

# On Written and Spoken Language

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As a novelist, poet, physician, translator, and literary critic, Mori Ogai (Mori Rintaro, 1862-1922) introduced many ideas from the West and helped lay the foundation for modern Japan. Publishing his own literary journal, Shigarami soshi (1889-1894), he was one of the most influential critics and selectors of literary talent during the Meiji Period (1868-1912). His essay “On Written and Spoken Language” (*Genbunron*), translated below, about the use of colloquial Japanese in writing appeared in that journal on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1890 at a time when there was a fierce debate in the literary and intellectual fields about which words, grammar, and style from the spoken language would be appropriate for writing.<sup>1</sup> Ogai is justifiably praised as a pioneer of new writing styles and one of the earliest contributors to the creation of the *genbun itchi* style (“unification of speech and writing”) that eventually became the dominant written language in Japan. But contrary to what one would expect, he did not approve of Japanese authors employing the *genbun itchi* style for their own writings, at least during the early days of the *genbun itchi* movement. It is hoped that the translation of the essay below will make this clear and will also further our general understanding of what was at stake in the controversy during the Meiji Period over which words would be appropriate for writing and which words would not.

In antiquity there was no difference between spoken and written language, and although people transcribed in writing things that were said, this was done not in order to read but in order not to forget. I do not think that the

theory that ours is the only country that derives joy from the spirit of words is a carefully considered one. The poetry of the Iliad and the Odyssey were simply written in the spoken language of the day. The epic of Herodotus is also written in such spoken language. Horatius (65 BC to 8 BC) on the other hand, wrote poems that were enjoyed and sung over and over again, and he wrote them in such a way that people would read them. It is clear that Thoudydides also wanted his readers to think about every verse and every stanza. Plato's philosophy is mostly written in spoken language, but one as early as Aristotle wrote in a non-colloquial style.

As the kind of writing that is meant to be read increases, the spoken and written languages begin to separate from each other. This phenomenon is clearly found in all the world's histories. It is as if the spoken language always gets ahead of the written language and the written language chases behind.

One should take into consideration the fact that a contemporary style appeared when ancient songs could not be sung aloud anymore, and that *dodoitsu* appeared when even that contemporary style could not be sung anymore.<sup>2</sup> Comparing this to the history of changes in Chinese poetry, what happened in Japan coincides almost exactly. Nakai Sekizen (1730-1804) once wrote the following about poetry:<sup>3</sup>

*Jintishi* ("modern form poetry," i.e., *lǔshi* and *jueju*) were probably created during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). The Tang Dynasty poets, including Shen Quanqi (650-729) and Song Zhiwen (656? to 712 or 713), Li Bai (701-762) and Du Fu (712-770), Wang Wei (699-759) and Cen Shen (715-770), Qian Qi (710-782) and Liu Yuxi (772-842), Yuan Zhen (779-831) and Bai Juyi (772-846), wrote long and short *jintishi* poems, and since there was competition to write excellent poems both at court and among the people, many people sang and performed them. For example, the poets Gao Shi (?-765), Wang Changling (698?-765), and Wang Zhihuan (688-742) all drank wine at excellent taverns where they heard female entertainers

singing songs that they (the poets) had written. Similarly, every poem written by one poet, Li Yi (748?-827), was eagerly purchased by musicians who would write music for the poems and play them for the emperor. With these examples in mind, it is easy to imagine how popular the *jintishi* were and the extent to which they flourished during the Tang Dynasty. The patterns and rules for the writing of the poems became fixed eventually, and it was only during the Tang Dynasty that these patterns and rules were widely known.

As the Five Dynasties (907-979) passed and the Song Dynasty (960-1279) came along, popular tastes changed and the *shiyu* ("that which is beside poetry") genre flourished. *Shiyu* or "*ci*" are the poems that were skillfully written by Qin Guan (1049-1100) and Huang Tingjian (1045?-1105). Many people wanted to sing them, and they sang them enthusiastically. "*Ci*" is simply another way to refer to *shiyu*. In the end, however, Tang Dynasty-style poetry and the earlier styles of poetry came to only be written and enjoyed by literati, elite bureaucrats, and landlords. From the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) onwards, these early-style poems were adapted for inclusion in opera. They could still be chanted in operas but could no longer be sung [since people no longer remembered the melodies]. Separate from *ci* there were also popular, new songs, so the early-style poems declined and became even more distant from popular culture.

