy of *Zero-on* in 1964.⁵ Soon afterwards, Garnier and Niikuni began a collaboration of French-Japanese concrete poems. The time was propitious for their collaboration: both of them were already actively involved in concrete and sound poetry in their own networks.

Garnier is considered “the spokesman for the international concrete poetry in France” and “the leader of French concrete poetry through most of the 1960s” (Solt, 1968, p. 34; Seaman, 1981, p. 237). Garnier studied in Germany before the Second World War and later worked as a teacher of German in his hometown, Amiens, France. His first poems were written in Germany (Blondeau, 2012, pp. 9-10). Garnier began publishing poetry collections in the 1950s and continued to be a prolific writer throughout his life. His concrete poems debuted in 1962 in the magazine *Les Lettres*, in which most of his concrete works appeared and which he edited since 1963 (Garnier, 1968d, p. 193). In 1962, Garnier launched Spatialism, a term he used to incorporate major types of experimental poetry of that time, with the publication of his first Spatialist manifesto, “*Position 1 du mouvement international*” [Position 1 of International Movement] (Garnier, 1968b).⁶ He invited poets around the world to endorse the manifesto, which was signed by twenty-four poets from fourteen countries when it was published (Solt, 1968, p. 80).⁷ In 1964, the same year Garnier received *Zero-on*, he published his second manifesto, “*Position 2 du spatialisme*” [Position 2 of Spatialism] (Garnier, 1968c).

In Japan, Niikuni began his poetry career through participating in the poetry group *Hyōga* (“glacier”) in Sendai, his hometown, in 1952. His first concrete poems were published

in 1955, but he felt that his works were not received well in Sendai. He then moved to Tokyo in 1962 (Kanazawa, 2008a, pp. 186-190). *Zero-on* was his only book-length publication before his untimely death in 1977. In addition to his poetic explorations in *Zero-on*, Niikuni co-founded the Association for Study of Arts (ASA) with Fujitomi Yasuo in Tokyo in 1964 to promote experimental poetry. The *ASA* journal began publication in 1965, and Niikuni published most of his concrete works there after *Zero-on*. Featuring spatial treatments of *kanji*, Niikuni’s concrete pieces were frequently curated for local and international concrete poetry exhibitions in the 1960s. His works also appeared in almost all major international concrete poetry anthologies. Interest in Niikuni has been revived in recent years as Japan’s National Museum of Art in Osaka presented the exhibition “Concrete Poetry of Niikuni Seiichi: Between Poetry and Art” in 2008, in conjunction with the publication of *Niikuni Seiichi: Works 1952-1977* (Niikuni, 2008c).

Although Niikuni and Garnier worked in different language codes, they did have much in common in their own pursuits of a new poetry, as Garnier observed. In particular, their individual works attend to metonymical relationships within written signs. The peak of the two poets’ concrete productions featured a disassembly of the form of words to recreate structures out of graphemic components, as in Figures 1 and 2, and an engagement with the material malleability of written signs, as illustrated by Figures 3 and 4.⁸

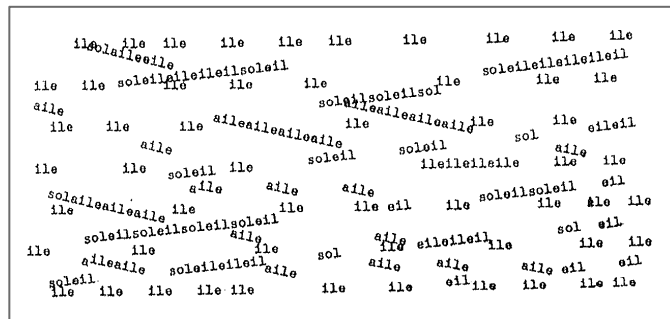


Figure 1. “[soleil]” [sunlight] (Garnier, 2008c, p. 212)

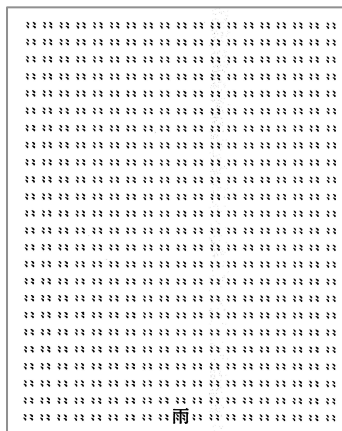


Figure 2. “Ame 雨” [Rain] (Niikuni, 2008a, p. 111)

In “[soleil]” [sunlight], the word *soleil* splits and transforms into *sol* (“soil”), *île* (île, ‘island’), *aile* (‘wing’), and non-word *eil*. Their individual placements on the page, together with the

occasional longer lines they combine to form, may produce an allusion to a flock of birds flying in the sky. Such an approach is also found in “*Ame 雨*” [Rain], in which the four dots in the *kanji* 雨 are extracted to form a pattern that, with the cue of the single appearance of the complete *kanji* at the bottom, gives the impression of raindrops falling.

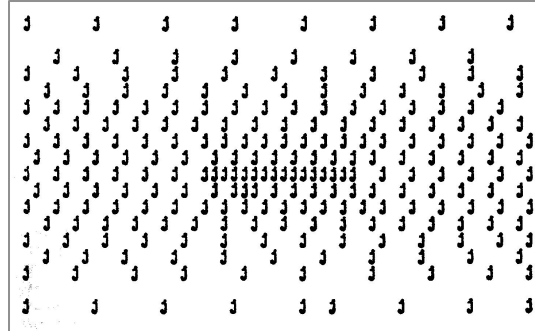


Figure 3. “[j]” (Garnier, 2008a, p. 224)

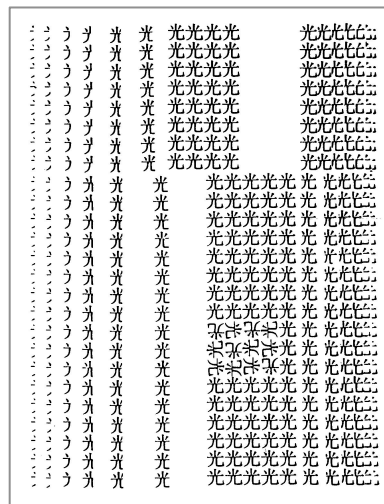


Figure 4. “*Sukima* 空隙/Vacant Space” (Niikuni, 2008b, p. 120)

“[j]” and “*Sukima* 空隙/Vacant Space” turn graphemes into plastic materials for creating visual stimuli. In “[j],” the gestalt effect of the overall pattern almost camouflages the nature of the repeating sign as a letter. Opposition is produced in “*Sukima*” between the full presences of the *kanji* 光 (‘light’) in the center (with a few even claiming a playful freedom through different orientations) and the character’s partial concealments toward the left and the right, as well as between the uneven columns and the intercepting white spaces.

