

Language is essentially sound

By Shigekatsu Yamauchi

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When people speak of the difficulty of the Japanese language, one of the major points they raise is the difficulty associated with the writing system, saying that it has three different sets of characters (*hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji*), of which the *kanji* set is particularly confusing, for reasons that include each character having many different readings and meanings.

The argument that a language is difficult because of its writing system, however, is not valid, because language is intrinsically sound; fundamentally, it has nothing to do with the characters used to write it with. Let me provide you below with several examples to help back up this somewhat startling statement.

The Japanese language was first written only in Chinese characters around 5 A.D. after they were introduced to the country from China. However, the Japanese language itself had existed for more than 10,000 years in some form. When the Chinese characters were introduced, each *kanji* was used as a phonetic symbol to represent each Japanese *mora*, the basic sound units of Japanese (like English syllables).

Even now, there are a good number of languages in the world which do not have a writing system. Absent a writing system, languages still function perfectly as a means of communication—language's primary role. Recall that illiterate people can communicate as effectively as the literate.

An important reason why people tend to associate language with writing systems is because when they first studied their own language consciously, they studied its writing system. However, by the time they started to learn their ABC's, they were already speaking English perfectly. Think of an American child 5 or 6 years of age: You know that they can use all the basic grammatical structures, tenses, pronouns, articles and prepositions quite skillfully. All the grammatical elements that foreign learners of English struggle with have already been mastered by the little child.

Similarly, any difficult grammatical element of the Japanese language which one may be struggling with has already been mastered by a 5 or 6-year old Japanese child. When children begin to study their own language at school, they are learning not the language—they already know it—but the artificially created set of rules used for writing.

The writing system of any language is arbitrary and is not an essential part of the language itself. You could, in fact, write any language in the world with any set of characters in the world. Yes, you could even write English with *kanji*, too, as long as we set up certain rules for which characters repre-

sent which sounds. In fact, if we were to do so, we might be able to write English in a much more regular and consistent fashion, with minimal or no exceptional spelling. How wonderful that would be!

When it comes to the Japanese language, most Japanese people are actually writing the language using the Roman alphabet. To prove this, ask any Japanese person what kind of keyboard they use when typing Japanese. Chances are very high that more than 95 percent will answer "alphabet." So they are writing Japanese using Roman letters. It is the machine that converts these letters into appropriate *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji*.

Before computers became available, international business communication was carried out using telex, which had nothing but a keyboard with the Roman alphabet. Therefore, between Japanese people, telexes were written in Japanese, but using the Roman alphabet. The telexes dealt with complex issues such as complicated business strategy discussions. These communications were all written in the Roman alphabet in those days. In fact, there was once a serious discussion among the Japanese to convert the writing system to using the alphabet even.

Following are some cases from around the world that show how arbitrary writing systems are:

Vietnamese, under Chinese influence, used to be written in Chinese characters, but it has been written using the Roman alphabet since French colonization. Koreans also used *kanji* for a long time, but not anymore. The Indonesian languages used to be written in Arabic script, but while under Dutch colonization, this was converted to a Western alphabet. The same thing happened to Turkish as well. I don't think I need to go on further. I'm sure you can now see that writing systems are arbitrary in relation to the language they represent.

The only reason that English is written the way it is, is because England was occupied by the Romans. If their big neighbor had been China, I'm pretty sure you'd be writing English in *kanji* or a derivative.

Coming back to the original issue, the only reason why the Japanese writing system is complex is that Japanese is written in Chinese characters; and Chinese is a completely different type of language from Japanese. The two make a bad match, unfortunately. If Rome had been our neighbor, things surely would have been much simpler when it comes to writing Japanese. You cannot reverse history, however.

Apart from the complexity of the writing system, which again has nothing to do with the language itself, Japanese is not such a structurally complex language. Compared with other languages in the world, it is an exceptionally regular and consistent language, as long as its own mechanism is viewed properly for what it is. If it is viewed in terms of the grammatical tools and notions common to European languages, however, it looks deceptively irregular with many exceptions. I will address this regularity, and other issues, in future articles.

Yamauchi is the president of International Communication Institute. After working for Sumitomo Corp. for 18 years, he completed Japanese-language teacher training at Cornell University.