The Rōmaji movement in Japan

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Abstract

The alphabet (rōmaji) has never been considered a serious contender for the national script in Japan, although at several points since the country's modern period began in 1868 supporters have made a case for its adoption on varying grounds, most notably those of education, democracy and office automation. Although such advocates have included influential scholars and bureaucrats, their combined intellectual gravitas has never been sufficient to allow their arguments for romanisation to outweigh the strong cultural traditions and ideologies of writing centred on the existing three-script writing system. Even today, in the face of pressures imposed by modern keyboard technology, discussion of the issue is not on the national agenda. This article considers the place of romanisation in Japan today and offers a short history of the rōmaji movement since the late nineteenth century.

The Alphabet in the Japanese writing system

Japan's writing system is widely recognised in both academic and popular literature as one of the most complex in the world. Japanese is written with three scripts, one logographic (kanji, Chinese characters as used in Japan) and two phonetic kana syllabaries, supplemented by Arabic numerals and frequent 'unofficial' use of the Roman alphabet (rōmaji).

The following is a simple schematic representation of these scripts and their typical uses:

Name	Type	Normal use	Example
Kanji	Logographic, many thousands (1,945 recommended for general use)	Nouns, stems of inflected words	自動車 (car) 長い (long)
Hiragana	Phonetic syllabary, 46 basic symbols, cursive shapes	Inflected endings, the copula, pronouns, postpositions and to indicate Japanese pronunciations	じどうしゃ (car) 長くない (not long) 食べる (eat) です (copula)

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Name	Type	Normal use	Example
Katakana	Phonetic syllabary, 46 basic symbols, angular shapes	Non-Chinese loanwords or names, emphasis	チーズ (cheese) ハム (ham) スミス (Smith)
Arabic numerals	Numerals	Phone numbers, numbers in horizontal writing	2007年, CX-7
Roman alphabet	Phonetic	Design feature, signs, prestige	

An example of the interplay of these scripts in a normal Japanese sentence would be:

スミスさんの新しい自動車はMazda CX-7です。

Sumisu san no atarashii jidōsha wa Mazda CX-7 desu.

Mr Smith's new car is a Mazda CX-7.

Sumisu (foreign name, katakana); san (Japanese honorific suffix, hiragana); no (Japanese possessive marker, hiragana); atarashii (adjective, stem in kanji, inflected part in hiragana); wa (Japanese topic marker, hiragana); Mazda (car maker, routinely written in roman alphabet); CX-7 (model name, ditto); desu (Japanese present-tense copula, hiragana)

Romanisation in Japan complements rather than replaces the existing orthography, adding to the prized diversity and multiplicity of options afforded by the multi-script writing system. Playing with the accepted conventions of the orthography affords endless opportunity for creativity intended to amuse, to shock, or sometimes to act as an in-group code for particular subgroups of society. One major area where the alphabet is pressed into service to this end is in advertising and publishing, where rōmaji are used to attract attention and to provide a general impression of "cool" and/or sophistication. In a purely cognitive sense the alphabet can be effectively used to do the first of these because rōmaji, by virtue of their different shapes, stand out from the surrounding Japanese scripts and invite processing attention,[1] thereby attracting notice. A headline advising of the temporary failure of a bank's automatic teller machines in the financial news section of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* on 21 May 2008, for example, ran 住友信託銀、システム障害で一時ATM取引ストップ, with the alphabet letters for the commonly used acronym ATM inserted among the other three scripts.

In 2002, the Ministry of Justice formally approved the use of the alphabet in the registration of Japanese company names, thereby relaxing the rule that had pertained since 1893 that only Japanese scripts could be used for that purpose. Large companies such as NTT (Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Co.) and JTB (Japan Travel Bureau), which had adopted alphabet letters in their externally oriented corporate names, had until that time had to register those letters in katakana transliterations inside Japan (e.g., JTB became ジェイティービー in katakana), but they may now use the alphabet letters themselves without change

[1] J. Kess and T. Miyamoto, *The Japanese Mental Lexicon: Psycholinguistic Studies of Kana and Kanji Processing* (Amsterdam, 1999), p. 113.