The similarity of the two poet’s works is not completely a result of coincidence. As mentioned, Garnier was already active in the international network of concrete poets who were influenced by contemporary avant-garde developments in visual arts, literature, and music as well as graphic design. Although Niikuni was not aware of the overseas development of concrete poetry when he wrote the poems in *Zero-On* in Sendai, he started learning ferociously after arriving in Tokyo, where he continued to work on the collection. One of his major influences was John Cage (Kanazawa, 2008b, p. 220).

Similarity aside, a main difference between Niikuni's and Garnier's concrete works was in the technology they used to create their poems. Whereas Garnier took advantage of the typewriter to produce mechanical effects in his poems and created most of his works by typing (Seaman, 1981, p. 247), many of Niikuni's graphemic presentations, such as isolation of *kanji* components as in "*Ame 雨*" [Rain] and size variation, would be impossible for the typewriter to produce and had to be typeset (Tatehata, Kido, & Kanazawa, 2009, p. 21).⁹

Without knowing each other's language and without ever meeting in person (Simon-Oikawa, 2007, pp. 273-74), Garnier and Niikuni worked together through a common interest and belief in the poetic creativity of written signs. Their collaboration included the third Spatialist manifesto, "*Position 3 du spatialisme: pour une poésie supranationale*" [Position 3 of Spatialism: For a Supranational Poetry] (Garnier & Niikuni, 1968b), published in France and Japan simultaneously in 1966 (Tatehata, 2002, para. 17); *Micropoèmes* [Micropoems] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008d) and *Petits poèmes mathématiques simplistes* [Small simplistic mathematical poems] (Garnier & Niikuni 2008f), both published in France in 1967 and in Japan in 1970 and 1971 (Simon-Oikawa, 2007, p. 276; p. 287); and *Poèmes Franco-japonais* (Garnier & Niikuni 1968a), published by Éditions André Silvaire in 1968, in which "*Position 3*" appeared as a preface.¹⁰ Despite a collaborative nature, "*Position 3*" inherits key Spatialist ideas from "*Position 1*" (Garnier, 1968b) and "*Position 2*" (Garnier, 1968c) drafted solely by Garnier. All three manifestos are essentially concerned with renewing language through concrete or Spatialist poetic means. Nevertheless, it is only in "*Position 3*" that "*une langue supranationale*" [a supranational language] is promoted, to an extent that this language becomes the apex of Spatialism.

A basic principle threading through the three Spatialist manifestos is the treatment of language as "*la langue-matière*" or language-matter (Garnier, 1968c, p. 144). "*Position 3*" states: "The poet now *objectively* works out a language treated as material and creates texts with all the elements of this language: phrases, words, letters, syllables, accents, articulations, breaths, and with the semantic and aesthetic information provided by such elements. The poet considers the language an autonomous universe and uses the technical means of creation, multiplication, and distribution" (Garnier & Niikuni, 1968b, pp. 147-48; original emphasis).¹¹ The Spatialist proclivity for reserving language-matter to the levels of and below the word calls for alternatives to the codified forms of words, phonemes, morphemes, and graphemes. The main purpose of language-matter is to liberate language from "*postulats linguistiques fixés et imposés, donc emprisonnants*" [linguistic postulates [that are] fixed, imposed, and hence imprisoning] (Garnier, 1968b, p. 140). As shown by "[*soleil*]" [sunlight] and "*Ame 雨*" [Rain] (Figures 3 and 4), Garnier and Niikuni individually explore these alternatives through atomizing linguistic units, by either isolating individual words or breaking down a word into letters and spatially presenting—spatializing—the words or letters.

Supranational language, according to "*Position 3*," is a poetic use of multilingual language-matter by means of the Spatialist approach (Garnier & Niikuni, 1968b, p. 148-149). As the manifesto states, the multilingual involvement results in a more extensive linguistic area that opens up the limits of individual languages. In this expanded linguistic area, Spatialism facilitates "the passage of national languages into a supranational language and into works that are not translatable but transmittable" (Garnier & Niikuni, 1968b, p. 148).¹² The treatment of national languages as language-matter—keeping words and distinctive features in a condensed, crystalized state—enables poets to create poems in languages of which they have only a limited knowledge. To Garnier and Niikuni, such limited knowledge gives the advantage of drawing "*le plus pur*" [the purest] as poetic materials transmittable across

linguistic boundaries (1968b, p. 149). Nevertheless, what is considered linguistically the purest in the poets' minds is inevitably subject to changes in an interlingual encounter. The issue from this phase on, as we shall see in a moment, is how to establish relationships among selected bilingual or multilingual language-matters.

Niikuni and Garnier created twenty-five poems in *Micropoèmes* (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008d), *Petits poèmes mathématiques simplistes* (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008f), and *Poèmes Franco-japonais* (Garnier & Niikuni, 1968a).¹³ All poems in *Micropoèmes* and all but one in *Petits poèmes mathématiques simplistes* feature language-material of semantic equivalence, i.e. each poem using Japanese and French words with the same or a similar meaning.¹⁴ In *Poèmes Franco-japonais* (Garnier & Niikuni, 1968a), most of the poems incorporate Japanese and French words with different meanings into graphic compositions, while several others employ individual French letters and Japanese *kana* characters for their sound value.

The following poem from *Petits poèmes mathématiques simplistes* (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008f) illustrates language encounter through convergence and movement of bilingual language-matters.

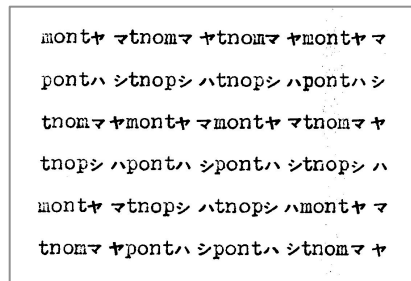


Figure 5. “[*mont* ヤマ/*pont* ハシ]” [mountain/bridge] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008e, p. 149)

Behind the poem's display of the French and Japanese words for “mountain” (*mont*, ヤマ *yama*) and “bridge” (*pont*, ハシ *hashi*) is a basic concern of how the incorporation of two languages affects linguistic operation in a poetic context. To look into this concern and prepare for the discussion of the poem above and other poems by Garnier and Niikuni, I will give an account of the operation of language based on syntagm and paradigm.

