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Working Words: New Approaches to Japanese Studies

Jordan Sand, Alan Tansman and Dennis Washburn

This project began as an attempt among scholars from an array of disciplines to find ways out of comfortable analytical habits toward more open possibilities for writing about Japan. Amid the enormous diversity of approaches that have emerged in the field over the past generation, what persists as both common and privileged ground for everyone doing some form of Japanese Studies is the universe of the Japanese language: the rich traditions of literature, philosophy, and the visual arts, the vast bodies of scholarly writing, the torrents of Japanese journalistic writing, and the distinctive forms of popular discourse—some tributary of which any writer must navigate in order to address a social or cultural phenomenon in Japan in any depth. Only a minuscule portion of all this Japanese writing ever gets translated into another language (although many times as much gets translated from European languages into Japanese), and apart from academic specialists, few native speakers of English or of other European languages develop the fluency to read it comfortably. As a consequence, those of us who do research in Japanese and write in English continue in some degree to play the role of translators and interpreters even as we engage contemporary Japanese scholarship (and Japanese scholars engage ours) in a multi-polar, globalizing field.

To encourage interdisciplinary conversation in Japanese Studies, a series of workshops was held over the course of several years at various venues in the United States. The idea of collecting essays based on particular key terms in Japanese (and, indirectly, in other languages) emerged out of these workshops as a simple but effective tool for scholars to present the insights of their own work in a form that would be digestible and meaningful to other scholars and students across disciplines. Each of the essays attempts to show how words—not just any words, but words central to our various disciplines—give shape and expression to the worlds we study and to our methods for studying those worlds.

The essays presented here are less concerned with etymological or lexical tracings (though these are often important too) than with the relationships of words to the larger historical, political, ideological, or aesthetic fields they inhabit. They examine the constellations of words around words, the patterns of a word's movement, including the suppression of one word by another, or the ways one word comes to stand in for others. We have chosen words that transform intransitively and transitively, that act as levers for rethinking cultural history, very broadly construed, and for imagining our disciplines anew. Some of these words have become commonsensical; we hope that here they are made strange again. Some are protean; others are resistant to change. For us a word is what Richard Poirier calls an "active, not merely reflective response to the given…" It is a trope, a turning against words already in place, and also an act of power over the worlds, imagined and real, that those words already in place have brought into being.[1]

Because words are a means by which consciousness mediates its relationship to the world, they come into being and undergo semantic shifts as part of a complex production of knowledge. As such, the ways in which words work and travel provide insights into the fundamental questions about how we come to know what we know, both in the general sense and within the specific contours of our disciplines.

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[1] Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Language: Emersonian Reflections*, New York: Random House, 1987, 30.

Although this project might be pursued across the entire history of a language, the essays in the present volume are more situated in recent time. This is because the past two centuries in Japan have been marked by the conscious production of a new culture—and a new language—spurred by an encounter with radically different ways of knowing the world. As colonial power in East Asia and as colonized subject of Western power, Japan has been a kind of borderland in which competing ideologies and values have intertwined. This history has left its traces throughout the Japanese language, which has been powerfully affected by the translation of vocabulary and concepts. Starting from the Meiji Period (1868-1912), translations of all types of knowledge from Western cultures, some of which were facilitated by earlier translations of Western sources into Chinese, have been a defining feature of Japanese literate culture. Translation has not been a simple one-way project, however, for translations from Japanese have had profound cultural and epistemological impact elsewhere in East Asia beginning in the same period. Moreover, academic and literary translations from Japanese into Western languages, especially since World War Two, have done much to establish the ways in which Japanese culture is represented and understood.

The act of translating presumes that not just words but knowledge itself is at some level commensurable and can cross cultural, linguistic, and historical borders. The vexing nature of this presumption is revealed, however, in cases where commensurate vocabulary is clearly lacking. Walter Benjamin confronted this problem when he argued that translation is “the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language.”

This "true language" does not dissolve the differences among natural human languages; it is "one in which the independent sentences, works of literature, critical judgments, will never communicate—for they remain dependent on translation; but in it the languages themselves, supplemented and reconciled in their mode of signification, harmonize."[2]

The implication of Benjamin's assertion is that translation can produce contradictory effects (or even contradictory affects). Even as translation throws into sharp relief particular traits of language that reveal and embody fundamental differences among cultures, it simultaneously acts to efface one parochial language and culture by bringing it into harmony with, and thus making it comprehensible to, another. As both a marker of difference and a means to reconcile difference, translation tries to satisfy two countervailing assumptions: on the one hand, that of the universal commensurability of knowledge, and on the other, that of the relative truth of parochial knowledge produced by distinct cultures—an assumption that gives the lie to the claim that all words are translatable.

These countervailing assumptions underwrite much of the literature on Japanese culture. Certain scholars and journalists have presented Japanese words such as *ie* ("house" or "lineage"), *uchi/soto* ("inside/outside"), and *wa* ("harmony") as signifying ineffably Japanese ideas or cultural forms, their uniqueness seemingly confirmed by the impossibility of translating them (although in fact the possibility of a "faithful" translation is open to question in the case of any word). What is remarkable about this type of writing is the tendency to claim, with breathtaking certainty, that these so-called untranslatable terms convey the essence of what it means to be Japanese. The tendency is hardly limited to specialists outside of Japan. Writers in Japanese have been just as guilty of this mode of cultural pseudo-linguistics. Indeed, this kind of mystification has been a favorite device of the many theories of Japanese exceptionalism that have flourished since the 1960s. A watered-down counterpart to cultural analysis based on word reification can be found in popular writing as well—for example in business guides with boldly untranslated Japanese titles like *Kaisha* and *Kaizen*.