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(*Yomiuri Shimbun* 5 May 2002). Inoue found a close relationship between use of the alphabet and corporate identity: major shopping chains, company acronyms, automobile and other manufacturers all use rōmaji in their logos because "westernized names sell, another example of the economic power of symbols". In one form or another, he reported, the alphabet now appears in three quarters of all Japanese television commercials.[2]

Where the alphabet is used in this way, particularly on items of clothing such as T-shirts or handbags, it is the appearance of the orthography itself that is the focus of attention, not the fact that (mostly) English words are being used. Words seen on fashion items frequently bear little or no resemblance to English in terms of grammar or context-acceptable lexicon. Seargeant sums up this particular phenomenon well when he says that "the language itself, supremely visual, also doubles as a decorative art form"; these expressions should not be seen as imperfect use of English but rather as "a strategy of using the language as an expressive tool which need not be dominated by the strictures of core semantic meanings".[3] It is the script itself which is important, the use of romanisation as an eye-catching visual device, rather than any special meaning the words might convey. English-speaking tourists often return from Japan with amusing tales of inappropriate words seen on clothing without realising that what they have seen is "a form of language which is only superficially English: emblematic rather than communicative".[4]

A second and equally important area where the alphabet plays a role is in the daily use of information technology. When Japanese users of computers and other electronic text-producing devices input text in their own language, they do so through the medium of a rōmaji keyboard. Even though people are opposed to reading romanised texts of any length despite seeing individual romanised words all around them, they nevertheless use the alphabet daily as an important intermediate step in electronically generating text in Japanese, a process which Unger refers to as "functional digraphia".[5] The success of the electronic revolution in handling Japanese characters established rōmaji in this crucial support role because computer keyboards usually access the other scripts through the alphabet, i.e., users type in the required word in the alphabet, it is then automatically converted to hiragana, and kanji where required, relevant options are offered on the screen and selected through a conversion mechanism. This means that "this generation of electronically savvy students is at home with rōmaji in a way that previous generations were not".[6] The reason for this preference for rōmaji rather than kana input is that if the number of keys rises above forty (as it does with kana), touch-typing becomes much more difficult. Thus, even though most syllables require only one kana as opposed to two letters of the alphabet to type, this advantage is outweighed by the ease of using the QWERTY keyboard.[7]

[2]F. Inoue, 'Econolinguistic aspects of multilingual signs in Japan', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 175/176 (2005), p. 165.

[3]P. Seargeant, 'Globalisation and reconfigured English in Japan', *World Englishs* 24 (3) (2005), p. 316.

[4]B. Hyde, 'Japan's emblematic English', *English Today* 18 (3) (2002), p. 13.

[5]J. M. Unger, 'Functional digraphia in Japan as revealed in consumer product preferences', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 150 (2001), pp. 141–152.

[6]Kess and Miyamoto, *The Japanese Mental Lexicon*, pp. 111–112.

[7]J. M. Unger, *Literacy and Script Reform in Occupation Japan: Reading between the Lines* (New York, 1996), pp. 125–126.

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One of the major obstacles to the idea of overall romanisation lies in the national attachment to kanji. In the minds of most Japanese adults, characters function as a signifier for the Japanese language itself. The ability to use kanji properly sends powerful signals of the users' levels of education and culture,[8] as Prime Minister Aso found to his cost.[9] When the Agency of Cultural Affairs canvassed attitudes to kanji in its 2001 survey of language attitudes, over 70 per cent of respondents indicated that they viewed characters as an indispensable part of writing Japanese.[10] More recently, a GOO Research survey found that over half of respondents who expressed concern about low levels of kanji proficiency among school students did so because they felt that Japan's national language culture could not be properly passed on without kanji.[11]

Types of Romanisation

Three kinds of romanisation are used in Japan: the Hepburn, the Nippon-shiki (Japanese-style) and the Kunrei-shiki (Cabinet-style) systems. The Hepburn system, used in this paper and very commonly elsewhere, was adopted by medical missionary James Hepburn (1815–1911) in the 1887 third edition of his famous Japanese–English dictionary. While the Hepburn system does not have the backing of official cabinet order (kunrei) status, it is nevertheless entrenched in Japanese society through government usage as well as through other avenues, appearing in transport- and tourism-related material and signs and in newspapers, magazine titles, road signs and passports.