SYNTAGM AND PARADIGM

Syntagm and paradigm comprise the two dimensions of the operation of language. The use of language involves the dual process of selecting words and combining them to build linguistic units at increasing levels of complexity. Paradigms are sets of words which are grouped under a semantic or grammatical category and from which selections are made. Syntagms are concerned with the combination of words in forming the linear sequence that governs language. Words in a paradigm are in relationships of contrast and substitution; the selection of one word means the exclusion of other words in the same paradigm set and thus their absence from the expression. Words in a syntagm, on the other hand, relate to one another through contexture and contiguity; their co-presence is required for the combination they form as the expression.¹⁵

The syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions of language are first discussed by Saussure, who refers to paradigms as “associative relations” (Saussure, 1959, p. 123). The term “paradigm” is introduced by Roman Jakobson (Jakobson, 1990, p. 415). More

frequently, Jakobson calls “paradigm” “selection” and “syntagm,” “combination.” While the operation of selection generates relationships of similarity or equivalence, the operation of combination produces relationships of contiguity. The importance of combination and selection in defining structural relationships among linguistic components can be seen in Jakobson’s applications. A key example is his analysis of aphasia as either similarity disorders pertaining to impairments in selecting words or contiguity disorders involving restricted abilities to combine linguistic units (Jakobson, 1990, pp. 115-133).

Of relevance to our discussion is Jakobson’s conception of the poetic function of language through selection and combination. He states in “Linguistics and Poetics:” “The selection is produced on the basis of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antonymy, while the combination, the build-up of the sequence, is based on contiguity. *The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination*” (Jakobson, 1987, p. 71; original emphasis). In Jakobson’s theory, equivalence is considered in a relational context. As mentioned above, selection involves a paradigm set of alternatives that can fulfill the same structural function. The paradigmatic alternatives relate to one another as “this-or-this-or-this” (Chandler, 2007, 84). In other words, they are relationally equivalent to one another. In referential discourse focusing on communicating meaning, equivalence governs how words are selected but not how words are combined. In poetic discourse, argues Jakobson, equivalence applies to combination as well in regulating the recurrence of consistent formal patterns such as meter, rhyme, and parallelism. Equivalence also applies to the way sound corresponds to meaning to produce sound symbolism, a topic of great concern for Jakobson.¹⁶ The notion of equivalence accords with Jakobson’s overarching view that the poetic function “promot[es] the palpability of the sign” (Jakobson, 1987, p. 70).

The extension of the principle of equivalence from selection to combination implies an ideal unity in the poem that functions to measure and tie together all instances of equivalence. The emphasis of similarity through equivalence in Jakobsonian poetics reinforces the primacy of the metaphor as the most valued figure of speech. Nevertheless, in Garnier and Niikuni’s French-Japanese poems, the absence of any pre-established syntagmatic relations between the two languages calls for a new assessment of equivalence and contiguity as well as of metaphor and metonymy.

In a monolingual context, the combination of linguistic units from phonemes and morphemes to words, words to phrases, phrases to clauses and sentences, etc., is regulated by codes belonging to that particular language. The linguistic units and the sequences they form can be seen as part-whole relationships. The higher the level in the part-whole hierarchy, the more flexible the codes, and the greater the freedom and creativity in the combination—ultimately leading to infinite possibilities (Waugh, 1985, pp. 146-48). Yet no matter the level, contiguity is ensured by the presence of and compliance with codes. However, in the case of using two languages in a poem, contiguity is no longer a straightforward outcome of codes. Without a pre-defined set of codes applicable to both languages, a syntagmatic dimension accommodating the two languages needs to be created from the very beginning, whether by using the codes of the individual languages or by other means.

Such a cross-linguistic syntagmatic dimension is integral to the poetic process of Garnier and Niikuni’s bilingual poetry, as demonstrated by their treatment of *la langue-matière* and Spatialism. From a perspective of language encounter, the question of how to combine the selected material is as important as what to select from the two languages.

INTERLINGUAL ENCOUNTER IN GARNIER AND NIIKUNI'S POEMS

The construction of contiguity is a key concern in Garnier and Niikuni's French-Japanese concrete poetry. The poem “[*mont* ヤマ/*pont* ハシ]” (Figure 5) illustrates the importance of contiguity. While *mont* (‘mountain’) / ヤマ (*yama*, ‘mountain’) and *pont* (‘bridge’) / ハシ (*hashi*, ‘bridge’) are paradigmatic equivalences, respectively, the selection of these words as language-matters must also fulfill the requirement of establishing syntagmatic relationships. The priority of contiguity is even more obvious considering the fact that the *katakana* script-form of ヤマ and ハシ is selected among the three graphemic systems in the Japanese script, the other two being *hiragana* and *kanji*.¹⁷ As a general practice, a Japanese word is written in *kanji* when the word has a *kanji* form, unless one “cannot remember how to write the kanji, or just to save time” (Kataoka 1997, p. 115). *Kanji* writing of 山 (*yama*, ‘mountain’) and 橋 (*hashi*, ‘bridge’) is available; it is likely that the *katakana* ヤマ and ハシ are adopted for their relative formal compatibility with the French letters in *mont* and *pont*. While formal compatibility is a concern of similarity/equivalence, the point here is that such a selection based on similarity is made so as to establish contiguity.

In addition, the Spatialist arrangement of the poem features not so much metaphorical as metonymical nuances. The poem's tightly linked spatial syntagm consists of alternating columns of *mont* and *pont*, and ヤマ and ハシ, in a pattern that switches between each word and its reversal. Horizontally, the equal number of letters/characters between *mont* and *pont* and between ヤマ and ハシ facilitates a regularity and orderliness that give the words an interlocking appearance. This interlocking effect masks the absence of blanks between words (except at the beginning and end of each line) that is required for re-marking, i.e. for demarcating word boundaries. Practically all aspects of the poem's composition perform the re-marking function of the typographic blank: the intralinguistic re-marking between French and Japanese, the semantic re-marking between ヤマ and *mont* and ハシ and *pont*; repetition as re-marking; and reversal as re-marking. If every presence of the words in the poem is seen as a re-mark, the relationships among all these re-marks become overwhelmingly metonymical under the poem's spatial framework, so much so that they eventually obfuscate the metaphorical significance generated through semantic equivalence and difference.

The *micropoème* “[*fe/u* 火]” [fire] presents an even stronger emphasis on the projection of contiguity from combination to selection.



