

# The Adoption of Punctuation in Japanese Script

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Exposure to Western writings in the nineteenth century had a beneficial effect on the spatial organization of Japanese texts, which had hitherto been either sketchily punctuated or not punctuated at all. The use of such devices as word spacing, paragraphing, commas, and full stops was advocated first in essays by scholars of the West and applied in a few school textbooks in the early Meiji period (1868-1912). The real impetus for the adoption of European-style punctuation, however, came from the novelists who produced the various schools of modern fiction which began to appear from the mid-1880s. They experimented with the whole spectrum of European devices in conjunction with a new colloquial style, though not all proved appropriate to Japanese. Through their efforts the practice of punctuating texts became well established and later spread outside the realm of fiction to other areas of written Japanese.

Written Japanese in the mid-nineteenth century encompassed a great variety of written styles and forms of orthography. Script was determined by style, and style by the nature of the text. There were a number of literary styles,<sup>1</sup> none of which bore more than a passing resemblance to the spoken language.

The rift between the spoken language and written texts effectively limited the range of readers who had access to the information presented in writing. The education of commoners had been quite widespread before the Meiji Restoration in 1868, but the degree of literacy attained thereby was usually only sufficient for carrying on the business of everyday life. To master the classical forms required years of study; lower-class children, whose physical labour contributed substantially to their family's welfare, had no leisure to devote to such pursuits. In effect, therefore, written Japanese remained almost exclusively the province of the upper class, a situation which further reinforced feudal class distinctions. It was by no means an efficient medium of communication. Chinese style in particular was so difficult that the method of instruction in that subject in *samurai* schools often consisted of mere chanting of passages learned by heart from the Chinese classics. As the newspapers which began to circulate in 1872 were controlled and written by upper-class

scholars who perpetuated the use of pure and hybrid Chinese styles,<sup>2</sup> townsmen, women and children were effectively cut off from the main source of information until popular newspapers written in a simple colloquial style began to appear after 1874. At the other end of the stylistic spectrum, classical Japanese was too long-winded, vague, and elegantly archaic in its expression to be fitted for dealing with modern situations.

These difficulties were compounded by the vast number of Chinese characters then in use in Japan. It was a favourite ploy of scholars wishing to display their erudition to pad out the text of their discourse with unnecessarily complex characters in order to impart a more educated appearance and tone to their prose.<sup>3</sup> To complicate matters still further, there was an often total lack of punctuation to show phrasing within the sentence itself. No spaces separated words, which rendered the mainly hiragana classical Japanese style particularly difficult. To extract the sense of the passage, the reader had to recognise sentence finals and other grammatical signals indicating function. It is not uncommon to find page after page in texts of this period almost totally without punctuation or punctuated only by commas and full stops. Where these last were in evidence, there does not appear to have been any rigorously adhered to convention governing their use. Examination of nineteenth-century government documents, scholarly texts,<sup>4</sup> and novels shows that in some cases the symbols , and ◦ were used to indicate clause and sentence boundaries respectively; in others, the symbol ◦ fulfilled both functions; sometimes commas were used for both, varying the size from that ordinarily used today to others so small as to be barely visible. Often, long sentences were broken up with commas but contained no full stops. Documents written in pure Chinese style or epistolary style<sup>5</sup> were in many cases not punctuated at all. Paragraphing was often non-existent, or at least rudimentary, which meant that readers of Chinese style texts in particular were faced with solid blocks of characters unrelieved by visual variation. While it may be argued that no more than basic clause, sentence, and paragraph separation are needed in official documents, the same cannot be said of the novel, where dialogue and narrative need separation and where effective punctuation gives life to the text. Figure 1 is an extract from *Seiyōdōchū hizakurige* (*By shanks' pony through the west*, 1870-76) by Kanagaki Robun (1829-1894). Its only punctuation is quotation marks to indicate dialogue embedded in the body of the narrative; this is true of the entire work with the exception of English words rendered in katakana which are separated from each other by full stops.<sup>6</sup>

In this field, as in many others, the need for reform was highlighted by exposure to the West. Those who came in contact with Western prose

