

PART I

“Pre-Nation”

Linguistic Chaos

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF LANGUAGE REFORMS in the early meiji period will perhaps be helpful to contextualize the discussions that follow. In the mid-to late-1800s, the literacy level in Japan was extremely low, while written and spoken languages existed separately from one another.¹ Multiple dialects proliferated, making basic communication difficult among the inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago. Meiji intellectuals were faced with the threat of Euro-American nations, which were equipped with the International Law of Sovereign States and its view of uncivilized countries as “lands with no possessor.” These intellectuals had to do everything in their power to educate the illiterate masses. They proposed various reforms to standardize the Japanese language, thus facilitating the new forms of knowledge imported from the West. This was an extraordinarily chaotic moment in the history of modern Japan.

As with arguments for any reform, various ideas were raised and debated. The key issues ranged from the choice of orthography—that is, whether to employ indigenous *kana* or Romanized scripts—to how to simplify grammar (or, perhaps more accurately, how to produce standardized grammar). As surprising as this sounds, some intellectuals even argued for the adoption of English as the national language. Proponents of *kana* scripts, such as Shimizu Usaburō (1829–1910) and Miyake Yonekichi (1860–1929), argued that use of *kana* would produce a form of language close to the “spoken” language. Nishi Amane (1829–97) and Nanbu Yoshikazu (1840–1917) each advocated Romanized script for very different reasons; the former argued that the Japanese people would be able to access “everything Western” by employing Romanized script, while the latter reasoned that Romanized script would help standardize Japanese grammar. Mori Arinori (1847–89), the first Minister of Education, criticized the unsystematic nature of the Japanese

language and proposed the adoption of simplified English. Other than the issue of orthography, there was no sense of systematicity in the various languages then in use. Fukuchi Gen'ichirō (1841–1906), a strong proponent of linguistic reform, criticized contemporary prose that employed “Western grammar” in its combination of *kanbun* and *wabun*-oriented words and phrases. He famously referred to this usage as *nuebun*, a metaphor based on the mythical *nue* monster that possessed the head of a monkey, the body of a badger, and the arms and legs of a tiger.²

Among these disparate arguments for reform, one common denominator was the rejection of *kanji* for both practical and ideological reasons. Such a view is represented by the works of Maejima Hisoka (1835–1919), notably in his “*Kanji onhaishi no gi*” (“On the Abolition of *Kanji*,” 1866) and “*Kokubun kyōiku no gi ni tsuki kengi*” (“A Proposition for *Kokubun* Education,” 1869). Many advocates of reform, like Maejima, claimed that *kanji* was an inefficient medium to educate the masses, an argument that was fueled by anti-Chinese sentiment. In the 1880s, Toyama Masakazu (1848–1900), who later became the president of Tokyo Imperial University, wrote many essays promoting the abolition of *kanji*. As Toyama remarked, “It is crucial that we jettison the Chinese odor as quickly and thoroughly as possible so as to adopt the culture of Euro-America. Since *kanji* reeks of China, it is impossible to sever ourselves from China insofar as we cling to *kanji*.”³ Ironically, however, his essays were composed in the *kanbun kundokutai* (*kanbun* style language with local “Japanese” grammar). In effect, he was not free of the trap into which many Meiji intellectuals fell: the argument against *kanji* in a sinified style, written in the very form it objected.

The anti-*kanji* reforms in the first decade of the Meiji period leaned toward more practical rather than ideological solutions. Initially, it was imperative that these reforms produce a language that could raise literacy rates and educate the people. The inefficiency of *kanji* was thus the main target. By the second decade, however, the ideological and emotional resistance to *kanji* and its apparent affiliation with China were foregrounded, as foreign relations with China began to worsen given Japan's relation with Korea.

One of the most dominant tropes in language reform was *genbun'itchi* (commonly translated as the “unification of spoken and written languages”). Many Japanese intellectuals mistakenly believed that the strength of European languages rested in precisely this unification, despite the fact that all languages possess distinct written and spoken forms. It is perhaps thus more accurate to say that Japanese intellectuals *discovered* that their spoken and written languages were disparate and so felt the need for their unification. This division, as we shall see in more detail, was ideologically construed. Many felt that, while the spoken language was “Japanese,” the written language was “Chinese.” Anti-Chinese sentiment that grew in light of the slogan “Westernization and de-Asianization” (*datsua nyūō*) fueled such rejection. Despite the misidentification of *kanji* as “Chinese” and hence “foreign” (no one who uses the Roman alphabet believe that alphabets

are Roman and hence “foreign”), we see many references in this period to the written language as “foreign” and hence not “natural” to the Japanese.

Although the history of linguistic reforms typically highlights the contributions of literary figures like Yamada Bimyō (1868–1910) and Futabatei Shimei (1864–1909) to the development of *genbun’itchi* prose, the advocates of such reform were certainly not limited to literary writers. Without falling into the facile dichotomy of aesthetic prose and practical prose, we need to keep in mind that literary writers were much more concerned with producing a stable narrator to posit behind the *genbun’itchi* prose, while advocates of language reform emphasized the “naturalness” and efficiency of *genbun’itchi*.⁴ As I will show, the “unification” of the spoken and written languages meant different things for proponents of *genbun’itchi*, but perhaps the most representative essays on this subject were written by Mozume Takami (1847–1928) and Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935). Although both emphasized the need for simple prose, the former used *dearu* and *dearimasu* (suffixes associated with “oral” presentation), while the latter used Romanized script and common “spoken” language.⁵

In the late 1880s, we begin to see a new set of intellectuals take center stage in the advocacy of linguistic reform. These included such scholars of national literature trained at Tokyo University as Sekine Masanao (1860–1932), Ochiai Naobumi (1861–1903), and Hagino Yoshiyuki (1860–1924). They departed from the earlier discourse by determining that *kanji* and *kanji* compounds were in fact “Japanese.” Hence they never advocated orthographical reform, except perhaps for the quantitative reduction of *kanji* in actual use. They began to compile *kokubun* textbooks, which focused on literary history from the classical to Edo periods. Their aim was to standardize grammar, primarily the *te ni o ha* particles, conjugation, tense, and suffixes. They extended their reforms beyond prose to include poetry as well.

These scholars of national literature were contemporaries of Ueda Kazutoshi (1867–1937), the so-called founder of *kokugo*. The emergence of Ueda and the establishment of Hakugengaku (Department of Linguistics) coincided with Japan’s triumph in the first Sino-Japanese War, a result that established Japan’s position as the leader of East Asia. Ueda then became the central figure in the promotion of *kokugo* reforms both within and beyond the Japanese archipelago.

It is very important to remind ourselves that these reformers did not possess a systematic view of what the “Japanese language” should be. They rarely agreed on what constituted “spoken” and/or “written” languages or indeed the meaning of “literature” or even “language.” In examining their arguments, it is thus important to suspend our notions of what these categories signify so as to better grasp the meaning of their ideas.