Figure 6. “[*fe/u* 火]” [fire] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008b, p. 131)

The Japanese word used in this poem, *fire*, would be usually written as 火 in *kanji*, instead of 火 in *hiragana* (火 here has the same pronunciation as 火, *hi*). But the poem's syntagmatic concern calls for a different choice. A shared meaning brings *feu* and 火 together in the first place. In a translation context, their semantic equivalence could be indicated by a slash, as in *feu/火*. The slash would also signal a relation of substitution—one is to replace its interlingual other in an instance of translation. Yet in this poetic context, by indicating the

graphemic regrouping of *fe/u* ∪, the slash is instrumental in establishing a relation of contiguity. As a result of the slash, the *u* from *feu* reaches out and joins ∪. The graphs *u* and ∪ are so similar in shape as if they were lost graphemic twins, once separated by linguistic boundaries but now “reunited” in a poetic syntagm that puts the sense of ‘fire’ in suspension. Like the previous poem, the emphasis here seems not so much on referential meaning as on language encounter that, through a display of syntagmatic relationships, facilitates interlingual exchange. It is obvious that neither the *kanji* 火 nor the *katakana* ヒ would fit into the combination with the letter *u*, and that a mere juxtaposition of the French *u* and the Japanese ∪ would be insufficient to create a syntagm. This simple poem takes the prevalence of contiguity over equivalence a step further to show that syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships are immanent to each other in the space of the poem.

In some other poems by Garnier and Niikuni, French and Japanese language-matters are brought together under a graphic composition. In a monolingual context, a graphic composition of words shows how one word relates to another through a spatial orientation. In a bilingual or multilingual context, a graphic composition also functions as an organizing syntagm in which language encounter occurs. While a graphic orientation adds a layer of referential equivalence between word and image, it is necessary to stress that in viewing these poems as sites of language encounter, similarity relationships between word and image are created as part of the contiguity relationships among interlingual language-matters. Through graphic presentations of words, more subtle effects of interlingual contiguity can be observed.

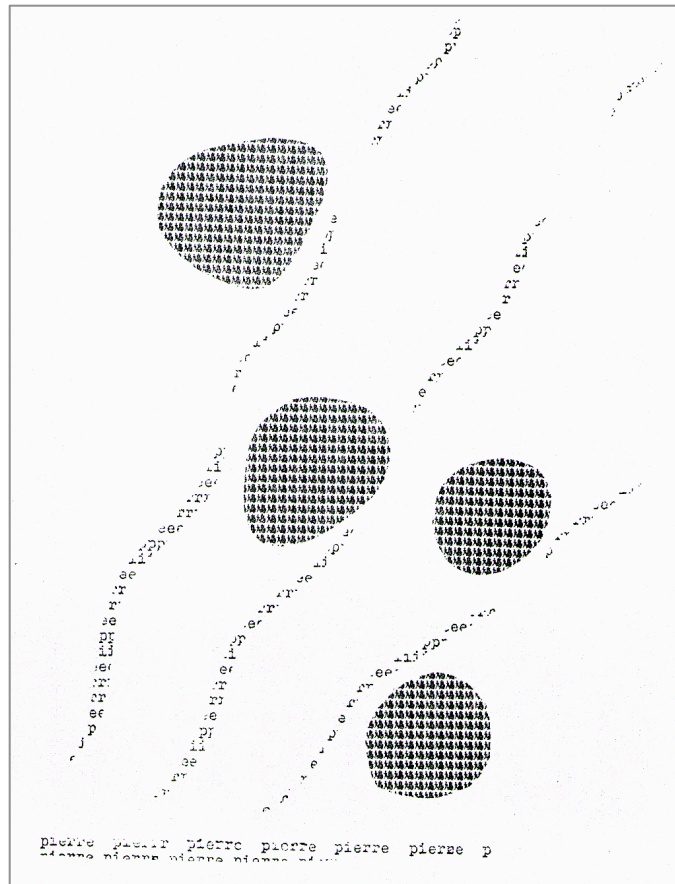


Figure 7. “[*pierre/鳩*]” [rock/pigeon] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008g, p. 250)

The first example of such kind of graphic presentation is “[pierre/鳩]” (Figure 7), which comprises the Japanese *kanji* 鳩 (*bato*, ‘pigeon’) and the French word *pierre* (‘rock’). Graphically, repetitions of 鳩 create relatively round shapes that may resemble rocks, and fragmentary sequences of the letters of *pierre* form lines that are mainly wavy and possibly allude to traces of flight. Instead of a direct graphic representation of 鳩 and *pierre*, the semantic values of the two words are thus transposed in the graphic composition. Aesthetically, the transposition is made plausible by the denser visual appearance of the twelve-stroke character 鳩 than the letters of *pierre*. While transposition results in a mutual substitution that operates on the axis of selection, it is not an end in itself in the poem. Rather, transposition is part of a response to the poem’s need for creating a part-whole relationship. Transposition works with the graphic and the graphemic along the axis of combination to generate ambivalence as a major effect of this poem.

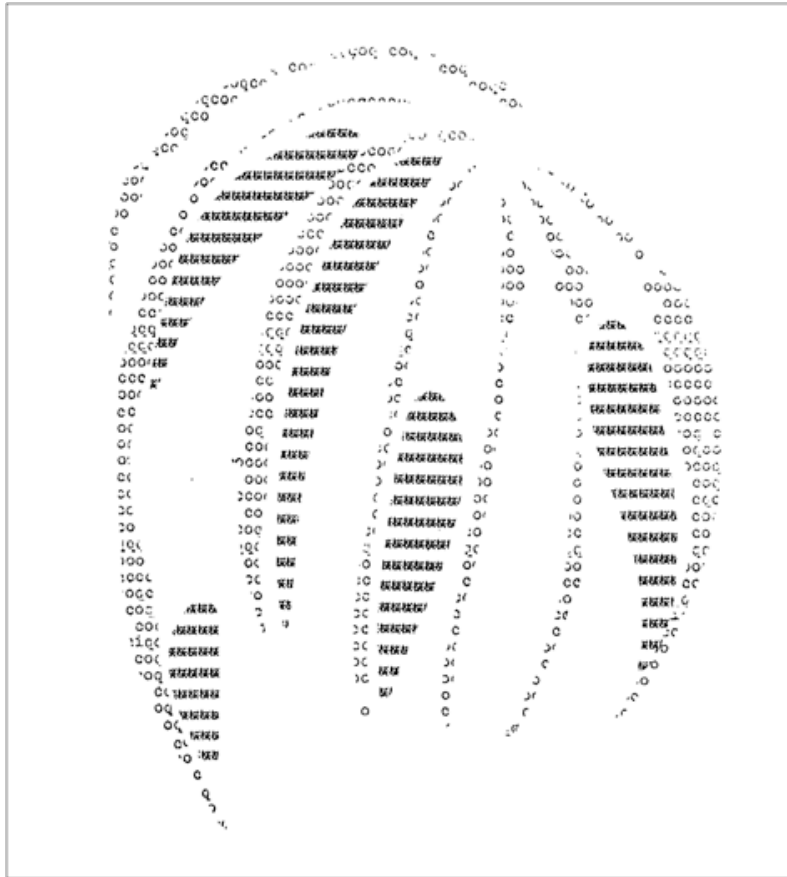


Figure 8. “[coq/桜]” [cock/cherry blossom] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008a, p. 248)