支那の上海ハヤンハ共を出帆して英領なる香港まで船路四日にて着すべし乍麼香港ハ支那の東南の方にある孤嶋なり長サ五里巾三里岩山のみにて草木少く平地なし元來支那の領地なりしが近世英吉利領となりしより英人追々住居を移し交易場を開き寺院を建立學問所を設けて人の數も次第に増し繁昌の港となれり且說大腹屋廣藏が博覽會へ赴く船ハ上海を出帆して直地に香港に着せしかバ旅宿を設けて彼処に舍るに例の弥次郎北八等ハ同行の中にて取分て睦まじき通次郎と三個等しく別間にござり弥「ライ、通さん上海で北八が大ぼろを出したので逗留中氣をもんでしまつて面白くもおかしくもなかつたから今夜ハえんぎ直しに何処へかしけこんで浮れやうじやアねへか通「そいつハ奇妙だが北さんの珍事でおいらアこりたからめつたな処へハ御めんだヨ北「それだつておめへがぜんてへ仕出かした事だから仕方がねへ通「ヲヤなぜおいらが出かしたことだへ北「夫でもおめへの言にやア英吉利の婦人ハ多淫で女の方から持かけるといつたからアノ牛屋ハ英吉利人だから定めし内にゐる女も英人だらうと思つて當込んだ処がまんざらでもねへ様子だからチヨ／＼の引つかへしではや幕を切らうとしたところが彼婦人が早替りで敵役の邪魔人バタ／＼の立まはりからふり落しの山幕をむかふに見て一人り道行ハ此ところ大不出来／＼と繪本の小がきに書かれるのだしかし鳴物が啼吠ちやるめらで世界が支那で迷子が日本人だけ新奇しいから日本へ帰つたら河竹にこの脚色をはなして一幕著てもらふのだア

Figure 1. Kanagaki Robun, "Bankoku Kōkai: Seiyōdōchū Hizakurige," *Meiji Bungaku Zenshū*, v. 1 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1966), p. 25.

could not help noticing the clarity and versatility of its colloquial style, the conciseness and simplicity of its alphabet, and the ease which punctuation imparted to the deciphering of its content. As the Meiji period got under way and it became increasingly clear that written Japanese was not an efficient vehicle for disseminating the flood of new information pouring into the country, voices calling for script and style reform began to make themselves heard.

The first attempt at breaking Japanese prose into less formidable blocks took the form of word spacing. With the exception of the authors of Dutch and English language textbooks, the first to write phonetic script in such a fashion was Shimizu Usaburō (1829-1910), a scholar of Dutch, Russian, French, and German who had published *Engirishi kotoba* (*The English language*), an English conversation manual, in 1860. Shimizu believed that Chinese characters should be replaced entirely with the hiragana script. His main concern was with the rapid dissemination of new knowledge; he felt that this could be greatly facilitated by simplifying script as well as style. The chief problem in using the kana script was its lack of any visual

あんたらしいとはぎりしやのあんたらくすすなはちすみ  
といふことはよりいでたり。これはすみのうまれだち  
なるやまいろものにて、すみねとわづかのみつねを  
ふくむ。いろくろく、ほろく<sup>ろく</sup>とかけてヤ、かねのご  
ときひかりあり。よりてかどやきすみ<sup>ろく</sup>またひかりすみ  
ともいふ。しづかにもえてけぶりなし。よりてまた  
めくらすみともいふ。やましはこれをつねのいしずみ  
のきくさ<sup>きく</sup>をたねとしてなりたつかみわざのあま  
りのやけがらとす。さてこれをいしずみがら  
のごとくたきもちふ。これはいるらんとにおほく、また  
えぎりすすことらんどならびにえうろばのひがし  
のいしずみばらにもいづる。あめりかにはいとお  
ほくいづるなり。

このあんたらしいとはくろくひかりてもろく、も  
えがたく、けぶりなく、わづかにあをきほのほあるの  
み。さりながらひのいきほひはいとつよくしてはくす  
のけなし。ゆゑにじようきしや<sup>はくす</sup>などのかまには  
もつともよろし。しろきはひをのこすものをよしとす。  
卯三郎はかねてより假名のみを用ひて書を著し、西洋文を譯  
するにも漢字を假ること無らんとの説あり。即ち此譯文の如  
きも其一例なり。

文三が二階を降りて、ソツトお勢の部屋の障  
子を開けるその途端に、今迄机に頬杖をついて  
何事か物思ひをしてゐたお勢が、吃驚した面相  
をして些し飛上ツて居住居を直ほした。顔に手  
の痕の赤く残ツてゐる所を観ると、久敷頬杖を  
ついてゐたものと見える。

