

Competing “Languages”

“Sound” in the Orthographic Reforms of Early Meiji Japan

This chapter focuses on the calls for orthographic reform that shaped the 1870s. A cursory look at early Meiji discourse shows that there was a general tendency to argue for script reform in order to unify the “spoken” and “written” languages and to reject *kanji* (and by extension *kanbun* and *kangaku*). Take the four reformers that I address in this chapter: Maejima Hisoka sought to abolish *kanji* and adopt *kana* scripts (phonetic alphabets indigenous to Japan) in an effort to produce “a language that, once uttered becomes spoken language (*danwa*) and once written becomes written language (*bunshō*).”¹ Mori Arinori, arguing against “useless Chinese” (referring to *kanji* and *kanbun*), “contemplated” the use of “Roman letters” in turning “the spoken language of Japan” into a written form “based on pure phonetic principles.”² Nanbu Yoshikazu, too, sought to adopt the Roman alphabet instead of “inconvenient *kanji*” to reform “grammar” so that the new language could be understood whether it was “heard” or “seen.”³ Nishi Amane similarly argued for the use of the Roman alphabet in his effort to “establish rules for spelling and pronunciation” so that “writing and speaking would follow the same rules.”⁴

On the surface, therefore, their calls for reform intersect in their efforts to bring about the unification of “spoken” and “written” languages. However, they varied greatly in what they promoted. This was inevitable since, as I suggested in the introduction, there was no agreement on what constituted “spoken” and “written” languages.⁵ This, too, was inevitable, given that the reformers catered to (and mobilized) different “languages” in positing their “spoken” and “written” languages. As we shall see throughout this chapter, their reforms included the system of language inscribed in Western linguistic theories, the system of

language latent in *kangaku* learning, or the system of language linked to the "fifty-sound syllabary grid" (*gojū-on zu*), traceable to nativist thought. These "languages" do not constitute additives, nor are they ontologically equal to one another; they are very much in tension with one another. Concealed in a narrative that lumps together the first two decades of the Meiji period as a preparatory stage for *kokugo* is precisely this complex intersection of "languages" that I seek to show in this chapter.

This chapter thus takes up varying arguments for a new orthography to make manifest these "languages." Key to this is the focus on the varying notions of "sound" with which the reforms engaged. Whether the reformers were arguing for the abolition of *kanji*, the use of the Roman alphabet or *kana*, or even the adoption of English, they all sought to privilege some kind of "sound," most often defined against *kanji* and *kanbun*.⁶ In what follows, I first examine Mori's call for the adoption of the English language and identify the nascent trend of Western linguistics, focusing on what he referred to as "phonetic principles," which had a large impact upon language reform in general. I then move on to Maejima's call for the abolition of *kanji* and show that an orality latent to the study of *kangaku* governs his proposal to adopt *kana* phonetic scripts. In this section, I accordingly extend my discussion to the manner in which literati studied *kangaku* in the late Edo period, since it is particularly pertinent to the manner in which the early Meiji intelligentsia, all invariably educated in *kangaku*, viewed "language." I then turn to works written by Nanbu, who, despite his advocacy of the Roman alphabet, in fact sought to systematize grammar by engaging with the fifty-sound syllabary grid of *kana* scripts, a syllabic representation of existing sounds. Finally, I address essays written by Nishi, who also advocated the Roman alphabet. We find many different "languages" inscribed in his argument, as he sought to produce a system of agreement between pronunciation and spelling.

Such an inquiry into the reforms will show that what we typically assume to be manifestations of Westernization and de-Asianization (*datsua nyūō*) needs further scrutiny. We shall see how the many efforts to adopt phonetic letters, too often considered efforts at Westernization, in fact engaged not only with Western linguistic theories but also with the fifty-sound syllabary grid and the study of *kangaku*. Despite the reformers' rejection of *kanji*, the system of language integral to *kangaku* learning looms strong in the arguments for reform. This does not mean that I seek to undervalue the forces of Westernization present in early Meiji; indeed, I begin my inquiry with the discourse of Western linguistic theories that shape Mori's call for reform and later examine how they intersected with the study of *kangaku*. Such an inquiry will show that it is essential to go beyond the surface layer of orthography and decipher the underlying system of languages that compete and collide in these reforms.

"PHONETIC PRINCIPLES" OF WESTERN LINGUISTIC
THEORIES: MORI ARINORI'S PROPOSAL
FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

It goes without saying that the encounter with the West and the Roman alphabet made a huge impact on language reform movements in Japan. Even before the Meiji period, scholars of Dutch studies had often referred to the superiority of the Roman alphabet to *kanji*.⁷ In the Meiji period, Western linguistic theories, which had only recently joined the ranks of "science," further reinforced such views.⁸ Although it was not until the second decade of the Meiji period that Western linguistic theories became influential in the language reform movements in Japan, we can already see their nascent form, for example, in Mori Arinori's essays and speeches advocating the use of the English language:

The spoken language of Japan being inadequate to the growing necessities of the people of that Empire, and *too poor to be made, by phonetic alphabet, sufficiently useful as a written language*, the idea prevails among us that, if we would keep pace with the age, we must adopt a copious and expanding European language. The necessity for this arises mainly out of the fact that Japan is a commercial nation; and also that, if we do not adopt a language like that of the English, which is quite predominant in Asia, as well as elsewhere in the commercial world, the progress of Japanese civilization is evidently impossible. Indeed a new language is demanded by the whole Empire. . . . All the schools the Empire has had, for many centuries, have been Chinese; and, strange to state, we have had no schools nor books, in our own language for educational purposes. These *Chinese schools, being now regarded not only as useless, but as a great drawback to our progress*, are in the steady progress of extinction. . . . The only course to be taken, to secure the desired end, is to start anew, by *first turning the spoken language into a properly written form, based on a pure phonetic principle*. It is contemplated that Roman letters should be adopted. . . . It may be well to add, in this connection, that the written language now in use in Japan, has little or no relation to the spoken language, *but is mainly hieroglyphic*—a deranged Chinese, blended in Japanese, all the letters of which are themselves of Chinese origin.⁹

This passage, originally written in English, is from an 1872 letter Mori wrote to William D. Whitney, an American linguist at Yale.¹⁰ It engages with the highly ideological view of language that dominated Western linguistics in the nineteenth century. Such an ideological view is most clearly apparent in the theory advanced by Friedrich von Schlegel (1772–1829). Indo-European languages, according to Schlegel, were "inflectional languages," which, he noted, could express "complex ideas through a single word: the root contains the main idea, the syllables that serve to form derived words express accessory modifications, and the inflections express variable relations." For Schlegel, these languages, as the most advanced form of languages, were the only medium that could bring about "any improvement of the human spirit."¹¹ In contrast, the "isolating languages," among which

he classified "Chinese," showed no inflection and were "made up of monosyllables that we cannot even call roots," and could only be "lifeless," hence the least advanced and an impediment to progress.¹²