At first glance, “[coq/桜]” (Figure 8) has a similar graphic approach to “[pierre/鳩].” The French word *coq* (‘cock’) and the Japanese *kanji* 桜 (*sakura*, ‘cherry blossom’) are used to “draw” a graphic image suggestive of both a cock’s tail and a heavy cluster of cherry blossoms hanging from a branch. As in “[pierre/鳩],” the image is made possible through the graphemic distinctiveness of *coq* and 桜. Semiotically speaking, *coq* and 桜 are connected through a common graphic image that relates them to each other metaphorically. As critic

Simon-Oikawa observes, the cock's tail and the cluster of cherry blossoms are inseparable from each other in the image (2007, p. 276). This poem is different from “[pierre/鳩]” in that the graphic composition here points toward a metaphorical leap whereas the graphical composition in “[pierre/鳩]” suggests a transposition. The metaphorical leap has significant impact on the syntagmatic aspect of the poem: seen from part to whole, *coq* and 桜 contribute to the graphic image metonymically; however, seen from whole to part, the graphic image puts *coq* and 桜 in a metaphorical relationship.

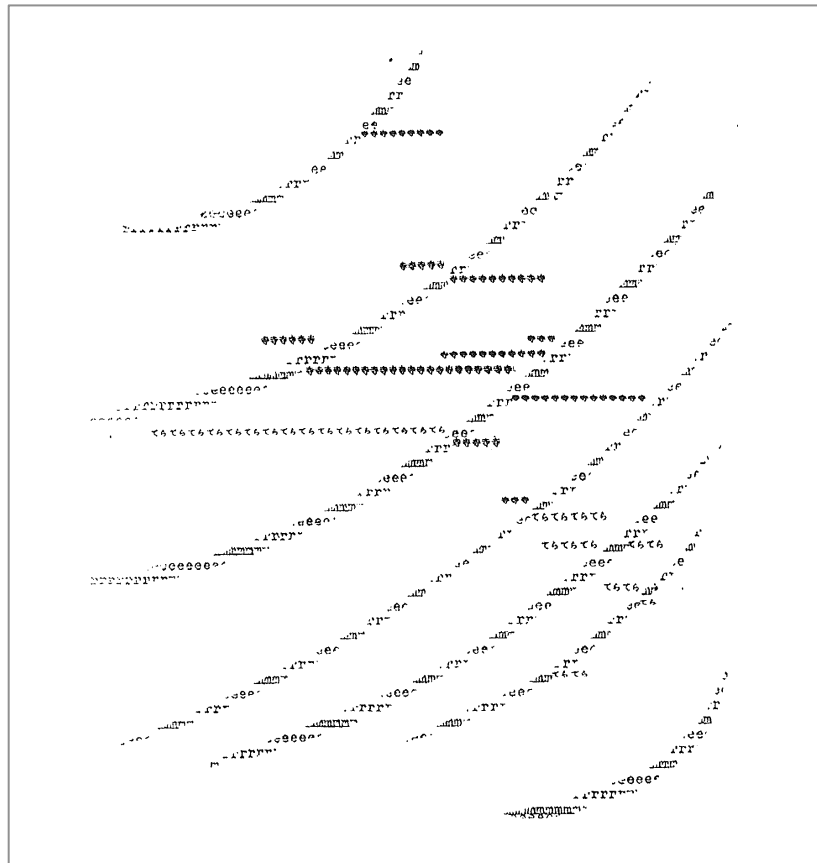


Figure 9. “*Shizu me ru tera* 沈める寺” [Sinking Temple] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008i, p. 249)

The next three poems present a stronger sense of interaction among the French and Japanese language-matters compared with “[pierre/鳩]” and “[*coq*/桜].” Both “*shizu me ru tera* 沈める寺” [Sinking Temple] (Figure 9) and “[*mer*/光/女]” [sea/light/woman] (Figure 10) use *mer* (‘sea’) as French language-matter, yet different graphic configurations put it in different relationships with Japanese language-matter. “*Shizu me ru tera*” consists of the French word *mer* and the Japanese *kanji* 寺 (*tera*, ‘temple’) as well as its *hiragana* form てら (*tera*, ‘temple’). Unlike “[pierre/鳩]” and “[*coq*/桜],” the graphic configuration here does not interfere with the referential aspect of the language-matter. The poem’s graphic-verbal correlations are straightforward and stable: *mer* appears as typewritten, letter-by-letter repetitions on fragmentary strips that look like ripples; 寺 and てら each repeats on horizontal lines of various lengths that together may symbolize a temple or a cluster of temple buildings. Reading in light of the title, the poem may depict a scene where a temple is

literally sinking into some water; alternatively, the title could allude to a temple’s reflection in a body of water.¹⁸ In either case, the *kanji* 寺 seems to undergo a transformation into the *hiragana* てら as it comes into further contact with *mer*. The longest horizontal line in the poem could signal the division before and after the transformation, with a small remnant of *kanji* not yet transformed on its right. The farther the water moves (the bottom right quarter of the poem), the more complete is the transformation. Perhaps French, being a phonetic script, pulls Japanese towards its phonetic self, as manifested through *hiragana*.

On a micro level, the poem unveils contiguous coincidences between the two languages. *Tera* (the transcription of 寺 and てら) and *mer* share the letters *e* and *r*. Putting the French and Japanese lines adjacent to each other, with several lines of 寺 and てら located between the French *e*'s and *r*'s, intimates such a proximity—one neither completely phonetic nor completely graphemic. In the same vein of combinatory possibilities, *tera* may even faintly recall *terre* ('earth' in French), giving 'temple' and the overall poem an added layer of connotation. Such kind of interlingual contiguity is also found in the title “沈める寺.” 沈める (*shizu me ru*) is a verb meaning ‘to sink,’ with る (*ru*) being a verb-marker. 寺 (*tera*, ‘temple’) is the same *kanji* in the poem. 沈める寺 literally means ‘a temple that sinks.’ The *hiragana* characters in this phrase, める (*me ru*), would be the phonetic equivalent of *mer* if the French word were transcribed into Japanese.