He Liangjun (1506?-1573) of the Ming Dynasty explains that as poetry died, *yuefu* ("Music Bureau" poems) took their place. Then *yuefu* died out and were replaced by *ci*. *Ci* died out and were replaced by *xiqu* (Chinese opera). Wang Shizhen (1526-1590) also explained this phenomenon and deeply lamented it, writing that Ming Dynasty poets only maintained the rules of the Tang Dynasty poets and had no style of their own. The poet Li Yu (1610-1680), nicknamed "The Old Man with a Conical Hat at the Lake," was one of the greatest writers of *ci* and *xiqu*. According to him, *xiqu* opera

were intended to be sung, while *ci* were intended to be read. Li Yu also said that writers of *xiqu* opera songs intended them to be sung as popular songs that people would want to listen to, unlike *ci* poetry, which writers definitely created for people to read and chant. It only makes sense to read them.

Li was a person of the Ming and early Qing Dynasties. *Ci* were sung in the opera and were popular then. What He Liangjun wanted to say about the decline of *ci* was that the words of the songs did not die out but the melodies did. This is why during the Ming and Ching Dynasties *ci* were only chanted. If such was true of *ci*, it was even truer of *jintishi* poems. People of the Ming and Qing Dynasties sometimes sang “modern poetry,” but it was not a true style; it was only created as something artificial. So it was not the true sound of the Tang Dynasty “modern poetry.”<sup>4</sup>

Poetry in ancient China led to *yuefu*, *yuefu* led to *ci*, and *ci* led to Chinese opera. Such were the historical changes in oral language. The five-seven rhythm of ancient song became the seven-five rhythm of today. The changes of *dodoitsu*, too, were a result of historical changes in oral language. German language writing styles are just as they were long ago, passed down through the writings of highly educated men and upper class female entertainers.

Thus this writing that is just as it was long ago is a form of writing that is the same as the spoken language of long ago, and it is different from the spoken language of today. Thus it is a dead language. The imitation of ancient writing, regardless whether it be of ancient Greece or Rome, or Tang or Song Dynasty China, or the Japanese Court around the time of the Nara period, all such imitation is inappropriate when it comes to the development of the national written language.

People who struggle to imitate dead written language generally exhibit the distinction between elegant and vulgar (*gazoku*) in writing, taking what is ancient to be elegant and what is contemporary as vulgar.

To take an example that is close at hand, a man named Fukuzumi Masae refutes Sasaki Hirotsuna's ideas about poetry in his academic journal, and in a section entitled "On Elegant Tone" he demonstrates that he understands ancient elegance, and yet does not understand that the contemporary is not always vulgar. His powers of discrimination are superior to the shallow-minded men of the world, but I would regret it if I did not open his eyes by revealing to him that the elegance/vulgarity (*gazoku*) distinction is not equivalent to the ancient/contemporary distinction.

Hagino Yoshiyuki and Ota Yoshinori, who hoped for reform among our Japanese language poets, as well as Ichimura Sanjiro (1864-1947), who explained the need for renewal among our classical Chinese poets, have all awakened to the need to discontinue dead language and realized that we must make contemporary spoken language elegant. The language that Hagino has hoped for among future Japanese poets would be deadly, with the eyes of the world, brave and forceful, big and broad.

He writes,

If the poets of the world are without the diseases of prejudice, suspicion, hate, and obstinacy, if they view all things thoroughly and bring about fairness, take the long and avoid the short, deepen the roots of learning, judge carefully, focus their thoughts, and aim in the direction of progress, won't it be easy to once again encounter a golden age? Is it possible to imagine a golden age of poetry in our country? If we do finally make progress in this way, as for the long songs, even the hundred steps of Dante's holy songs and the twenty volumes of Milton's Paradise Lost will not be able to be proud; and as for the short ones, even those that kill short-sword people of haiku and *katauta* will not be able to talk about such terseness; long poetic phrases and short poetic phrases will become entangled and come out, and there will be tonal highs and lows, speeding up and slowing down, and mixed melody. Not only will its effects move heaven and earth,

cause even the emotions of the invisible fierce gods to be stirred, make relations between men and women harmonious, and soothe the heart of ferocious warriors, but also will bring consolation to men, bring enjoyment to men, make men manly in times of distress, make men loyal and brave, make men noble and elegant, and bring satisfaction that Japanese poetry can go the distance.