「お邪魔ぢや有りませんか。」

「イ、エ。」

「それぢやア。」

ト云ひ乍ら文三は部屋に這入ツて坐に着いて

「昨夜は大に失敬しました。」

「私こそ。」

「實に面目が無い、貴儀の前をも憚らずして……」

……今朝その事で慈母さんに小言を聞きました。

アハ、ハ、ハ。」

「さう、オホ、ハ、ハ。」

ト無理に押出したやうな笑ひ、何となく冷淡い。

今朝のお勢とは全で他人のやうで。

ヨこはまのかいがんどほりへとりたてたヤそけうくわい  
のれいはいだうが、できあがつて、こんげつとうかにひら  
きになり、ボるべつき、タむそん、フらをん、なぞが  
はるくにて、きやうをとなへおしへのわけをのべ  
ました。

Figure 2. Shimizu Usaburō, “Kishūsekitan Kantei no Setsu,” *Chūgai Shinbun*, no. 29, 26/8/1869. *Meiji Bunka Zenshū*, v. 4, 3rd ed. (Tokyo: Nihon Hyōronsha, 1968), p. 435.

method of signalling word boundaries. Shimizu demonstrated that this could be simply overcome by spacing words in the Western manner in “Kishūsan sekitan kantei no setsu” (“Expert Opinion on Coal from Kishū”, 1869), and later in *Monowari no hashigo* (*The ladder of physics*, 1874) a three volume translation of a German science primer. Figure 2 is an example from the former. Even postpositions indicating the syntactic function of the preceding word are separated from their head nouns.

Another who adopted the device of spacing words in kana prose was Watanabe Shūjirō (1855-1945), who had studied English and lived in Germany in 1870-71 before returning home to become eventually a renowned historian. He gave an example in “Nihonbun o seitei suru hōhō” (“Rules for writing Japanese”, 1875) of how he thought kana should be written (Figure 3). Watanabe suggested the use of katakana (in a hiragana text) to indicate capital letters in personal and place names, and the insertion of commas and full stops. The Japanese should adopt European grammar as a model, he said; they should emulate its best features, such as punctuation, paragraphing, parenthesis, dashes, and quotation marks. Unlike Shimizu, Watanabe was content to preach and did not practise his theories in his own prose, preferring to write in the traditional mode to which he had been educated. In the very early years of the Meiji period, few of the scholars who espoused script and style reform actually departed from custom in their own essays, perhaps fearing the thrust of their argument would be lost in the scorn sure to be heaped upon any such departures by the intelligentsia at large.

One of the first areas in which these new ideas were put to the test was, of course, education. The first use of punctuation outside translations of Western literature was in a primary reader, *E-iri chie no wa* (*An illustrated puzzle ring*, 1872), written by Dutch studies scholar and enlightenment writer Furukawa Masao, who used full stops and commas. These symbols were later used in *Shōgaku kyōjusho* (*Primary textbook*), published by the Education Ministry in 1873, and in Tanaka Yoshikado's *Shōgaku Nihon*

Figure 3. Watanabe Shūjirō, *Nihonbun o Seitei Suru Hōhō* (1875). Quoted in Yamamoto Masahide, *Kindai Buntai Hasei no Shiteki Kenkyū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965), p. 132.

Figure 4. Futabatei Shimei, “Ukigumo,” *Gendai Nihon Bungaku Zenshū*, v.1 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1956), p. 200.

*bunten* (Japanese grammar for primary schools, 1874-75). Tanaka (1841-1879), a *yōgakusha*,<sup>7</sup> was appointed head of the Education Ministry's editorial office for normal school textbooks in 1872. His book was a conscious imitation of English grammars, hence his adoption of the punctuation he found therein. *Shōgaku Nihon bunten* was written in a variety of Japanese characterised by heavy use of Sino-Japanese items which were conventionally associated with the rendering of Chinese-style texts into Japanese; texts of this type were normally left unpunctuated.