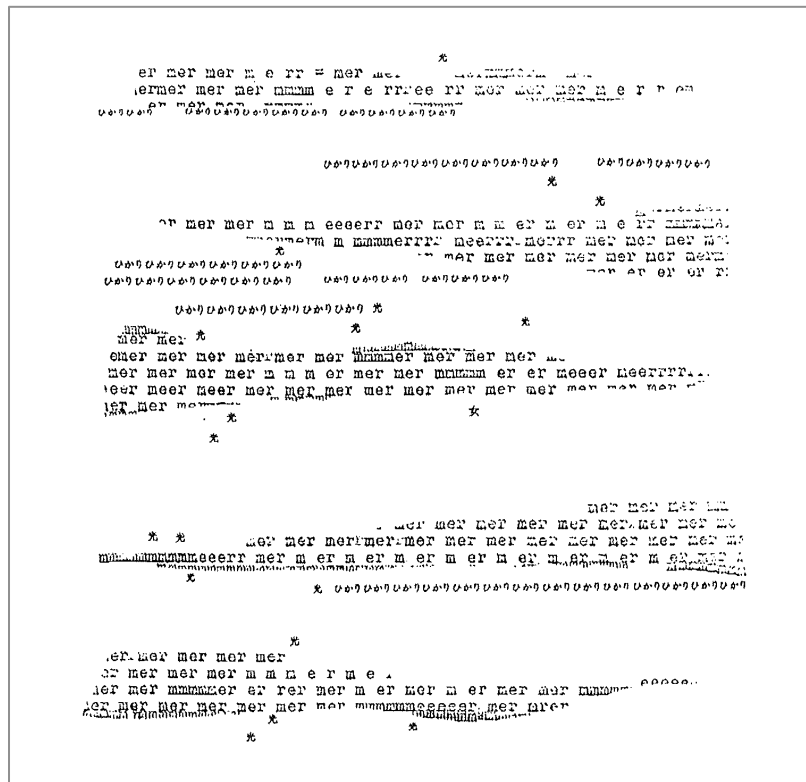


Figure 10. “[mer/光/女]” [sea/light/woman] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008c, p. 252)

Sharing the same French language-matter, “[mer/光/女]” [sea/light/woman] is different from “*shizu me ru tera*” in its clear distinction of each script’s graphic function: planes are formed by French, lines are made of *hiragana*, and dots are *kanji*. From a graphic perspective,

“[*mer/光/女*]” appears to portray a scene of the sea. Light reflects on an undulating surface of *mer* with lengths of *ひかり* (*bikari*, ‘light’) and individual sparkles of *光* (*bikari*, ‘light’). Amidst rays and glitters of light, a solitary presence of *女* (*ona*, *kanji* for ‘woman’) completes the picture. Specific to this graphic setting, *女* could connote a goddess, a mermaid, or other mythical female figures. The formal similarity of *女* to *光* might, however, mask *her* presence and leave the *kanji* unnoticed (e.g. Seaman, 1981). Yet beyond graphic interpretations, the poem points toward a subtle language encounter. The repetition of *mer* on horizontal lines introduces variation through irregular blanks and recurrence of individual letters. Though the variation is kept to a limit, it leaves room for imaginary morphings of *lumière* (‘light’ in French) and *mère* (‘mother’ in French), as triggered by the *hiragana* and *kanji* forms.¹⁹ The *kanji* for ‘sea,’ *海* (*umi*), does contain the character for ‘mother,’ *母* (*baba*). Like “*shizuru me ru tera,*” an interlingual contiguity is potentially there in “[*mer/光/女*].” In these poems, both metaphor and metonymy are at play. As graphic materials the French and Japanese words are assigned with referential significance and each becomes a symbol for the graphic content; as linguistic materials, the words relate to one another through chances of contingent connection across the two languages at the intersection provided by the poems. The metonymical aspect supports the metaphorical aspect: reading the poems from a graphic perspective alone might takes the reader’s attention away from the interlingual exchange happening in the text; yet treating the words as words and reading the poems from a linguistic perspective would enhance the referential values in the graphic.

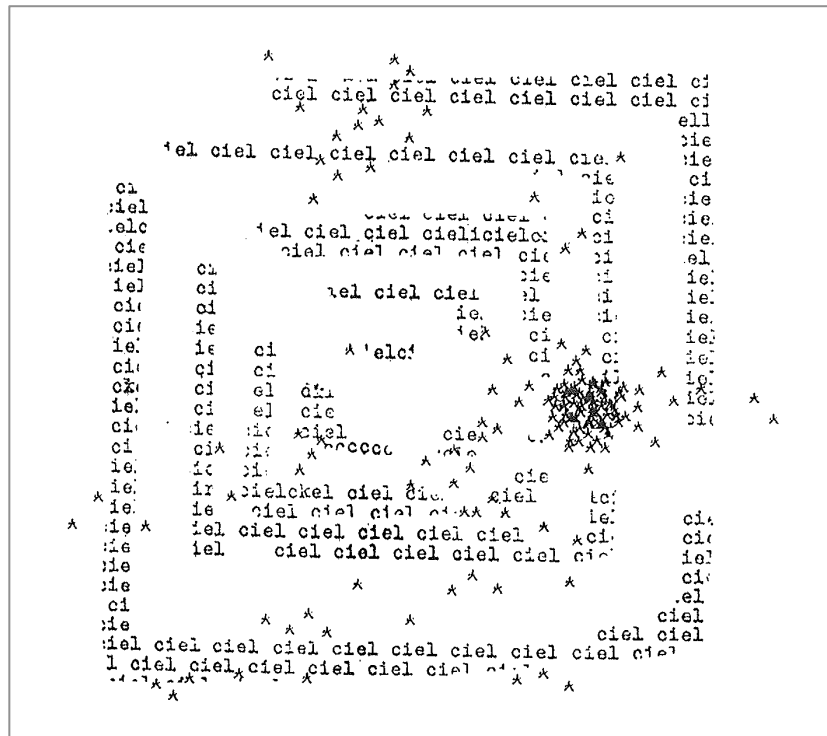


Figure 11. “*Purometensu no hi* プロメテウスの火” [Prometheus’ Fire] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008h, p. 254)

In “*Purometeusu no hi プロメテウスの火*” [Prometheus’ Fire], metaphor and metonymy work together even more closely than in the previous poems, encapsulating the story of Prometheus’ gift of fire to human beings. Both the French *ciel* (‘sky’) and the *kanji* 火 (*hi*, ‘fire’) may each have its double meaning as a result of the graphic layout. The contour-like pattern formed by *ciel* may allude to the mountain where Prometheus is taken captive in addition to referencing the sky. As a symbol of fire, 火 spreads under the sky thanks to Prometheus, whose presence could be identified by the high concentration of 火’s in the dark spot to the right. Alternatively, the calligraphic style of 火 (★) resembles a symbol for star (★); this turns the scene into a star-lit night at which Prometheus’ liver, consumed by an eagle during the day, grows back little by little as the dark spot. With the provision of two interpretations as either–or, double meaning is a matter of equivalence.