I think Ota and Ichimura's hopes are also similar to this.

This kind of progress would not be limited only to lyric poems in which one sings alone, epic poems that are read aloud, and plays that are performed, and not be limited to prose that is recited aloud. In the end, in the project to reform and renew these things, poetry and prose belong together. Because Ichimura, in his last contribution to this journal, focused mainly on the reform of sentence-ending words in poetry, he wound up discussing only briefly the renewal of prose, and although he quite thoroughly covered poetic expression, he seems to have left off there. I would like to broaden the discussion somewhat and extend it to the principles involved in the relationship between spoken and written language.

First of all, people should not continue to write in dead language. If it is necessary for contemporary written language and contemporary spoken language to not be so completely at odds with each other, then there are only two paths to be taken to rescue the written language. To replace the contemporary written language with purely ancient written language and to try to return the contemporary spoken language to the ancient spoken language is essentially an attempt to make written language into spoken language. Converting contemporary spoken language directly into contemporary written language or trying not to write the same as people did in antiquity is essentially an attempt to make spoken language into written language.

To make the written language into spoken language [i.e., the opposite] is something that is quite beyond human capacities, just as it is impossible

to fabricate history after the fact. It might be possible to just enrich the present "literary society" by using little words here and there from classical forms. It is like when the late Johannes Scherr (1817-86) of Germany decorated his writings with words from the classical language, and after awhile, they became all the rage when those words had spread throughout the newspapers and society. When this is taken a step further and people attempt to use such ancient forms, writing styles end up like the pseudo-classical prose and poetry that are imitations of Bo Juyi and Wang Wei, and the Manyōshū-style "waka" poems. This principle is truly easy to understand, and as one would expect, no one has said that we should return our speech to the writing styles of long ago. In the preface to his "Nihon bun shiori" (A Guidebook to Japanese Writing), Kume Mikifumi laments the disorder of writing these days, writing, "Even if one wished to return to the writing styles of antiquity, the classical style cannot be learned easily by people today. My writing this book using writings from the past two hundred years that are imitations of ancient writing styles, and such imitated writing styles of people today, and even adding my own poor examples, is only for the sake of introducing beginners" [to how to write in classical styles]. Kume only wished to imitate dead writings and did not intend to return the spoken language to the language of the past.

Thus everyone wants to make the spoken language into written language, except for those who have not lost their minds. People want to use contemporary spoken language directly as contemporary writing and not write as people did in the past. But there is a distinction between "elegant" (*ga*) and "vulgar" (*zoku*) at the present time, and that which is extremely elegant and that which is extremely vulgar only compete against each other, just as ice and ashes do not mix.

When Westerners travel through the interior of Africa and do research on aboriginal languages, they transcribe those languages based on the sound. Doing this is referred to with the term "phonetic," and if it is not the organic notation of Sievers and Sweet, it is the "iconic notation" of Lepsius. This is basically fine. As for the languages of the African

natives, since the history of their languages has not allowed for anywhere near the refinement of our language, there is no way to write down their language except by relying on the sound of the language. It is all the more unfathomable then that the Romaji Society that has appeared in our country wants to abandon our country's history, and without reflecting on the history of our language, wants to just transcribe the spoken language of today based only on contemporary pronunciation, and make that our written language! The pronunciation of *yukau* ("go") is now *yukou*, so the Romaji Society would write it as *yukou* instead of *yukau*. For the word *yukanu* that is common to both ancient and contemporary language, one has to then change the vowel "o" back to "a" and write *yukanu*. Because these are only vowels, this is perhaps permissible. Even worse, one also has to change the consonants. For example, they write "tatsu" for 立つ and "tachi" for 立ち. "Ts" and "ch" are both dialectical variations. Yet, they write "tateba" for 立てば. "T" is the correct pronunciation. These things completely ruin the branches of languages, and this is what happens when a nation has no grammar books or dictionaries. If there were grammar books, it would not be necessary for people to write in such a mishmash fashion. To say it somewhat brazenly, what they are on the verge of doing is seeing our nation's people as aborigines of the African interior. Transcribing the language of today for the sake of research in phonetics is of course a different matter.

