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Is Technology Dumbing Down Japanese?

By EMILY PARKER

When I first moved to Kyoto in 1999, I knew about 50 words of Japanese. My attempts to string together a few broken phrases were met with excessive praise, and I assumed everyone was being nice. “No,” I remember my friend Yuki saying. “People mean it. They really are impressed.”

She was referring to the widespread belief that Japanese, with its nuanced formal expressions and three different writing systems, is a uniquely complex language. How could a foreigner possibly learn it? Even Japanese people make mistakes. Former Prime Minister [Taro Aso](#), whose Liberal Democratic Party’s more than half-century in power came to a crashing end this past August, might go down in history for having publicly misread Japanese kanji, or characters. He was hardly the first native speaker to bungle the language. “Many otherwise educated people have trouble writing a logical, grammatically correct sentence,” said Michaela Komine, an Australian who spent eight years working as a Japanese-English translator in Osaka.

Now the Japanese language is being transformed by blogs, e-mail and keitai shosetsu, or cellphone novels. Americans may fret over the ways digital communications encourage sloppy grammar and spelling, but in Japan these changes are much more wrenching. A vertically written language seems to be becoming increasingly horizontal. Novels are being written and read on little screens. People have gotten so used to typing on computers that they can no longer write characters by hand. And English words continue to infiltrate the language.

So what do these changes mean for a language long defined by indirect locutions and long, leisurely sentences that drift from the top of the page? Is Japanese getting simpler, easier or just worse?

On one side of the debate is Minae Mizumura, whose book “The Fall of Japanese in the Age of English” made a splash when it came out in Japan last year. Mizumura contends that the dominance of English, especially with the advent of the Internet, threatens to reduce all other national languages to mere “local” languages that are not taken seriously by scholars. The education system, she argues, doesn’t spend enough time teaching Japanese. “I cannot imagine a country with a highly functioning national language that devotes less time to teaching their own language than to teaching a foreign language,” she wrote in an e-mail message.

The simplification of Japanese really began during the country’s transition to democracy after World War II, according to Mizumura. While the American occupiers did not succeed in persuading Japan to change to the Roman alphabet, Mizumura said, the “pro-phonetic” camp gained momentum, and the Japanese Ministry of Education simplified characters and limited the number of kanji used in the media. As a result, “the older generation — even those who did not go to college — are much more comfortable reading and writing Japanese than the younger generation,” she said. “The Japanese population’s literacy — that is, the capacity to read and enjoy books — slowly declined, and the written language itself accordingly became less rich.”

But other authors embrace the language’s evolution. As [Haruki Murakami](#), Japan’s best-known living novelist, wrote via e-mail, “My personal view on the Japanese language (or any language) is, If it wants to change, let it change. Any language is alive just like a human being, just like you or me. And if it’s alive, it will change. Nobody can stop it.” There is no such thing as simplification of language, he added. “It just changes for better or worse (and nobody can tell if it is better or worse).”

Some of the most dramatic transformations have been taking place on cellphones, where writers, often young women, type stories into their keypads and readers consume them on their screens. Sentences tend to be short, and love stories are popular. The phenomenon peaked in 2007, when five out of 10 of the year’s best-selling books were written on cellphones. While their popularity seems to have dropped off, keitai shosetsu still elicit scorn from some Japanese who see them as trashy. Others just shrug them off: Murakami said that he has “no interest” in cellphone novels or any form that resembles them.

Natsuo Kirino, author of the novels “Out,” “Grotesque” and “Real World,” believes that cellphone novels have hardly killed off traditional literature. “I think there is a split in the reading styles among young people,” she wrote in an e-mail message. “On one hand, there are those who love keitai novels — they feel comfortable with the flat and simple language and expressions. I also feel there are a lot of young people who are not satisfied with simplicity, who read complex and advanced novels, and even wish to write their own.”

Nor does it seem that cellphone novels have permanently shortened attention spans. Murakami’s latest novel, “1Q84,” which weighs in at over 1,000 pages, had huge print runs when it came out in Japan this year.

Even as some see new technology as a threat to literacy, surveys suggest that Japanese are reading more than before. According to an article in the newspaper Sankei Shimbun, middle-school students read an average of four books a month in 2008, the most ever in the 30-year history of the survey. (The article did note that the reading material was not always sophisticated.) A separate national survey published last year in Yomiuri Shimbun found that 54 percent of people were reading more than one book a month, compared with 48 percent in the year before.

Japanese people also seem to be writing more. Motoyuki Shibata, who teaches literature and translation at the University of Tokyo, noticed that new technology makes his students more willing to write Japanese, even if it is on their computers or cellphones. “Some people say the tradition of letter writing has come back,” Shibata says. Thanks to e-mail, he adds, “I get more messages and feedback from students than I used to 20 years ago.”

People may also be using and recognizing more kanji. Instead of having to write every stroke from memory, people can type words phonetically into a computer and a list of characters to choose from pops up on the screen. (This wondrous phenomenon allows me to quickly dash off e-mail messages filled with complex characters. As a result, I am much more inclined to send messages to Japan.)

Critics may protest that Japanese is defined by its formal expressions, polite openers and roundabout way of getting to the point. In an age of cellphone novels and rapid text messaging, won’t some of this be lost? Maybe. But Japanese might also become less intimidating, allowing a wider range of people to enjoy the pleasures of reading and writing.

Will technology cause Japanese to lose its reputation as a uniquely difficult language? That’s possible, too. But it could be a good thing. Japan, a rapidly aging society, may well have to face an influx of immigration in the not too distant future. A more accessible language could accelerate the country’s process of internationalization. Who knows, we might even one day find that, as Shibata put it, “this idea of Japanese being a very difficult, esoteric language may have been a myth all the time.”

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