Schlegel may not have been the major influence behind Mori's proposal, but such an ideological view was present in Mori's argument when, for example, Mori noted that "Chinese schools" in Japan "are now regarded not only as useless, but as a great drawback to our progress."¹³ Mori was certainly not the only one to adopt such a view. Katō Hiroyuki, the president of Tokyo University, attempted to define "our language" (*hōgo*) as being as far away from "Chinese" (*shinago*) as possible when establishing the Department of Linguistics (Hakugengaku) in 1880: "According to the theories of linguists, our language is completely different from *shinago* in type and instead shares a root with Manchurian, Mongolian and Korean."¹⁴

Predictably, such an ideological view of languages extended further into scripts in Schlegel's theory, as Roman alphabets were considered the most advanced and ideographic characters like *kanji* less so. In order to sever itself from classical philology, Western linguistics took as its object of study the phonetics of a given language as opposed to "dead" texts. Therefore, the criteria by which Indo-European languages were considered the most superior were drawn from many studies on "sound." In such a paradigm, the Roman alphabets, given their phonetic nature, as well as their ability to express "complex ideas" with the mere twenty-six letters of the alphabet, were deemed most civilized.¹⁵ In contrast, *kanji*, as script, were seen as not representing their phonetic aspect, and were hence equated with "hieroglyphie," a view that Mori clearly adopted.

Mori, however, did not blindly adopt such views. To scrutinize what he ultimately advocated with his reference to the "phonetic principle," important in our line of inquiry, let us look at how he appropriates the dichotomy between "phonetic" and "hieroglyphic" scripts in his argument. Perhaps surprisingly, Mori deployed the criticism of "hieroglyphie" not only against "Chinese" but also against the English language. Such a claim was not unique to Mori. As Seth Jacobowitz shows in *Writing Technology in Meiji Japan*, Mori was also engaging with arguments of Anglophone reformers like Noah Webster, who sought a "national tongue based on an American rather than British vernacular, which would be vouchsafed by a simplified spelling system" and would jettison "unnecessary silent letters and multiple-letter combinations representing the same phonetic values."¹⁶ Similarly, Mori proposed that the English language be changed to what he referred to as "simplified English" for adoption in Japan; in addition to substituting "seed" for "saw" and "seen," "speaked" for "spoke" and "spoken" to regulate the irregular verbs, Mori also suggested systematizing irregular spelling, such as "though" to "tho" and "bough" to "bow," which he claimed would be a "recast of English orthography—making the language actually what it claims to be—phonetic—instead of hieroglyphic on a phonetic basis, which is what it now really is."¹⁷

Two things ought to be highlighted here. First, what this criticism shows is that by "hieroglyphie," he was not simply referring to *kanji*-like figures or characters. In his understanding, phonetic letters did not necessarily produce phonetic language, and "hieroglyphie" was not limited to the "non-West." Mori was thus not blindly advocating the ideological view, as his argument here has the implication of questioning the Social Darwinist paradigm that situates "Chinese" (or "Asia" and its non-phonetic letters) as backward and English (or the "West" and its phonetic letters) as the most civilized. He of course did nothing to defend "Chinese" (which, for Mori, included *kanji* and *kanbun*, including the *kundoku* style), as he assumed that its infiltration into what he called "Japanese" had caused the demise of "language in Japan."¹⁸ But he certainly did not uncritically cater to the dichotomy of a phonetic West vs. a non-phonetic Asia put forth by linguistic theories and those around him.

Second, his idea of "phonetic language" was one that privileged pronunciation over spelling. He sought to change "though" to "tho" to achieve commensurability, but did not attempt to change the pronunciation to match "though." This is precisely why adopting "phonetic letters" would not constitute reform for Mori. He sought a language in which the spelling would perfectly adhere to pronunciation; adopting phonetic letters would be insufficient to implement such reform. This privileging of pronunciation is on a par with theories of Western linguistics, which had discovered itself as a discipline through the study of phonetics by severing the study of language from classical philology.¹⁹ The focus on phonetics, therefore, was its *raison d'être*.

What Mori thus sought was a simplified and "perfected" English as the language of Japan. This, at least, was his explicit goal. This does not mean that he did not seek reform to the "spoken language" of Japan. Although his arguments to do so only appear implicitly in his arguments for simplified English, he gives us a hint as to how he would have carried out the reform if he had implemented it.²⁰ The analysis of his ideas for the reform of the "spoken language" would further clarify how he conceptualized the "phonetic principles" by which he sought to bring reform.

It would be recalled that Mori lamented the current state of language in Japan in the following manner: "the only course to take . . . is to start anew, by first turning the spoken language into a properly written form, based on a pure phonetic principle." Here he is not discussing the adoption of "simplified English," but how he would reform the spoken language of Japan if he were to "start anew." In his introduction to "Education in Japan," he further suggests that the language itself needs to be reconfigured: "There are some efforts being made to do away with the use of Chinese characters by reducing them to simple phonetics, but the words familiar through the organ of the eye are so many that to change them into those of the ear would cause too great an inconvenience and be quite impracticable."²¹ The

new language, by virtue of being defined by “a pure phonetic principle,” would thus be endowed with a system by which “words familiar through the organ of the eye” would be replaced by “those of the ear.” Mori does not discuss how he would go about implementing this, but it is not too hard to imagine that he was, for example, thinking about increasing the variety of syllable structure to reduce homonyms, or the introduction of some kind of a phonetic system to mark the variety of existing homonyms, thereby defining the new language via “a pure phonetic principle.” It was, in effect, a way to introduce a new phonetic structure to the “spoken language of Japan.” Without such reform, he deemed the “spoken language of Japan” to be “too poor to be made, by a phonetic alphabet, sufficiently useful as a written language.” In other words, merely adopting a phonetic alphabet and transcribing “the spoken language” without bringing reform to the language itself was not going to be enough.²² He sought to alter and rearrange the sound system as a way to establish a new *écriture*, one which privileged pronunciation (rather than its scriptural equivalent), to completely alter what Mori called “deranged Chinese, blended in Japanese.”²³

What this unattempted reform shows is that Mori’s use of “phonetic principle” was prescriptive. This interestingly reformulates what is at the core of Western linguistics. The central focus of linguistics was a descriptive study of multiple aspects of “sound”; it devised a phonetic system by which to describe languages focusing on, for example, phonological change, articulatory phonetics, and so forth. Mori, instead, sought to use these phonetic principles prescriptively, as a means to redefine and restructure the language. He saw in linguistic theories a way to reform the language, not simply a means to describe its limitations.