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[2] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken Books, 77.

By taking up questions of the commensurability of local, national, or global cultures, and by considering the historical and discursive contexts in which words acquire their particular semantic characters, the essays presented here reflect on the more general question of how we understand the nature of knowledge itself, and how that struggle has implications for the disciplines in which the individual words analyzed operate. Indeed, words that name a discipline, such as *shigaku* (history or historical studies) or *bungaku* (literature or literary studies), or that do work within a discipline, such as *bijin* (beauty) and *saburaimu* (sublime) in the field of aesthetics, *chūryū* (middle class) in sociology and history, or *yōga* (Western painting) in art, often become rich with the accretions of meaning from the many contexts through which they have moved. In the case of the word *zange* (confession), the gendered structure of the field of modern literature has suppressed the longer history of the word's migration through other contexts. This semantic motility is crucial to understanding how words work. Their very polysemy profoundly affects the way we know the world.

Some of the essays showcase this polysemy by revealing, for example, how semantically related pairs arise when the burden on one word becomes too great. *Shigaku*, a conceptual notion of history that focuses on methods, came to be used alongside the word *rekishi*, which conveys a naturalist sense of history as a type of quotidian knowledge derived from antiquity. *Ongaku* conveys a sense of music as something foreign and, like *shigaku*, conceptual, whereas *onkyoku* carries the sense of music as its naturally constitutive, material sounds. *Minzokugaku* denotes study of the folk as a discipline, whereas *kyōdo* points to a material knowledge of the everyday and the local. *Kioku* is a type of memory that has validity by virtue of being public, objective, and standard, while *omoide* is a recollection that stakes its claim of truthfulness on its private, subjective, personal nature.[3] These examples reveal the pressure on individual words to move toward a harmonizing of language even if that harmony is only partially achieved—a pressure operating constantly on words, regardless of cultural or historical context, that the conscious act of translation merely makes explicit.

The polysemic structure of words makes it more difficult to “harmonize” different languages, but multi-layered significance is not by itself an inherent property of any word. The accretions of meaning, the various nuances that attach to a word, are as much if not more the outcome of the transfer and flow of knowledge within and among cultures. Understanding how specific words convey knowledge thus depends to some extent upon the various media by which words, whether spoken or written, are circulated. The motility of words, which enables us to transfer and transform knowledge from one culture to another, is not the product of some natural permeability of languages, but rather of the materiality of the various media of speaking and writing. For this reason the relationship of the technology of written language to the production and distribution of knowledge is another major subject in many of the essays that follow.

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[3] See the essays by Keirstead, Hosokawa, Satō and Tamanoi.

Not long ago, words looked different than they do today. In the days before the internet the printed words we encountered lay inert on the page. Someone had written them, someone had edited them, someone else had set the type and printed them, and there they rested, impervious to all but the most aggressive of marginalia. Even as disembodied patterns of pixels on the screen of a computer or word processor, they appeared as we typed them, the transcription of an inner monologue, or, as the response of the machine, part of a dialogue.

Internet search engines changed all this. The keyword search, a central new form of “word-work” in the era of digital texts, has become so commonplace that we seldom reflect on its revolutionary character. Yet it affects not only how we acquire knowledge, but the nature of what is acquired. Even setting aside the host of issues about the instability of virtual texts and the disappearance of traditional authorship in textual environments like Wikipedia, the simple fact that keyword searching gives special place to the individual word or short phrase itself signifies a radical reorientation of texts and readership. The researcher who finds a traditional, individually authored and citable piece of writing through a keyword search rather than through a bibliographic reference to an author or title (or through aesthetic cues like an eye-catching book cover) leaps past the organizational structures of disciplines, library classification systems, publishers, editorial boards, and so forth, to a direct encounter with the author(s) on the unprepared ground of the word or phrase. From there the reader is as likely to work backward as forward, or simply to skip around before deciding whether to read on. Apprehension of the author’s intention and of the context of the work follows reading, if it happens at all. In the shift from paper archives to databases and the World Wide Web, digital keyword searches replace the idiosyncratic and historically layered relationship between readers and words with a utopia of instant information and a dilemma of consumer choice.

As the recent history of the word *otaku* demonstrates, shifts in the material context of language away from print media toward the various visual and digital media of contemporary popular culture can transform the meaning of a word in a way that reveals the transformation of the nature of media itself.[4] The word *otaku* names a specific group of people, and in so naming attempts to impose a degree of control and discipline on them. And yet within the participatory world of digital media, *otaku* also confers an identity that signifies not only a specific class of consumers who have, quite literally, an all-consuming interest in new media, but also the impact the obsessions of this class exert on those media, which become as liberating and empowering as they are controlling.

A collection like this, incomplete and idiosyncratic, available to anyone but demanding careful reading on the authors' own terms, is an effort to acknowledge and challenge the emergence of digital media, especially the internet, as the repository of a "knowledge" conceived as synonymous with, and representable as, sheer information. Our challenge, however, is not merely directed at or limited to digital media. By focusing broadly on the ways words work, the ways they move over time, circulate within cultures, and cross linguistic borders, we hope at least to remind readers of the symbiosis that exists between the meanings of words and the underlying assumptions about the nature of knowledge embedded in those words—meanings and assumptions that often go unchallenged because they are either taken as common sense or viewed as little more than discursive tools, the jargon of academic discourse. Our aim is thus both modest and humbling, because we can never exhaust all the things that may be said by and about a single word.

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[4] See the essay by Morikawa.