In addition to this, the poem contains two subtle instances whereby symbolic meaning is driven by combinatory possibilities. Firstly, at the center of the piece appears the sequence ★'elc'. Setting aside the fragmentary *i*, *elc* becomes *clé* (‘key’ in French) when read backwards, and *cle* would aptly symbolize the role of fire in the story. Secondly, in the group of four horizontal lines in the bottom half of the poem, there is a single occurrence of **c*iel*** in the first line. While the possibility of mistyping *k* as *i* cannot be completely excluded, it is more plausible that *k* is ★ transformed and transplanted, considering the short line of ★ extending from the *ciel* above the line.²⁰ The morphing of *c* in **cccc** next to the line of ★ could hint at a parallel graphemic transformation in *ckel*, only that the latter is translingual. But if *ciel* and 火 are now supranational language immanent to the poem, linguistic boundaries are no longer an issue. As the preface of *Poèmes Franco-japonais* states, “Japanese and French blend and add on to their semantic and symbolic values” (Garnier & Niikuni, 1968a, para. 3). The new combination of *ckel* signifies, through the context provided by Prometheus’ fire, the productivity of the supranational language that the two poets work together to create.

TOWARD AN INTERLINGUAL POETICS

What do Garnier and Niikuni’s French-Japanese poems instigate for an interlingual poetics? Based on the above observations, I propose that the involvement of bilingual or multilingual language-matters reinstates the priority of contiguity over similarity in the poetic process, and this is where an interlingual poetics may begin. While similarity or equivalence is the concern of translation that deals with the substitution of one language with another, contiguity is the primary issue if two or more languages interact in the same text. As shown by Garnier and Niikuni’s works, combination motivates selection. That is to say, contrary to Jakobson’s view that equivalence is projected from selection to combination, contiguity extends from combination to selection as a guiding principle in an interlingual poetics for bridging the languages involved and for staging an interlingual encounter. This is because firstly, combinatory relationships must be set up to put two or more languages together; and secondly, it is necessary to consider interlingual or translingual mechanisms when reading the text for meaning, and such mechanisms are observed through combinatory relationships.

Furthermore, the productiveness of Garnier and Niikuni’s spatial syntagms demonstrates their viability for interlingual poetry. While spatial syntagms are one of the most important techniques in concrete poetry, they were probably pioneered in the interlingual poetry by Garnier and Niikuni.²¹ The casting aside of syntagmatic conventions inherent to a national

language, especially those of grammar, can prevent the subjection of a language to the overarching frame of another. Spatial syntagms are an effective means of organization if interlingual poems are created as level playing fields for the languages involved.

The main impact of spatial syntagms is in their opening up of the text to invite contingencies and accidents in the combination of words—that is to say, to recognize the mechanisms of chance in linguistic production. In doing so, interlingual poetry, like concrete poetry and language poetry, can go beyond the question of “what it means” to engage readers with basic questions about linguistic processes that might resist interpretation. The essence of meaning, cumulating in the metaphor, inevitably becomes problematic in contexts of interlingual exchange. And yet, reliance on metaphorical approaches such as symbolism and substitution can easily reinscribe the quest for the essence of meaning. As Jonathan Culler explains in *The Pursuit of Signs*, “[t]he privileging of metaphor over metonymy and other figures is an assertion of the cognitive value and respectability of literary language; the accidental play of verbal associations and contingent juxtapositions is given an ancillary status so that it can be ignored” (1981, p. 198). In texts that explore interlingual encounter, however, such “accidental play of verbal associations and contingent juxtapositions” cannot be ignored; rather, it is the very basis of the interlingual encounter and of meaning production. By incorporating this kind of play, the use of spatial syntagms to create interlingual contiguity contributes to a reevaluation of the relationship between metaphor and metonymy.

When *ASA* published *Micropoèmes* and *Petits Poèmes mathématiques simplistes* in 1966, Niikuni included some thoughts on his collaboration with Garnier: “in the process of this collaboration, I cannot resist consciously reflecting on the differences between Japanese-ness and French-ness, and cannot help incessantly imagining the spiritual climates and civilizations of both languages” (1966, p. 10).²² The bringing together of the two languages in the French-Japanese poems does not and cannot efface the distinctiveness of the two languages; rather, by foregrounding their formal differences, a synthesis of supranational language reveals instances of interlingual exchange that are contingent to combinatory possibilities. If it is by chance that the two poets worked together, solely through language, chance is also behind the encounter of Japanese and French in their poems, the extension of one language into another, and any meanings that ensue from the encounter.

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NOTES

¹ I would like to thank Éditions des Vanneaux and Musashino Art University Museum & Library for granting permissions to reprint Figures 1, 3, 7-11, and Figures 2, 4-6, 9-11, respectively. I am grateful to Hideki Kakita and Mimi Yu for their advice on the Japanese translations in this essay. My sincere thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.

² For an introduction of the International Concrete Poetry Movement with a country-by-country account, see Solt (1968).

³ For a detailed discussion of the Brazilian *Noigandres*, see Perrone (1996). For the *Noigandres*' adaptation of the ideogram, see Pignatari (1982).

⁴ 〈この大地の見知らぬ処に、見知らぬ詩人が、異なった言葉で私とほぼ同じようなことを目指し、同じような作品を発表しているのを目前にして、私はある種の靈的な戦慄を感じたのである。これが、私が国際運動に参加した必然性といえはいえるものであろう。〉 All translations are mine.

⁵ The international scope of the concrete poetry movement encompasses most countries in western and northern Europe, North America, some Latin American countries, and Japan. L.C. Vinholes was studying traditional Japanese music in Tokyo when, through connections with Brazilian artists, he co-organized the "Brazilian Concrete Poetry" exhibition, the first outside Brazil, at Tokyo's Museum of Contemporary Art in 1960 (Kanazawa, 2008a, p. 192).

⁶ In addition to concrete poetry, Spatialism included phonetic, objective, visual, phonic, and cybernetic poetry (Garnier, 1968b, p. 138-139).