The phonetic focus by which linguistics defined itself as a discipline, deployed in the framework of comparative linguistics, produced an influential albeit fundamentally invalid dichotomy of the “phonetic West” and “hieroglyphic Orient.”²⁴ Mori questioned this dichotomy, but he was one of the few intellectuals to be able to do so. This dichotomy in fact haunted the linguistic reform movements for decades to come. Partly as a result of this, the privileging of “sound” we see in the early Meiji period has too often been monolithically attributed to the “West.” Of course, the existence of Indo-European languages and Western linguistic theories had a large impact upon language reform movements. And, as we shall see in the following chapter, the phonetic focus of Western linguistic theories became a more influential force in the 1880s, shaping the reforms, as arguments to adopt the Roman alphabet increase in number. However, Western influence alone cannot completely explain this “phonetic” focus we see in early Meiji. The following section will show that there were in fact other forces at work that compelled the Meiji literati to advocate phonetic scripts and insist on phoneticizing texts (which are otherwise written in “hieroglyphic” *kanji*).

THE ORALITY OF SODOKU: MAEJIMA HISOKA
AND THE ABOLITION OF KANJI

Mori was certainly not the only one to see the need for an entirely new language. In fact, most proponents of language reform in the first decade of the Meiji period sought a new medium. Maejima Hisoka, who is perhaps more famous for his contribution to the establishment of the Japan's postal system, was also a strong advocate of language reform; his 1866 “*Kanji onhaishi no gi*” (“On the Abolition of *Kanji*”) has often been identified as the beginning of modern orthographic reform. The main gist of his proposal is to abolish *kanji* altogether and employ *kana* scripts, but at one point in the essay, Maejima gives us a glimpse of an idea of the “new language” he sought:

In establishing *kokubun* and its grammar, I don't mean that we need to return to the ancient forms of writing (*kobun*) and use suffixes such as *haberu* and *kerukana*, but rather I mean that we should employ the common language of today (*konnichi futsū no gengo*) like *tsukamatsuru* and *gozaru*, and apply some rules. That language changes with time is something I believe holds true both in our country and abroad. But I propose a language that once uttered becomes spoken language (*danwa*) and once written becomes written language (*bunshō*). I thus propose a language in which there is no disparity in style between spoken or written.²⁵

This is the passage often referred to as one of the first references to *genbun'itchi*.²⁶ However, as literary critic Kamei Hideo has argued, Maejima was certainly not conceptualizing the “spoken” language as we have it now, nor the *genbun'itchi* that was later established. Kamei contends that Maejima had in mind a language that was very similar to *sōrōbun*, a style of language that was used in official documents, especially toward the end of the Edo period.²⁷

To further scrutinize what Maejima means by “common language of today,” I wish to identify the governing system of language that shapes Maejima's argument for reform. Rejecting *kanji* as a “hindrance to progress” and promoting the use of *kana* (which is likened to the Roman alphabet), Maejima appears to engage with the ideological view of Western linguistic theories. He emphasizes the amount of time people waste learning the means to knowledge and not knowledge itself, to the extent that critics like Lee have argued that Maejima's argument is shaped by a “utilitarian perception of language” typical of “practical knowledge” (*jitsugaku*).²⁸ His anti-*kanji* sentiments, as well as his conscious effort to identify *kana* with Roman alphabets, may lead us to think that his view is largely influenced by Western learning. However, take the following passage in Maejima's “*Kokubun kyōiku no gi ni tsuki kengi*” (“A Proposition for *Kokubun* Education”), which he wrote in 1869:

The issue of enlightening the people is about providing education. . . . By ‘providing education’ I refer to abolishing *kanji* and taking *kana* (i.e., *hiragana*) as the national

script, changing the conventional methods of education and, with new methods, educating people with subjects that range from ethics, physics, political science to law as well as daily things, all in simple national script like *kana*. . . . When we rely on old methods of education by using *kanji*, or even when we change the methods of education but use *kanji*, *kanji* would not only be trying for students' brains (*shin'nō*) and interfere with their intellect, but would also interfere with the development of the students' physical constitution (*taishitsu*) and weaken their physical frame (*taikaku*). There would be no hope to equal the physically and intellectually well-equipped people of Euro-America.²⁹

This is a strong criticism against *kanji* and “the old methods of education.” But notice the inextricable relationship Maejima draws between orthography and the physical makeup of those who study it. Such statements have not been scrutinized beyond the significance of emotionally-charged metaphors that express anti-Chinese sentiments. I do not doubt that Western linguistic theories reinforced anti-Chinese sentiments in Maejima. However, perhaps ironically given his strong criticism of *kangaku* in this essay, this link between orthography and the students' physical composition replicates the manner in which *kangaku* was studied in the mid- to late Edo period, the very education that Maejima and his generation had.

The study of *kangaku*, which was predominantly a study of its classics, had roughly three stages of learning: “raw-reading” (*sodoku*), reading (*dokusho*), and instruction (*kōgi*).³⁰ In the late Edo period, the practice of *sodoku* was foregrounded as one of the most important training practices in *kangaku*. This is significant, because the practice emphasized the physical characteristics of learning. *Sodoku* was a form of learning in which students declaimed words and phrases without knowing their meaning. Students verbally repeated their teachers, who read the texts orally and used pointers to indicate the characters and sentences they were reading. This process was repeated until the students had memorized the texts.³¹ In effect, the body memorized the texts through the rhythm and sound of the sentences.³² *Dokusho*, in which meaning was attributed to the language they memorized, followed; this was then supplemented by the third phase, *kōgi*, in which the meanings/interpretations of the texts were sought, debated, and discussed.³³

The physical posture with which students practiced *sodoku* was extremely important, and the need for proper posture was carried over to later stages of *kangaku* studies and beyond. There is a famous anecdote about Nishi Amane, who, upon falling ill, began to read works by Ogyū Sorai, which Neo-Confucianism (*Shushigaku*) had categorized as “heretical studies” (*igaku*), because he thought he could read them in bed without worrying about proper posture. Nishi was pleasantly surprised to find them interesting, a discovery that would not have been possible had he not fallen ill. It had been engrained in him that appropriate posture was absolutely necessary in reading “proper” *kangaku* texts.³⁴