The Nippon-shiki system was developed by physicist Tanakadate Aikitsu (1856–1952) in 1885, while the Kunrei-shiki was adopted as the official Japanese version by cabinet order in 1937 and later slightly revised in 1954. Tensions between supporters of the Hepburn and Nippon-shiki systems prior to the Second World War led to the setting up of a board of enquiry into the matter under the aegis of the Education Minister in 1930 which eventually arrived at a compromise between the two which became the Kunrei-shiki when it was accepted by the Cabinet in 1937. There are only very slight differences between Nippon-shiki and Kunrei-shiki.[12]

The differences between the Hepburn system and the other two are generally explained as boiling down to the fact that the Hepburn system employs alphabet letters as they are used in English while the Nippon-shiki and Kunrei-shiki systems maintain a more precise correspondence with Japanese phonemes. The syllable transliterated as "tsu" in Hepburn, for example, becomes "tu" in Nippon-shiki; "shi" becomes "si" and "ja/ju/jo" become "zya/zyu/zyo". The Nippon-shiki system can lead to confusion for English speakers learning Japanese pronunciation: the word for "moon" (romanised as "tsuki" in the Hepburn system),

[8]R. A. Brown, 'Chinese character education in Japan and South Korea', *Language and Communication* 10 (4) (1990), pp. 299–309.

[9]He had been lampooned without mercy for the many mistakes he made in reading kanji during his term of office.

[10]Agency for Cultural Affairs (2002), *Heisei 13 Nendo "Kokugo ni kansuru Seron Chōsa"*, online at http://www.bunka.go.jp/kokugo_nihongo/yoronchousa/h13/kekka.html (accessed 12 February 2009).

[11]GOO Research (2007), *"Kanjiryoku" nado ni kansuru Chōsa*, online at http://research.goo.ne.jp/Result/000509 (accessed 8 August 2007).

[12]Unger, *Literacy and Script Reform in Occupation Japan*, p. 53.

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for example, when presented as "tuki," may seem to them to be pronounced "too-ki" rather than its actual pronunciation of "tsoo-ki".

Arguments for Romanisation

The three issues in relation to which the romanisation movement has argued its cause since Japan entered its modern period in the second half of the nineteenth century have been education, democratisation, and, more latterly, the demands of office automation and computerisation. I define "romanisation movement" here as efforts to convince others through a variety of means that Japan would benefit by abandoning Kanji and Kana and using the western alphabet in their place.

Education

At the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japanese was written very differently to how it is now. Today's modern colloquial written style did not yet exist; instead, the written language of public life was Sino-Japanese, supplemented by other classically based styles such as *sōrōbun* (epistolary style) and *wabun* (classical Japanese). Also commonly used was the *wankankonkōbun* style which synthesised elements of Chinese and Japanese classical grammar with more contemporary lexical items, but a considerable gap still existed between even this and the contemporary spoken language. In addition, none of the modern script reforms had yet occurred or would occur for another eighty years. The thousands upon thousands of kanji available for use, the multiplicity of readings available for each of them, a kana spelling based on classical pronunciation and the lack of a systematised method of punctuation rendered mastery of the writing system at advanced levels beyond the grasp of the majority of the population.

With no national education system in place until 1872, the only officially sponsored education available was that offered through samurai domain schools to the children of the samurai class. Commoners fended for themselves by establishing a vigorous system of education at *terakoya* (temple schools) and attaining a degree of literacy in kana and basic kanji, some more so than others, but the complexity of the writing system meant that advanced literacy skills were not uniformly reached. "For most", Unger notes, "literacy meant a restricted set of skills that conferred only a portion of the liberating power we unthinkingly ascribe without qualification to education as a force for social change. Furthermore, literacy was not distributed equally".[13] Nevertheless, literacy rates (when estimated based on school attendance figures, without regard to degree of literacy) are widely considered to have been higher in pre-modern Japan than in Europe at that time,[14] and this may later have worked against the idea of romanisation. Whereas in many countries romanisation has been seen as a path to literacy, in the case of Japan it is possible that fairly widespread familiarity with the Japanese writing system (however limited) in the pre-modern period helped to instil an attachment to that system that later invoked resistance to any subsequent move to replace it with the alphabet in the modern period.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
[14] See, for example, R. P. Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan* (Berkeley, 1965).