Something that takes a step past "transcription" is the *rakugo* writings that have become so common recently. [Entertainment magazines] with names like "Park of Hundred Flowers" and "Flower Mementos." *Rakugo* writings are also transcriptions based on the pronunciation, but unlike the writings of the Romaji Society, they do not simply follow the sound but go so far as to correct kana usage. Nevertheless, artistic spoken language can never become artistic written language. Encho's oral performances are fine, but when they are written down, they are inferior to the writing of a mediocre and stupid novelist. Those who have studied the art of storytelling would in any case take pity



on and feel sorry for those who have such poor taste that they enjoy reading such writings.

A style that is more tasteful than rakugo-type writings is what is referred to as “the unity of speech and writing” [*genbun itchi*]. The *genbun itchi* style is a style in which the kana are corrected, a set syntax (*teniwoha*) is used, and contemporary spoken language is written. Yamada Bimyo (1868-1910), who is the master of this style, has greatly advanced the Nation's literature by writing in an artistic *genbun itchi* style.

It seems that there are actually people in society who, having heard the word “*genbun itchi*,” think that writing can become speech and speech can become writing, but in fact *genbun itchi* only refers to selecting certain types of spoken words from among contemporary speech. Its quality is that of a stern and solemn written language. It is a written language meant for reading. Because *genbun itchi* is a written language meant for reading, it is as if it has been produced through a certain purification by heat, and naturally there are areas where it is different from ordinary language. It is, in fact, true that *genbun itchi* is different from ordinary language, as one can see from Mrs. Yoshikawa's previous harsh attack on this style—how her mother-in-law could not understand [Bimyo's *genbun itchi* style]—so should we not say that this style is sick?

When Dante tried to make his great works public he said that he wanted to write it in the “*lingua vulgare*” of his day, and after he had decided this and done it, he was able to bring forth a certain new writing style in Italy.

Bimyo's school of style has bravely introduced new spoken words into the written language for the benefit of our literary society. He has spearheaded a new Japanese writing style. Previously Tsubouchi Shoyo (1859-1935) and Aeba Koson (1855-1922) had already improved the writing style of today, but because they worked at creating an elevated style, they did not come upon the so-called “radical methods” of Bimyo. Their methods are still flawed. Yet, if this were not the case, they would not have been sufficient to cause a great storm in the sea of literature and

remove the obstruction of the neglectful eyes of the great master stylists.

Bimyo incorporates many new words into his writing, but works to avoid vulgar words, resulting in what may be designated an elevated style. For example, in his “The Fragrance of Sinking into Drunkenness” the word “jeweled curtain” has invited society's censure, but this word is less vulgar than simply obscene. In reference to his verb conjugations, it is as if he uses contemporary Kyoto speech for the prose but maintains the classical conjugations for verse. I cannot help but harbor a few doubts about this. Please allow me to say so.

The inflected portions of Bimyo's prose is unusual from beginning to end. In the preface to Natsukodachi he writes:

It is easier to speak to someone of lower status than to someone of higher status, and so thinking of speech for speaking to someone of lower status as the basis for a style that would unify spoken and written language, I assumed such a relative social status to the reader throughout this work. Lately when I think about it, since somewhat different concerns have arisen, for the most part now I have been assuming a status for the narrator such that his speech register creates equality between narrator and reader.

Besides Bimyo, another notable work that was written in the Bimyo style earlier than Natsukodachi but by Hasegawa (Futabatei) Shimei (1864-1909) is Ukigumo. Besides Bimyo, shall we mention the work of Saganoya Omuro (1863-1947) which lately employed the Bimyo style after Natsukodachi was written?