The emphasis on the need for proper physical posture continued well into the Meiji period. *Kaisei kyōjujutsu* (*On New Strategies of Teaching*), written as late

as 1883 and apparently governed by the new “Western” pedagogical method of J. H. Pestalozzi, describes the teaching of *sodoku*. The importance of posture is repeated again and again, with the text outlining the specifications for students’ practice of *sodoku*:

1. The legs must be bent sixty degrees, and both feet must be perfectly still on the floor.
2. The student must sit as deeply as possible, and his lower back must slightly touch the chair.
3. The knees must be at a right angle.
4. The entire body should be slightly tilted forward.
5. The student ought to hold out his chest.³⁵

The list continues to detail thirteen posture specifications for when one is sitting and another fourteen for standing. It was with such rigid physical posture that students experienced the rhythm and sound of the sentences. *Sodoku* was, as intellectual historian Tsujimoto Masashi claims, a process through which the entire body consumed the text of recitation.³⁶ It was a process of learning that required one’s full physical attention until the memorized sentences were engrained in the body.

Such a relationship between the body and learning is derivative of Neo-Confucian ethics, the implication of which is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that *kangaku* education, *sodoku* being one of its important components, sought both moral and physical development, one integral to one another.³⁷ In effect, Maejima’s criticism of *kanji* betrays the fact that he had internalized the physical training inscribed in *kangaku* education, especially in the *sodoku* practice. For Maejima, language was inextricably linked to the physical component, which affected the growth of the mind.

Note that this system of *sodoku*, though practiced for a long time in the Edo period, was only institutionalized in early nineteenth century. A *sodoku* exam (*sodoku ginmi*) was set up and attracted students from all over the country when passing this exam became a goal for students not only at Shōheikō, the official school of the Bakufu, but also in the provinces and non-Bakufu sponsored private schools (*shijuku*). *Sodoku ginmi* played an important role in standardizing the reading of the *kangaku* classics. It served to authorize the “correct” way of reading, regulating the variations that existed. Prior to such standardization, there were different methods devised by different masters or schools in reading *kanbun*, which determined how certain characters were read, how certain words were conjugated, where to place which of the *te ni o ha* particles, and when to employ the *on*-reading (phonetic approximation of the “original” sound or *kaon* 華音) or the *kun*-reading (“indigenous” pronunciation) of *kanji*. There were, in other words, “plural” readings of a single work, as different masters made different decisions; these decisions were not merely interpretive, but also grammatical.³⁸

However, once standardized, it was as if the "right" way of reading preceded the *kanji* texts. In effect, the *kanbun* texts were no longer open to structural interpretation; the *te ni o ha* particles, conjugation, whether or not to employ *on*-reading or *kun*-reading for a given *kanji* compound, and so forth, were all determined by the authorized reading. There was, in other words, a "right phonetic reading" *behind* the characters. Once the structural ambiguity had been erased, it was no wonder that *kanji* came to appear as a hindrance. As a result, it was not a coincidence that the entire focus went to the phoneticizing of the text.³⁹ This explains the unconditional valorization of phoneticizing *kanji* scripts we see in Maejima and for that matter in many others in the early Meiji period. Once a *kanbun* text had been phoneticized, it was then easy to vocalize it. In effect, the institutionalized practice of *sodoku* created a space in which the main aim was to vocalize the authorized reading, which was a crucial means to learn and access "knowledge." We can now see that what has been taken as an adoption of Western "phonetic" languages and the impact of Western linguistic theories also grew out of *sodoku*, the first goal of which was to vocalize (hence phoneticize) the written script.

One of Maejima's arguments against *sodoku* was the length of time a student wasted in mastering the medium of knowledge, time better spent on knowledge itself, which is precisely why Lee characterizes his argument as utilitarian.⁴⁰ Now we can see that the institutionalization of *sodoku*, and hence the standardization of "knowledge," is behind such a positing of the problem. This may have been further reinforced by the ideological view promoted by Western linguistic theories, in which phonetic alphabets were considered more superior and "hieroglyphic" *kanji* less so, but it is also clear that *sodoku* played a large part in structuring Maejima's proposal in the first place.

Additionally, *sodoku ginmi* standardized the *kundoku* reading, which converts the syntactical order of the *kanbun* to "Japanese-local" grammar by inserting diacritical marks, particles, and suffixes, and conjugating words as necessary. The focus on the *kundoku* emerged out of an anti-Ogyū Sorai movement, as Sorai, in his "discovery" of the ancient texts, criticized the *kundoku* as "a barrier that stood between the reader and the language of Confucian texts," suggesting that "the ancient way" could only be accessed through *chokudoku* (literally "direct reading," referring to a reading in pure *kanbun* syntax) via *kaon* (in the "original" sound).⁴¹ In criticizing such a view, Neo-Confucian scholars tried to show that it was in fact in the *kundoku* that "accurate" reading could be offered.⁴² What *sodoku ginmi* did, in other words, was to disseminate and standardize the *kundoku* form of reading. What is important to remember, then, is that this institutionalized practice of reading, the core of *kangaku* study, was the orality of *kundoku* reading.

There are two things that ought to be highlighted here. First, we must remember that there was an orality integral to the learning of *kanbun*. We often

lose sight of this orality given the prevalent dichotomy of phonetic and “hieroglyphic” letters, frequently used to compare *kanji* to the Roman alphabet or *kana* scripts.⁴³ Second, the orality associated with *kanbun* was that of the *kundoku* reading. With this in mind, we need to revisit Maejima’s use of *danwa*—which is typically translated as “spoken” language—because not all utterances are necessarily “spoken.”

In “Kokubun kyōiku no gi ni tsuki kengi,” Maejima says the following: “The new *kokugo* will accommodate Western words and *kanji* compounds. Its structure ought not cater to classic elegance but to *zokubun* of contemporary times (*kintai*).”⁴⁴ The typical translation of *zokubun* is “vernacular prose,” but we must not uncritically equate *zokubun* here with our sense of the vernacular. *Zokubun* here aligns with Maejima’s earlier use of “common language of today” (*kyō futsū no gengo*) as it opposes “classic elegance.” As Saitō Mareshi has shown, references to “common language” did not mean “vernacular” *per se*; they signified the *kundoku* order (as opposed to the *kanbun* order).⁴⁵ In fact, “common” (*futsū*) and “contemporary” (*kintai*), both of which are used by Maejima to denote *zokubun*, are terms used to characterize writing that were *not* pure *kanbun*, referring to the *kundoku* style of writing.⁴⁶ Recall that Maejima was critical of a language in which there was a discrepancy between “spoken” and “written” languages. Given the *sodoku* practice, it is not too farfetched to say that the disparity of *danwa* and *banshō* languages that he saw was the disparity between *kanbun* and its *kundoku* reading. In effect, the language he promoted by using the term “common” or the phrase “the *zokubun* of contemporary times,” was first and foremost a language in *kundoku* syntax. This is on a par with his decision to retain *kanji* compounds, despite his rejection of *kanji*, given that *kundoku* syntax strings together the *kanji* compounds. Whether written or spoken, his new language thus was to follow the *kundoku* order.