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It was against the above background, and in the context of a keenly felt need to modernise in order to fend off the potential threat from western powers, that the initial suggestions that romanisation might facilitate national progress were made. During Japan's period of feudal isolation from the rest of the world, when only one Dutch trading post was allowed to remain in Nagasaki Harbour, scholars of the West commented on the conciseness of the alphabet with which they came in contact through the study of the Dutch language.[15] In the first year of the new national education system, Nambu Yoshikazu (1840–1917) petitioned the Minister for Education to replace characters with the alphabet. His view was supported by influential Meiji Period philosopher Nishi Amane (1826–97), who as one of the first Japanese students sent to study abroad felt keenly that Japan's writing system was sorely in need of reform before it could function efficiently to spread learning and science among the populace. What better, then, at a time of widespread adoption of other western institutions and customs, than to adopt the alphabet as well?[16]

The men in charge of the new Meiji Period government and its institutions, however, had been educated to read and write Sino-Japanese and to study the Chinese classics, and great prestige attached to these traditions. Mastery of Sino-Japanese and of kanji was the mark of an educated man. Although several significant essays on romanisation appeared during the 1870s and early 1880s, the idea of script reform did not sit well with the majority of the educated class. In order to increase their effectiveness, therefore, rōmaji supporters – most of whom had studied foreign alphabet-using languages – decided in 1885 to band together into the Rōmaji Club. The Club published a manifesto, "Rōmaji nite nihongo no kakikata" (How to write Japanese with the alphabet), and put out a journal, *Rōmaji Zasshi (Rōmaji Journal)*, between 1885 and 1892. By the end of 1888, the Club had a membership of over 10,000 supporters.[17]

A common theme informing the advocacy of romanisation was that education, so important to the modern nation-building project, would benefit greatly from the replacement of the complex Japanese orthography with the alphabet. If the burden of characters were removed, it was argued, significant amounts of classroom time would thereby be freed up, since building competence in the existing writing system took many, many hours of instruction which could be better spent on studying science and other useful subjects. Prominent Meiji educator and statesman Nitobe Inazō (1862–1933), for example, was moved to write:

> A large part of the school-life is spent in mastering some 4,000 ideograms, most of which are pronounced in three or four ways and written in at least three ways. The waste of energy thereby incurred is worthy of the most serious consideration, and can be prevented only by the adoption of transliteration, i.e., the use of the Roman alphabet instead of Chinese ideograms.[18]

An instrumentalist approach of this kind, of course, was based on pragmatic and utilitarian considerations and took no account of the affective dimensions of the orthography,

[15] N. Twine, *Language and the Modern State: the Reform of Written Japanese* (London, 1991), p. 225.
[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 237–238.
[17] M. Yamamoto, *Kindai Buntai Hassei no Shiteki Kenkyū*, second edition (Tokyo, 1982).
[18] I. Nitobe, *Lectures on Japan: An Outline of the Development of the Japanese People and their Culture* (Tokyo, 1936), p. 297.

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particularly characters, which – despite having originated in China – were seen as the repository of many centuries of national literary and intellectual tradition. Its primary concern was efficiency in education.

The efforts of Rōmaji Club members to promote romanisation proved ultimately counterproductive, since, without the visual clues to meaning afforded by kanji, classically based literary styles written using the alphabet became not simpler but even more difficult to understand because they were not based on contemporary speech. Some members realised this and began to push for the development of a modern style based on spoken Japanese to be used in conjunction with the alphabet, but it was many years before this was to eventuate.[19] To Andō Masatsugu, it was this lack of practical applicability which led to the eventual failure of the Rōmaji Club, some of whose members he believed were simply pushing westernisation rather than thinking the matter through in terms of the Japanese situation.[20] The Rōmaji Club was eventually disbanded in 1892, in response to a generalised backlash against what was perceived as over-enthusiastic adoption of western customs in society as a whole. During this period, however, two of today's three transliteration systems, the Hepburn and the Nippon-shiki, had been settled upon.

By the early 1900s, thanks to the efforts of influential figures such as Ueda Kazutoshi (1867–1937), Japan's first western-trained linguist, sufficient agreement had been reached on the desirability of both stylistic and orthographic reform that the romanisation movement experienced a period of revitalisation. Particularly important here was the establishment in 1902 of Japan's first language planning body, the Kokugo Chōsa Iinkai (National Language Research Council), with the overarching aim of carrying out full-scale surveys on the state of the language. Under this umbrella fell four major charter points, the first of which was to investigate the relative merits of kana and rōmaji with a view to adopting a phonetic script. This was never a realistic option, however, given the prevailing language ideology in which the writing system was seen as representing a long and splendid literary tradition, much more than just an instrument. Also contributing to the fear of change was concern that young people would be cut off from access to national values and heritage if they were not educated to read and write using the existing orthography.