The following decade saw several instances of the advocacy and practical application of punctuation. Miyake Yonekichi (1860-1929), secretary to the Kana Club whose members advocated replacing Chinese characters altogether with hiragana, called in "Bun no kakikata ni tsuite" ("On writing", 1884) for the use of commas and full stops. Mozume Takami (1847-1928), a teacher in the Literature Department of Tokyo University and an active member of the Kana Club, published an essay in March 1886 entitled "Genbun'itchi" ("Colloquial style"), remarkable as the first scholarly discourse which combined both the theory and practice of style reform. While no actual reference was made in the text to the need for punctuation, commas and full stops were liberally used to clarify its meaning. That same year Suematsu Kenchō (1855-1920), a politician and scholar who had studied for eight years in England, suggested in "Nihon bunshō ron" ("Written Japanese: a discussion") that those who advocated replacing Chinese characters altogether with hiragana should use word spacing, capitals, and Western-style punctuation to improve their texts. His views were echoed by Nishi Tomisada, physicist and leading member of the *Dai Nippon kyōiku kai*,<sup>8</sup> in "Nihon futsūbun no zento" ("The outlook for written Japanese", 1888). In "Nihon futsūbun dō" ("The future of written Japanese", 1887) Shinpo Iwatsugu, a member of the Kinkōdō publishing firm who had earlier published the first colloquial-style primary textbook, suggested the use of punctuation as part of an over-all progression towards a simple colloquial style, claiming that under the current system what stops were used at all were simply inserted after a certain set number of characters regardless of meaning. Shinpo experimented with applying full stops and commas to the *Kojiki* (*Record of ancient matters*, eighth century) and other Japanese classics, and went on to illustrate his theory further in a primary school reader, *Nihon tokuhon* (*Japanese reader*, 1886). Two other school texts experimenting with punctuation at this time were Nakagawa Kenjirō's<sup>9</sup> *Rika tokuhon* (*Science reader*, 1886) and Nishi Tomisada's *Yōgaku tokuhon* (*Children's reader*, 1887), both of which used commas, full stops, paragraph indentations, and large characters to begin each sentence. Nishi also used capitals for names.

Thus, thanks to the urging of *yōgakusha* who realized that the success of

colloquial style in Western countries was due in part to the convenient division of writing into manageable segments, the practice of punctuating texts slowly gained a foothold in Japan. Much more influential in its eventual spread than the early scholars, however, were the novelists who began to use the colloquial style as a necessary adjunct to the new realistic fiction which appeared in the mid-1880s. First among these was Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909), author of *Ukigumo* (*The drifting cloud*, 1887-89), the first novel which attempted both a realistic portrayal of the problems of an ordinary modern individual and the use of the colloquial style in narrative as well as dialogue passages. Futabatei went so far as to attempt in his colloquial translations of Russian literature<sup>10</sup> to reproduce the exact punctuation of the original.

In translating foreign literature, one runs the risk of spoiling the original if one concentrates only on meaning. I myself was convinced of the necessity to grasp and reproduce the rhythm of the original text; I therefore did not dispense arbitrarily with even a single comma or period. If there were three commas and one period in the original, then I put the same into my translation in an effort to convey its tone. When I first began doing a translation, in particular, I expended considerable effort on the matter of form, even going so far as to use the same number of words as the original in an effort to reproduce the rhythm with absolute fidelity; but this did not go at all as I hoped, and there were times when I could not meet my own standards.<sup>11</sup>

The text of *Ukigumo* itself, which appeared in three volumes, was sparsely punctuated in volume one, but better punctuated in the later volumes, with dialogue separated from narrative on separate lines as well as by quotation marks (Figure 4). Futabatei's prose in the first volume showed frequent traces still of traditional literary styles, and no doubt this affected his attempts at punctuation too. When he became more proficient at using colloquial style in volumes two and three, which he patterned after the prose of Dostoevsky and Goncharov, his punctuation also improved. His diary for 1888, *Kuchiba shū: hitokagome* (*A collection of dead leaves: first basket*), is written in literary style and punctuated by only a few commas, lacking even full stops. By contrast, "Yo ga hansei no zange" ("Confessions of half a lifetime"), an autobiographical essay published twenty years later in 1908, is replete with paragraph indentations, commas, full stops, dashes, lines of dots to suggest reflection, quotation marks, and exclamation marks.

Another who incorporated European punctuation into his novels was Yamada Bimyō (1868-1910), who began writing colloquial-style works at about the same time as Futabatei. His first published attempt at the new style was *Chōkai shōsetsu tengu* (*The conceited demon: a satirical novel*), an unfinished work published in 1886 in "Garakuta bunko" ("Trash library"), the journal of the Kenyūsha group.<sup>12</sup> Its extremely long and

sparsely punctuated sentences were reminiscent of those of Tokugawa period light fiction, but Yamada did introduce certain forms of punctuation which had not been seen in a Japanese work before, separating dialogue and narrative with the symbol = and using the device . . . . . to suggest admiration or lingering memories. In later works he adopted with enthusiasm all forms of European punctuation, including abbreviation, dashes, exclamation marks, question marks, and quotation marks, as well as the basic comma and full stop.