The practice of *sodoku* and its institutionalization played a large role in shaping the views of language that Meiji literati harbored. But as they intersected with the view of language offered by Western linguistic theories, which reinforced anti-*kanji* sentiments, the phonetics of *kanji* and the orality of the *sodoku* practice were concealed. If we characterize all such anti-*kanji* movements as manifestations of de-Sinification (and Westernization), we would further reinforce such concealment. For Meiji literati, anti-*kanji* sentiments may have manifested themselves as the desire to de-Asianize and Westernize, as many expressed. However, we simply replicate their views if we turn a blind eye to the role that the study of *kangaku* played in fostering anti-*kanji* sentiment.

In the following section, we will see a yet another notion of “sound” that shaped the arguments for reform, one that is inextricably linked to the development of the fifty-sound syllabary grid (*gojū-on zu*). Given that this development is often linked to nativist learning, it is perhaps ironic that this appears most tellingly in arguments to adopt the Roman alphabet.

ASSIGNING THE “CORRECT” SOUND:
NANBU YOSHIKAZU AND THE FIFTY-SOUND
SYLLABARY GRID

It is easy to imagine how advocates for reform who valued the phonetic nature of *kana* might take it a step further and argue for the use of the Roman alphabet. The call for the use of the Roman alphabet took off primarily in the second decade as Western linguistic theories became more influential. However, Nanbu Yoshikazu's proposals for the Roman alphabet, to which we will now turn, were not grounded in Western linguistic theories, and thus ought to be considered independently from what developed later. Nanbu was the first ever to make an argument for the use of the Roman alphabet, in works entitled “Shūkokugoron” (“On Learning *Kokugo*”), in 1869, and “Moji o kaikaku suru gi” (“On Reforming the Scripts”), in 1872.

After arguing how inconvenient *kanji* is for memorization and promoting instead the use of the Roman alphabet, Nanbu argues the necessity to first do the following:

In order to change the script and establish grammar, we must first decipher the correct sound (*oto o tadasu*) and designate appropriate script. Our country has fifty sounds, in fact, seventy-five including voiced consonants (*dakuon*), and all words are produced with these sounds. As such, we must first of all identify the correct sounds; in order to do so we must designate appropriate scripts to them.⁴⁷

Nanbu was certainly not alone in arguing for script reform as essential component to standardizing language; we saw that Mori sought the same in his call for simplified English. Yet what is unique to Nanbu is the way in which he associates script, grammar, and “correct” sounds. There are two points of focus here: the inextricable link he sees between script and grammar, which will be addressed later in this section, and his use of the phrase “*oto o tadasu*” (literally, “to correct sounds”). Perhaps the first reaction to “*oto o tadasu*” is to equate it with correcting pronunciations and standardizing dialects. This is understandable, because many dialects divided the nation in the early years of the Meiji period. Yet, among three essays Nanbu wrote between 1875–77 on adopting the Roman alphabet, he does not once mention dialects or, for that matter, the actual spoken language. Dialects were not taken up as a central issue among the advocates of linguistic reforms until the 1880s, when they began to talk about standardizing Japanese through the Tokyo dialect.⁴⁸ The sound Nanbu refers to here does not appear to have any link to actual uttered sounds or spoken language.

If it is not spoken language or dialects, what then constitutes the “*oto*” of “*oto o tadasu*”? Just as with Maejima, the system of language that shapes Nanbu's proposal is evident from what he criticizes, namely *kana*. One of the main reasons that Nanbu advocates the Roman alphabet is because the vowels and consonants are separate, a convenience which, he argues, is non-existent in

kana. Moreover, Nanbu contends that *kana* scripts need to “improvise” when representing “contracted sounds” (*yōon*) like *ja* (じゃ) and *kya* (きゃ), which require two *kana* characters, as well as “voiced sounds” (*dakuon*) like *da* (だ) and *ga* (が), which need two additional dots for *ta* and *ka* respectively. Both of these methods of representation are too unsystematic for Nanbu. With the Roman alphabet, he suggests, “equal” value would be assigned to each sound of the syllabary grid.

Nanbu, like Mori, sought a language that could be understood equally well either when “seen” or “heard.” Yet Nanbu certainly did not propose to adopt English, nor did he cater to Western linguistic theories in the way Mori did. Nanbu instead subscribed to a view of language inscribed in the syllabary grid, which is latent in his use of *oto o tadasu*. *Oto o tadasu* is a phrase used with regard to *kanazukai* (uses of *kana*) in the history of writing.⁴⁹ It is used in reference to rendering *kanji* as *kana*, that is, assigning *kana* to respective *kanji* characters. With *oto o tadasu*, Nanbu was thus referring to the act of assigning alphabetical letters to each *kana* sound. It is these sounds of the fifty-sound syllabary grid, which he at other places calls *koe* (or *kowe* to be exact, because he opts to use classical orthography, both denoting “voices”), that he seeks to systematize in adopting the Roman alphabet.⁵⁰

Let us delve further into the “sounds” of the syllabary grid and *kanazukai* in order to explore the perception of language that Nanbu harbored.⁵¹ The development of the syllabary grid and *kanazukai* in the Edo period engaged with nativists’ study of ancient texts, all of which were written in *kanji*.⁵² The nativist Keichū, for example, attempted to recover the “original” sounds inscribed in the *Man’yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*). Motoori Norinaga, in seeking indigenous “Japanese-ness” (defined in opposition to what he called *karagokoro*, or the “Chinese heart”) in ancient texts, too, sought the words of the ancients expressed in *Kojiki*. Both sought to access the “sound” behind the *kanji*, the “voices” that logically preceded the *kanji* that mediated them. There is a clear inversion at work here: it is the practice of reading that posits the sound behind the *kanji*, but it is as if that sound had always been there, waiting to be excavated.⁵³ The implications of such inversion are beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that, through such a scholarly turn, “sound” had become a central medium by which to access the ancient texts. Only by focusing on these sounds could the readers access the ancient voices.⁵⁴ Within such a scholarly trend, the syllabary grid became not only a means to represent sounds manifested in ancient texts, but the embodiment of ancient voices themselves. For the nativists, the syllabary grid signified a meaningful system of sounds that embodied the voices of the past.⁵⁵

“Sound” in such a paradigm is an abstract sound, made manifest only textually. It may have been uttered in the past, but it is not linked to a “living” sound. It is, for example, very different from the phonographic *kana* system (*hyōonshiki*

kanazukai) that appeared in the second decade of the Meiji period, which sought to represent *kana* in ways closer to contemporary pronunciation. It is also very different from how Mori conceptualized the unification of sound and script. Instead, it features a prescribed system of sound that is linked to past texts and not an actual pronunciation. In effect, Nanbu sought commensurability between two systems of script, *kana* and the Roman alphabet.