⁷ Prior to "Position 1," Garnier published his first concrete manifesto, "*Manifeste pour une poésie nouvelle, visuelle et phonique*" [Manifesto for a New Poetry, Visual and Phonetic] (1968a), also in 1962.

⁸ Throughout this essay I use the word *graphemic* to refer to qualities pertinent to written signs, and *graphic* to describe visual images or effects produced through principles of drawing. The distinction is important in discussing visual poetry since principles and techniques pertinent to written signs are different from those to graphic/visual compositions.

⁹ 〈字素に分解するのはできなくはないけれど、活字だと極めて困難です。だけど写植だと簡単にできる。〉 “It is not impossible to separate elements of *kanji*, but it is extremely difficult for typing [to present such separation]. However, it is an easy task for photo-typeset to produce [the graphic presentation].”

¹⁰ The Japanese version of “*Position 3*” is reprinted in Tatehata (2002, note 11). While “*Position 3*” concluded the series of French Spatialist manifestoes, Niikuni published two more manifestoes in the Japanese journal *ASA*: “Tokyo Manifesto for Spatialism: 1968” (Niikuni, 1968) and “ASA Manifesto: 1973” (Niikuni, 1973).

¹¹ “*Le poète travaille maintenant objectivement une langue considérée comme matière et il crée (ou fabrique) des textes avec tous les éléments de cette langue: phrases, mots, lettres, syllabes, accents, articulations, souffles et avec les informations sémantiques et esthétiques fournies par ces éléments. Le poète considère la langue comme un univers autonome et utilise tous les moyens techniques de création, de multiplication, de diffusion.*”

¹² “*le passage des langues nationales à une langue supranationale et à des oeuvres qui ne sont plus traduisibles mais transmissibles.*”

¹³ Both *Micropoèmes* (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008d) and *Petits poèmes mathématiques simplistes* (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008f) are small series of poems. Marianne Simon-Oikawa (2007, p. 276) mentions that the two collections contain a total of thirteen poems; however, reprints in *Niikuni Seiichi: Works 1952-1977* (Niikuni, 2008c) show a total of five poems in *Micropoèmes* and seven in *Petits poèmes mathématiques simplistes*.

¹⁴ The exception is “*Six poèmes de la forêt lyrique*” [Six poems of the lyrical forest] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008i), in which French syllables meet with Japanese ones, the two corresponding at first and diverging increasingly.

¹⁵ For an introductory account of paradigm and syntagme, see Chandler (2007, pp. 83-90).

¹⁶ Jakobson discusses sound symbolism in *The Sound Shape of Language* (1979), co-authored with Linda Waugh. They define sound symbolism as “designating an inmost, natural similarity association between sound and meaning” (Jakobson & Waugh, 1979, p. 178).

¹⁷ *Kanji* (漢字) are Chinese characters borrowed into Japanese writing since its early development. *Hiragana* and *katakana* are two phonetically-based graphemic systems for the same set of speech sounds in Japanese language, each having forty-eight graphs. These two *kana* are assigned with different notational functions. *Hiragana* is used to write grammatical particles, inflectional markers, and native Japanese words. *Katakana* “is used for emphasis, non-Chinese loanwords, Chinese loanwords where the *kanji* would be used but for some reason is missing, names of many plants and animals, onomatopoeic words, and telegrams” (Rogers, 2005, p. 65). According to writing conventions, *hiragana* and *kanji* can be combined in writing a word, such as a verb with the stem written in *kanji* and the inflectional ending in *hiragana*, but *hiragana* and *katakana* cannot be used in the same word (Steinberg & Yamada, 1978-1979, p. 90). On a macro level, it is common for all three graphic systems to appear in one piece of writing. Visually, the three types of graphic forms are easily distinguishable from one another: *kanji* usually having more strokes than *hiragana* and *katakana*, *hiragana* is more round in shape and frequently have curves, and *katakana* is more angular and has the simplest composition. Also of interest to our discussion is the three graphemic systems’ stylistic association with social stereotypes in contemporary Japan. As Smith and Schmidt’s study shows, *kanji*, associated with erudition, is more often used by men of middle age or above. *Hiragana*, symbolizing softness and femininity, is popular among women and young people. *Katakana*, having a strong presence in pop culture, is more frequently used by young people, especially males (Smith & Schmidt, 1996, p. 50).

¹⁸ Among the French-Japanese poems discussed in this essay, only “*Shizu me ru tera* 沈める寺” [Sinking Temple] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008i) and “*Purometeusu no hi* プロメテウスの火” [Prometheus’ Fire] (Garnier & Niikuni, 2008h) are titled, and the titles only appear with the poems in *Niikuni Seiichi: Works 1952-1977* (Niikuni, 2008c). In the original publication of *Poèmes Franco-japonais* (Garnier & Niikuni, 1968a), none of the poems are titled.

¹⁹ Some of Garnier's concrete poems do drop the French accent marks as in *ile* (*île*), *cinema* (*cinéma*), *equinox* (*équinoxe*) (Garnier, 2008b, pp. 212, 210, 226).

²⁰ The unlikelihood of *ckel* being a typo is reinforced by the appearance of the same version in three different publications: the original *Poèmes Franco-japonais* (Garnier & Niikuni, 1968a), *Niikuni Seiichi: Works 1952-1977* (Niikuni, 2008c) in Japan, and Pierre Garnier's *Ceuvres poétiques I 1950-1968* (Garnier, 2008c) in France.

²¹ Concrete poets working around the same time as Garnier and Niikuni's collaboration often refer to the syntagmatic dimension of their works as structure (e.g. Gomringer, 1968) or spatial syntax (e.g. Campos, Campos, & Pignatari, 1968), as a result of their common objective of liberating their languages from the constraints of grammar. To Eugen Gomringer, who is known as the father of concrete poetry in Europe, a universal language is achievable through the structures of concrete poetry: "Concrete poem structures can serve to unite various kinds of language, concepts of language and the body of existing signs" (Gomringer, 1968, p. 68). Garnier and Niikuni have a similar aspiration; they believe that through supranational language "*l'activité du poète rejoint celle du savant dans la découverte d'une esthétique linguistique et d'un langage commun à toute l'humanité*" [the poet's activity joins the scientist's in discovering a linguistic aesthetics and a language common to all humanity] (Garnier & Niikuni, 1968b, 149). Functionally speaking, the terms "structure," "spatial syntax," and "supranational language" mean a concrete syntagm that displaces the syntax of a particular national language.

²² 〈だが実際には、この合作の過程において、私はフランスと日本を意識しないわけにはいかなかったし、終始両国語の風土や文明圏を想起しないわけにはいかなかった。〉