The use of punctuation in Japanese fiction accelerated from then on in direct proportion to the adoption of the colloquial style by Meiji period authors. Because the one major drawback to the colloquial style was its wordiness by comparison with the much more concise Chinese style, it was essential that it be controlled and shaped by orthographic devices, and authors continued to hammer out a system of punctuation appropriate to Japanese as a necessary corollary to their successful use of *gen-bun'itchi*.<sup>13</sup> The text of *Wagahai wa neko de aru (I am a cat, 1905)*, by Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), perhaps the most famous author of this period, is studded with question marks, quotation marks, dashes, and lines of dots to indicate fragmented speech, in addition to the standard commas and full stops. Paragraphs are indented. In some sections dialogue and narrative are separated with dialogue beginning on a new line; in others Sōseki reverts to the older practice of leaving dialogue in the body of the narrative, separated only by quotation marks. *Hakai (The broken commandment, 1906)*, by Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943), a prominent writer of the Naturalist school, is similarly embellished, with the added refinement that Tōson used full stops as well as quotation marks to end sections of dialogue whereas Sōseki did not, relying instead on the closing quotation mark alone to indicate the end of an utterance. By then the practice of punctuation was well established, and later writers continued to use it both as an indication of the sense of their text and as a means of stamping their own individual styles upon the written language

Not all European devices were adopted. Inverted commas as used to indicate quotation in the West were not appropriate in Japan, where the addition of " next to the top right hand corner of certain of the phonetic symbols denoted a change from unvoiced to voiced consonant. In their place were used ㄱ ㄴ. Nor was the use of capitals more than a passing fad among those who advocated replacing Chinese characters entirely with phonetic script; while it may have been possible in an all-phonetic text, it would have made typesetting a nightmare in the script situation which actually existed. Word spacing was not generally adopted; it is found today only in certain elementary textbooks, children's fairytales meant to be used as first readers, and some elementary Japanese language textbooks for foreigners.<sup>14</sup>

As the use of the colloquial style gradually spread to areas of written Japanese outside fiction, punctuation naturally accompanied it, until both were well established in education and journalism by 1925. Official documents proved more resistant to change; with the appearance in 1946 of the draft of the revised Japanese constitution written entirely in colloquial style, however, it was not long before these last areas of entrenched traditionalism were also overcome.

1. For a discussion of styles, see Satō Kiyoji (ed.), *Kokugogaku knekyū jiten* (Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 1977), pp.353-368.

2. Pure Chinese style was a style in which kanji are arranged in accordance with the syntactic order of literary Chinese; Hybrid Chinese style was a form of writing which, while following the syntactic order of literary Chinese to some extent, also shows the influence of Japanese syntax.

3. Fukuzawa Yukichi, "Fukuzawa zenshū chogen", *Fukuzawa Yukichi zenshū*, v. 1 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1958), p. 6.

4. For example, those found in the *Dai Nihon komonjo* and *Meiji bunka zenshū* collections.

5. A style which developed about the twelfth century as an offshoot of Hybrid Chinese. It was known as *sōrōbun* because of its characteristic use of the verb *sōrō*.

6. My example is taken from the third volume; the two forewords to this volume offer an interesting example of the range of punctuation practices then extant. One is un-annotated pure Chinese style, totally innocent of punctuation; the other is a variety of Hybrid Chinese in which full stops have been used not only to indicate clause and sentence boundaries but also subjects, topics, objects, and so on, as well as replacing commas in lists.

7. Scholar of things Western.

8. An influential education group with several thousand members.

9. 1850-1928. Meiji period educator.

10. Notably "Aibiki" (1888), a translation of Turgenev's "The Rendezvous"; and Meguriai" (1888-89), Turgenev's "Three Meetings".

11. Futabatei Shimei, "Yo ga honyaku no hyōjun" ("My standards in translation", 1906), *Meiji bungaku zenshū*, v.17 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1971), p.108.

12. A literary group who favoured a return to the styles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

13. 言文一致, colloquial style.

14. And, of course, in romanized Japanese.