Nanbu may have appropriated the syllabary grid in conceptualizing his idea of reform, but this does not mean that he adhered to the nativist ideology. Far from it. He saw it purely as a phonetic system and a practical medium to systematize language. He was certainly not alone in this. That the utilitarian value of the syllabary grid was being discovered in the early years of the Meiji period as an appropriate medium to educate young children is evident in its inclusion in many school textbooks.⁵⁶ Many Meiji intellectuals promoted its use in education, more so than the other well-known syllabary sequence, *iroha*.⁵⁷ This was precisely because the syllabary grid was seen to embody a system of sounds, while *iroha* (which constitutes a poetic sequence) was considered to be a system of writing.⁵⁸ *Iroha* was usually the first to be taught in the Edo period in private calligraphy schools (*tenarai juku*), schools for elementary education in which writing was prioritized over reading, given its practical link to letter-writing and other daily chores.⁵⁹ In effect, the fifty-sound syllabary grid as a phonetic system was thus being brought to the forefront in the early Meiji period. And Nanbu was clearly on a par with such a general trend.

For Meiji intellectuals, the practicality of the syllabary grid lay not only in its ability to represent the existing sound system but also in its link to a system of grammar.⁶⁰ Katayama Junkichi, in his textbook for elementary education (*Shōgaku tsuzuriji hen*, 1873), says the following:

The fifty-sound syllabary grid . . . vertically represents the five vowel sounds and horizontally represents the variation of *a*, *i*, *u*, *e*, *o*. It also represents *shōzengen* [the old way of saying *mizenkei* or irrealis], *ren'yōgen* [adverbial], *setsudangen* [the old way of saying *shūshikei*, conclusive], *rentaigen* [attributive], and *izengen* [realis]. It embodies rules for adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, which also show past, present, and future forms. It is orderly and convenient, and surpasses anything that China or Europe has. To educate our children, we must therefore use the fifty-sound syllabary grid as the foundation for education and teach them rules of sound and grammar. The forty-seven letters of the *iroha*, in comparison, do not offer a system of sounds, nor a system for conjugation.⁶¹

What does Katayama mean when he suggests that the syllabary grid embodies grammatical rules? Take, for example, the word *kaku* or “to write” (for convenience, I will here use our contemporary orthography): *kaku* conjugates into: *kaka(nai)* (irrealis, to denote the negative), *kaki (masu)* (adverbial), *kaku* (conclusive), and *ake(ba)* (realis, to denote hypothetical), thus following *ka*, *ki*, *ku*, *ke*

sequence. In effect, when the word's column is identified, hence identifying the “correct sound,” so is its conjugation. Katayama does not account for the many types of verbs that do not conjugate in accordance with the syllabary grid, but it is clear that Meiji intellectuals saw the grid as a means to standardize grammatical rules.

It is worth recalling here that, for Nanbu, “sound” was inextricably linked to grammar. Nanbu clearly saw the grid's value in its ability to teach the grammar necessary for standard conjugation. Identifying the proper column for conjugation was especially important for the historical *kana* system, which Nanbu sought to reflect in his system of Romanization.⁶² Take, for example, the verb *tohu* 問ふ or “to question.” In the irrealis form, *tohu* becomes *toha* (*nai*), hence showing us that it conjugates in the *h*-column. Its adverbial and realis equivalents, in the historical *kana* system, are *tohi* and *tohe* (問ひ・問へ), although they were pronounced with /i/ and /e/, like its contemporary conjugation, namely *toi* and *toe* (問い・問え). Nanbu clearly valued the systematicity thus inherent in the syllabary grid. It is not a coincidence that, after giving up on the Roman alphabet in the second decade of the Meiji period, he joined the historical *kana* faction of the advocates of *kana* scripts (as opposed to *hyōonshiki kanazukai*, those who advocated the use of *kana* that reflected contemporary pronunciation).

It is perhaps difficult to fathom a discursive site in which such a system of language lay “hidden” behind a proposal to adopt the Roman alphabet. In catering to such a system, however, Nanbu sought a way to use the existing system of *kana* and grammar, very unlike, say, Mori, who sought to alter the phonetic structure as a whole. The paradigm of language inscribed in the fifty-sound syllabary grid that Nanbu sought to deploy has not been scrutinized enough in the study of language reform. This is, in part, because the choice of *kana* is often likened to the Roman alphabet as opposed to “hieroglyphic” *kanji*. Such a triangular scheme treats *kana* purely as a phonetic system and relegates *kana* to a status secondary to the words and concepts that it presumably represents, inevitably divorcing *kana* from its grounding in the syllabary grid; this further reinforces the severance between the syllabary grid and its ideological link to the voices of the past espoused by the nativists. The idea that *kana*, because of its “phonetic nature,” is like the Roman alphabet, therefore, is very limiting.

We will now turn to Nishi Amane's proposal that also argued for the adoption of the Roman alphabet, a proposal that engaged with the many “languages” we have seen so far. Nishi and Nanbu were similar in that both sought to establish a system of grammar by adopting the Roman alphabet. But Nishi did not draw on the syllabary grid to systematize grammar; he instead attempted to create his own system of grammar by focusing on the relationship between pronunciation and spelling, drawing on Western linguistic theories and other paradigms of language.