I think it is clear that one could employ da or desu according to what is appropriate in each case for the words of the main character. The talented and, for a time, celebrated Bavarian, [Ludwig] Ganghofer (1855-1920), in Der Herrgottschnitzer von Ammergau wrote

“s Gluck von die Kinder is d' Seligkeit von die Eltern.” -- Ein edles  
Feuer verschonte das alte faltenreiche Gesicht,

The dialogue, in the first half, is just in a local dialect while the narrative in the second half is in correct diction. Our Tsubouchi and Aeba, as well as both Koda Rohan (1867-1947), Ozaki Koyo (1868-1903), and Sudo Nansui (1857-1920) always use this method. The ones who use the new grammar without any distinction between narrative and dialogue, who change between da and desu in the dialogue according to what is appropriate and stick to one or the other in the narrative are Bimyo, Futabatei, and Saganoya mentioned above. They would probably correspond to Fritz Reuter (1810-1874), the Dickens of Germany, if one were to seek their equivalent in the German literary world. In his Orure Kameruren these words appear: “What willst du? raup ik. -- Ik will dat, wat du nich willst! seggt hei.” The words raup ik and seggt hei are narrated in a first person style in vulgar dialect rather than correct grammar. Yet what is different from our genbun itchi writers here is that Reuter treats vulgar dialect as vulgar dialect, whereas our genbun itchi writers treat vulgar dialect as “New Diction.” One can see that what the result has been of writing in such New Diction is that this school of writers, including Bimyo, Futabatei, and Saganoya, uses this style regardless whether what they are writing is a preface, a record, or an essay, as is apparent from what Bimyo has written in Gakkai no shisen and Kokumin no tomo and from guessing what the reason was for his writing “Nihon zokugo bunporon” (On the Grammar of the Japanese Spoken Language). I naturally am neither completely happy about entering into writing in new grammar, nor do I dislike entering into poetry when it is written in dialect and humble language. If it were possible to take an example from classical Chinese poetry, would it not be where Du Fu (712-70) wrote “The mouth of the ravine surprises the monkey into hearing one” and “looking down at the ravine, he thought it would cut very much, but facing the wine he could not drink”? Would this not move all true human beings? Nevertheless, regarding his new grammar, even if

he says he only uses it for prose, I still cannot agree with him that this grammar should suddenly be treated as normal grammar.

In present-day Bavarian people say "ich thue schlafen" when they should say "ich schlafe," but this new usage has not become part of writing. Is this not similar to our da and desu?

The genbun itchi writers of the present have not decided to not use classical grammar any longer. They use it in the writing of verse. Is this not because the New Diction is not yet necessarily elegant and flowing in a way that is appropriate for verse? Verse is written so that it may be sung or recited, and verse depends on the ear. Prose is meant to be read, and is dependent on just the eye and the mind. In his extreme definition of prose, has not Bimyo penetrated briskly and nimbly, going to the extreme of saying that the writing brush has no use for tone? In that case, then, since he decided that it is not necessary to use his New Diction even in verse, which is dependent upon the ear, then in prose, which is dependent only on the eye and the mind, prose that is for reading, then should it not be unnecessary to put the New Diction to work and use it?

I acknowledge that there would be benefits for the Japanese literary world if someone like Fritz Reuter were to appear in our country, I acknowledge the need to equip ourselves with one of the so-called genbun itchi styles, and I acknowledge that something like Bimyo's theory of Japanese colloquial grammar would be very valuable for scholars. Nevertheless, I think Reuter is a very talented person who acts according to his own designs, and having seen writers using their abilities to write verse that is not in the New Grammar, I cannot understand why we would not also write prose that is not in the New Grammar.

People who are thinking about the reform of our contemporary national literature are all trying to make spoken language into written language, but they just end up trying to preserve the received classical grammar. Konakamura Kiyonari wrote:

The style that is common today went through several periods in

which it went from being splendid and representative, to natural and correct, to confused and estranged, before it ultimately was transformed into the boorish style of the Tokugawa period, completely changed from its original form. While it gets away from the vulgar and is nearly elegant, its elegance is a reflection of classical Chinese, and when one works diligently to abandon the particular written language of one's own country, what results is not a flowing style, but many mistakes in nature's grammar [meaning the various classical conjugations]. When people write in our country's language, even if it is the common style with kanji mixed in, it is hard to refer to mistaken grammar as writing. At present all the world's countries have their own national literatures [i.e., national written languages], and since it is said that the rise and fall of such nations depends on this [having a national written language], [it is the norm] for the common written language [of nations] to be written completely in the nation's own language to the greatest extent possible.