RECONCILING PRONUNCIATION AND SPELLING:
NISHI AMANE AND THE ROMAN ALPHABET

As a strong advocate of the Roman alphabet, Nishi Amane wrote “Yōji o motte kokugo o shosuru no ron” (“On Writing *Kokugo* in the Roman Alphabet,” 1874) for the inaugural issue of *Meiroke zasshi* (*Meiroke Journal*), perhaps the most famous of his writings advocating language reform. Among the many calls for reform in the 1870s, this work is one of the most complex, because it combines many of the “languages” we have looked at in this chapter and challenges the normative understanding of “language” and “unification of spoken and written languages” that we in the contemporary times harbor. As such, even a sophisticated critic like Lee Yeounsuk sees it as a manifestation of a blind pursuit of the West.⁶³ Yet let us not hastily dismiss Nishi’s claims, and first identify the logic behind his choice of the Roman alphabet. He lists ten advantages of adopting the Roman alphabet; here are numbers one and three:

By adopting the Western alphabet, we shall establish grammar (*gogaku tatsu*). This is the first advantage. . . .

Since writing and speaking will follow the same rules, what is written is what is spoken. Lectures, toasts, speeches before assemblies, and sermons by preachers may all be recited as they are written and written as they are read. This is the third advantage.⁶⁴

What he is claiming is not immediately obvious. “Establishing grammar” was one of the goals that Nishi, along with many others like Nanbu, had in devising his arguments for the use of the Roman alphabet. Yet the link Nishi saw between his orthographic choice and grammar is nothing like what we examined in Nanbu’s work. It is inextricably linked with the third advantage, namely that “writing and speaking” follow the same rules. What does this mean, specifically? Some critics see Nishi’s proposal as one of the early arguments of *genbun’itchi*, only to criticize it for not pushing the ideals of unification far enough.⁶⁵ Yet, if we look at the examples he provides carefully, his proposal appears very practical. Here are his examples:

• denotes characters that are not read

~ denotes a change in sound

The top line shows spelling, and the bottom line shows pronunciation

For adjectives that end with *ku*, *si*, and *ki*:

1. Spelling イカサマヲモシロシ (omosirosi)
 ikasama omosirosi

•

Pronunciation: イカサマヲモシロ・イ (omosirosi.i)

2. フモシロキ コト (omosiroki koto)
omosiroki koto

•

フモシロイ コト (omosiro.i koto)

3. コレハ ヨロシシ (kore wa yorosisi)
kore wa yorosisi

•

コレハ ヨロシイ (kore wa yorosi.i)

To make nouns modifiers:

4. キタイ ナル ヒト (kitai naru hito)
kitai naru hito

••

キタイナ ヒト (kitai na.. hito)

Verbs :

5. イマ キカム ユワム (ima kikamu yuwamu)

6. キルル (kiruru) ima kikam yuwam kiruru

~

~

~

イマ キカウ ユワウ (ima kikō yuō) キレル (kireru)⁶⁶

What Nishi has devised here is a system of agreement for “uniting” the written and spoken languages. Take the first example. We may write “*omoshirosi*” but say “*omoshiroi*.” As long as we agree to read *omoshirosi* as *omoshiroi*, then the written and spoken languages follow the same rules. By writing in the Roman alphabet, it becomes clear it is the “s” that is a silent letter, which ought to be skipped; *kana* would not be as convenient in this sense. Like Maejima before him, Nishi advocated a new language in which the “spoken” and “written” languages followed the same structure, but he did not aim to use the same language for both spoken and written like Maejima did in proposing to use the “common language.” He sought instead to take the divergence of spoken and written languages and reconcile it by devising a new system of pronunciation and spelling. This is slightly different from Mori’s proposal to establish commensurability between pronunciation and spelling. In proposing simplified English, Mori sought to relegate script to reflect pronunciation, hence proposing to change “though” to “tho.” Nishi, however, sought to retain the spelling “*omoshirosi*” but in pronunciation skip the “s.” The idea may seem absurd on the surface, but any written language features a system of agreement

with its reading equivalent. According to Mori's set of evaluative criteria, Nishi's system would be considered “hieroglyphic,” but Nishi's was a practical way to devise a systematic unification.

Despite the seeming originality of his ideas, Nishi's proposal drew on many languages we have seen so far. This is evident from the following list he provided of what ought to be done to adopt the Roman alphabet:

1. Determine the relationship between the ABCs and our sounds (*hōon*).
2. Our sounds have four voices. Establish rules for them.
3. Determine the characteristics of words and categorize them accordingly.
4. Determine what is intrinsic and extrinsic in the language.
5. Decide rules for spelling.
6. Decide rules for pronunciation.
7. Decide rules for inflection.
8. Decide tenses and conjugation of verbs.
9. Decide rules for employing sounds of *kanji*.
10. Decide rules for employing Western words.⁶⁷

The first two points evoke *kanazukai*, as he proposes to assign letters of the alphabet to “our sounds.” He was clearly adopting the prescribed system of sounds represented by *kana* scripts. Thus, this is similar to Nanbu, who promoted the *kana* sounds, and dissimilar from Mori, who sought to introduce an entirely new phonetic structure. Moreover, Nishi's interest in *kana* was not spontaneous. He had in fact once advocated the use of *kana*, as evident in his experimental work on grammar entitled *Kotoba no ishizue* (*The Foundation of Language*, 1870), which he wrote entirely in *kana*. He opens the work with his discussion on what he calls “Kowe no manabi” (“On Learning Voices”) and argues the superiority of the syllabary grid over the *iroha* sequence, showing that his notion of “our sounds” (*hōon*) is clearly derivative of the former.

“Our sounds,” according to Nishi, have “four voices” (*shisei*). The exact meaning of “four voices” is unclear, as editors and the translator of *Meiroku zasshi* claim.⁶⁸ However, the “four voices,” which typically refer to four tones in Chinese, refer to the pitch accent pronunciation that was used in systematizing a version of *kanazukai* by Fujiwara Teika (1162–1241) before *kanazukai* was altered and “corrected” by later nativists.⁶⁹ Teika apparently assigned *kana* based on the varying pitches of the “four voices.” Such *kanazukai*, however, had long been criticized by the Edo nativists as “inconsistent,” because it did not properly adhere to the ancient usages (the “pure voices” of the past). Why did Nishi choose to evoke this, in many ways considered “invalid,” *kanazukai* in systematizing the use the Roman alphabet? It was because his focus was on pronunciation, or more specifically, phonological changes that would account for the discrepancy between pronunciation and spelling. As his examples showed, Nishi was interested in deciphering the

relationship between pronunciation and spelling, which was more closely reflected by Teika's system of *kanazukai*.

This focus on pronunciation is where his engagement with Western linguistic theories, in which he was very well informed, comes into the picture.⁷⁰ Even in *Kotoba no ishizue*, after he argues the superiority of the syllabary grid, he discusses how these sounds are produced in the mouth, drawing on articulatory phonetics. In a section called “Kotoba to aya to no koto” (“On Words and Sentences”), he includes what looks like a vowel chart, something he learned when he studied in Europe.⁷¹ Drawing on studies of phonological changes in Western linguistics, he sought to establish a system by which to unite pronunciation and spelling. Take the earlier example of “*omoshirosi*” and “*omoshiroi*” again. Nishi was interested in deciphering the process behind the elision of the “s” sound. If he could see the system that enabled the elision of such sounds and hence understand the phonological change, he would be able to establish his new grammar.

Yet Western linguistic theory was not the only realm he drew on to decipher phonological change. To explore this issue further, it is important to note that the phonological changes in his examples only occur in inflection. That is to say, he offers examples of verb and adjectival conjugation—such as “*yorosisi*” to “*yorosii*,” “*kikamu*” to “*kikau*”—but not of nouns or other words in which inflections do not occur. Had he been drawing on Western linguistic theories, he would have shown interest in all words, not just inflected forms. We could, of course, say that phonological changes occur most often in inflection, but this does not seem to be a satisfactory explanation for Nishi's curious focus. I sense something quite deliberate in his choice to limit his inquiries into phonological change (and hence the rules to “unite” pronunciation and spelling) to inflected forms.

What is behind such a choice? Number nine on his list, “Decide rules for employing sounds of *kanji*,” may give us some clue. Here, we can see Nishi's urge to represent “*kanji* sounds” as such in his new language. In other words, he seeks to distinguish *kanji*-based renderings even in the Roman alphabet. One of Nishi's earlier orthographic experiments may shed light on his proposal. When studying in Europe, he had been involved in a project to romanize *Great Learning* (*Da xue*), one of the *kangaku* classics, in the *kundoku* form.⁷² Here is an example:

物有本末。事有終始。知所先後。則近道矣。

Mono *hon-batsu* ari; waza *siu-si* ari. Sen-kou suru tokoro wo sireba, sunavatsi mitsi ni tsikasi.⁷³

Notice how he italicized the *kanji* compounds as if to retain the orthographic difference in the Roman alphabet. Despite his rejection of *kanji*, Nishi was never against the use of *kanji* compounds in the new language he sought.⁷⁴ In effect, in “employing sounds of *kanji*,” it is likely that he was looking for a way to represent *kanji* compounds as a unit, whether by italicizing them or by devising something

else to mark their “*kanji*”-ness. This was the same for what he called “Western words” in item number ten in his list.

These units, represented as such, would remain free of phonological change in his new language, and hence their pronunciation and spelling would not deviate from one another. In effect, a system of agreement between pronunciation and spelling only had to be devised for inflected forms. This structure inevitably replicates the *kundoku* structure, which links a series of *kanji* and *kanji* compounds by making inflectional changes, conjugating, and adding tenses to the original *kanbun*. As Saitō Mareshi has shown, *kundoku* offers a system of grammar by which to link and make sense of *kanji* compounds.⁷⁵ Despite Nishi’s rejection of *kanji* and his strong inclination to Western linguistic theories, the *kundoku* reading played an important role in his arguments for reform.

The idea of a unification of “spoken” and “written” languages that Nishi proposed is nothing like we saw in the other reforms. Nishi’s call for reform presented itself as a combination of the languages we have seen throughout this chapter. While he sought to deploy the existing system of sounds, he devised ways to “translate” them into the Roman alphabet by drawing on theories of Western linguistics and *kundoku* reading.

CONCLUSION

Despite an apparent similarity in the urge to unify the “spoken” and “written” languages, the proposals for linguistic reform in early Meiji Japan varied from each other in their methods and goals, probably more so than at any other time in the history of modern Japan. This shows the multiple directions in which reforms could have developed before being “standardized” as “national language.” Moreover, it also shows that a clear path had yet to be defined. The only thing that these advocates knew was that a new medium had to be produced, be it through the adoption of English, *kana* scripts, or the Roman alphabet. In effect, what marks the first decade of Meiji period language reform is intellectuals’ search for “languages” that could regulate the new medium they sought.

Choices of orthography did not limit these thinkers. Although we often attribute a given orthography to the paradigms of knowledge that support it, the call for the Roman alphabet did not necessarily signify a pursuit of Western learning, nor did the argument for *kana* signify a longing for nativist learning. These advocates freed their orthographic choices from their apparent foundations in grappling with the many complex issues they faced in producing their own system of language. From our perspective, too, such a link between orthography and knowledge, often made in studies of linguistic reforms, can only be a hindrance in the attempt to see the complex ways in which varying perceptions of language intersected and were made manifest in arguments for reform.

The rejection of *kan*, too often treated as a given in the early Meiji period, also needs further analysis. Even as *kangaku* was rejected as a “hindrance to progress” not only by the four reformers but by many early Meiji intellectuals, the institutionalization of *sodoku* was firmly behind the Meiji reformers’ urge to phoneticize scripts. Many intellectuals may have been against *kanji* as script, but *kanji* compounds and *kanbun* grammatical structure (especially in its *kundoku* form) were appropriated to produce a new language, as we saw in Maejima and Nishi.

As we saw throughout this chapter, the notions of “sound” that shaped the first decade were many, none of which ought to be conflated with one another. The “phonetic” principles of Western linguistic theories, the orality of *sodoku*, the “sound” inextricably linked to the syllabary grid, and *kanazukai* systems all offered themselves as a means to regulate the styles that were available in the discursive site in question. These varying “languages” manifested differently in the way the reformers sought commensurability between “spoken” and “written” languages. In Mori’s idea of commensurability, on a par with the idea of phonetics in Western linguistic theories, the pronounced sound was privileged; it was thus up to spelling to reflect the pronunciation (hence the proposal to change “though” to “tho”). Maejima’s concern centered on phoneticizing (and hence vocalizing) *kanji* scripts, seeking commensurability between the oral “reading” (*kundoku*) and “writing” (*kanbun*). Nanbu privileged the textual sound represented in the fifty-sound syllabary grid, which was perfectly translatable to Romanized script; the commensurability that he sought was technically via one set of script (*kana*) to another set of script (the Roman alphabet), divorced entirely from pronunciation. With Nishi, commensurability between pronunciation and spelling was achieved by a system of agreement, not relegating either mode of expression to a position secondary to the other.

As we shall see in the following chapter, the competing “languages” that were foregrounded through these “sounds” continued to shape the calls for reform in the 1880s, which were marked by the emergence of *kanbun kundokutai* as “common language.” An inquiry into *kanbun kundokutai* will not only allow us to reassess the role of *kan* in the production of linguistic modernity, but also to see how the “languages” changed form as linguistic reforms entered a new era with the appearance of a “common language.”