Mozume Takami (1847-1929) goes a step further, explaining:

I will not go so far as to say that snow, the moon, and flowers are bad, nor that elegance is bad, but when learning to write on such topics, one cannot write true thoughts naturally by following the writing examples of people long ago, or by learning the tone of people's writing long ago. [If one learns to write in this way] one gets into the bad habit of getting the order mixed up—in the end, following the words before following the ideas and beginning to think after acquiring the words. I remember encountering this kind of thing before. In order to correct my bad habit, I avoided old rhetoric and old ideas for more than one year by writing everything in genbun itchi, even though it was for compositions in Heian-style classical Japanese or other styles. I would then rewrite such genbun itchi

writings in Heian-style classical Japanese.

Ariga Nagao's (1860-1921) Nihon Kokubun ron is similar to this [quote from Mozume]. These writers/scholars differ from the Bimyo School mainly just in the area of grammar. That Bimyo does not intend to abandon classical grammar is clear even just from seeing how he preserves it in his verse. Even when Bimyo writes prose sometimes he recognizes that classical grammar should be used sometimes according to the type of writing it is, so I expect that after a short time this one small school of the new literature of today will leave their present position to return to using classical grammar in some cases.

Ochiai Naofumi (1861-1903) and those genbun itchi writers are quite estranged from each other, and he is the farthest away from them among the writers of today. He writes:

I am also of the position that the spoken language and the written language should not be separate, but I think one has to be extra careful in this matter, i.e., when raising the spoken language to make it a little more lofty, or pulling the written language down a little in other words. When one looks at the so-called genbun itchi style being used in the world today, authors who write in genbun itchi seem to be going out of their way to promote vulgar, narrow, and inferior language. I not only cannot accept such an approach but also rigorously reject such a style of writing.

My private opinion is that the distance between Ochiai's writing style, that tries to bring down the status [level of writing/writer], and Bimyo's style, when intending to preserve classical grammar, should not be as great as it is today. Or rather, in that gap between their styles, while a certain word for one of them may be elegant, it may be vulgar for the other. One may demand a rich sound in writing, the other perhaps seeking out an extreme opinion, may not demand a rich sound. Compared to their great distance

now, they will be just a minuscule distance from the horizon. Ah well, I understand the feelings of both men. Are not both of them hoping for the appearance of a new national literature in our country? When even Bimyo is applying classical grammar to prose, the many writers whose positions are between these two extremes of Bimyo and Ochiai should all be able to join forces and seek the reform and renewal of literature. I cannot bear to lose hope.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kato Shuichi and Maeda Ai, eds., Buntai (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989) 91-101.

<sup>2</sup> *Dodoitsu* are a genre of Japanese poetry that are written in four line units with the sound unit count of 7-7-7-5 which is mostly used for folk songs. The poetic interest comes in having the last line shortened by two units, a twist on the device of “ji-amari,” using an excess character.

<sup>3</sup> Nakai Sekizen (1730-1804) was a scholar of Neo-Confucian studies who was critical of Ito Jinsai and Ogyu Sorai. He was a merchant in Osaka and a student of Goi Ranju. In his book on political economy (Sobo kigen) he called for major reforms, including abandoning the hostage system for regional daimyos at Edo and terminating guaranteed stipends for the aristocracy. He proposed a unified school system for all classes with promotion based on ability and achievement. He suggested educating students in Edo for administration, and in the Kyoto-Osaka area he recommended cultural studies to include history, ethics, and literature. <http://www.san.beck.org/3-12-Japan1615-1875.html>

<sup>4</sup> In translating this passage in classical Chinese, I benefited from the assistance of Professor Akegi Shigeo of Chukyo University. Any mistranslations or errors are my own.