Unlikely to succeed as it was, however, the inclusion of this task in the Council's agenda signalled a significant challenge to orthodox views in its tacit assumption that Chinese characters were bound to disappear, and engendered a divisiveness which was to characterise script policy discussions for the next sixty years.[21] History tells us that the goal of romanisation did not come anywhere near being achieved before this body was dissolved in 1913, and that the existing orthography remained in use until rationalised by the postwar cycle of script reforms after 1946. Nevertheless, the fact that romanisation was mentioned as one possible outcome of the Council's survey work gave heart to rōmaji supporters. Despite the fact that the Rōmaji Club had disbanded, romanisation advocates had continued their work on an individual basis. Not all had been happy with the National Language Research Council's

[19]Twine, *Language and the Modern State*, pp. 241–244.
[20]M. Andō, 'Kanji no seigen to kokugo no sonchō' (1922), in M. Andō, *Gengo Seisaku Ronkō* (Tokyo, 1976), pp. 296–303.
[21]N. Gottlieb, *Kanji Politics: Language Policy and Japanese Script* (London, 1995), p. 61.

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mandated focus on surveys, which they saw as wasting time when action was required; such action was therefore deemed to be required henceforth from the private sector.

After Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 and thus gained an increase in status on the international scene, the use of rōmaji was promoted on the basis of the international character of the alphabet. Under the influential patronage of Prince Saionji Kinmochi (1849–1940), the Rōmaji Hiromekai (Society for the Propagation of Romanisation) was set up in 1905; it published its own journal, *Rōmaji*, and petitioned the Education Minister to teach the alphabet in schools. While at first both the Hepburn and Nippon-shiki systems were accepted for the sake of the overarching goal, in 1908 the Society decided to adopt a modified form of the Hepburn system as its official standard. Supporters of the Nippon-shiki system, including its inventor Tanakadate Aikitsu, thereupon hived off and set up the Nippon no Rōmazi Sya to publish material in that medium, including in its journal *Rōmazi Sekai (Rōmazi World)*.[22] In 1914, the Tōkyō Rōmazikai (Tokyo Romanisation Society) was also formed in order to promote Nippon-shiki romanisation, and this group later became the Nippon no Rōmazikai (Japan Romanisation Society) in 1921.

By the time of the Taishō Period (1912–1926), the modern colloquial style was well on the way to becoming the norm and one of the major impediments to romanisation was therefore lessened. During this period, the main argument of rōmaji advocates switched from education to office automation and international communication. Major newspapers had seen a switch after 1870 from woodblock printing to movable type and therefore had a vested interest in script reform (though not necessarily romanisation). In offices, the complexity of the Japanese script meant that Japan never experienced a successful typewriter age as alphabet-using countries did, since the size of the character set rendered the Japanese typewriter bulky, non-portable and requiring serious training to use.[23] The earliest typewriters, from 1923, were katakana-only; they were not marketed as serious writing machines because of this but were used only as billing machines in large companies. To romanisation advocates, early office automation in the form of the typewriter provided another cogent reason why the writing system should turn to the alphabet.

The groups mentioned above continued their activities in promoting romanisation throughout the first half of the twentieth century, despite the increasing power of a strong ultranationalist ideology which viewed any attempt to tamper with the existing orthography as counter to the essence of the 'Japanese spirit' encapsulated in that orthography. Tradition here took on rigid nationalistic overtones. During the Second World War itself, the promotion of the enemy's script was viewed as treason and those who did so were subject to persecution: in one particular incident in 1939 a group of students from Waseda University who supported romanisation were arrested by the secret police on the grounds of anti-nationalist sympathies.[24] It was thus not until 1945 that romanisation advocates saw their next real opportunity to plead their cause, this time under the rubric of democratisation.

[22] H. Kitta, *Nippon no Rōmazi-undō* (Tokyo, 1992).
[23] See N. Gottlieb, *Word-processing Technology in Japan: Kanji and the Keyboard* (Surrey, 2000).
[24] Kitta, *Nippon no Rōmazi-undō*.

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Democratisation

When the dust of war settled and reconstruction began during the immediate postwar period under the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952), rōmaji advocates – along with other advocates of script reform – saw the rejection of ultranationalist ideologies, including those associated with the orthography, as their best chance to bring about a change in the status quo. This was a period of change and renewal, characterised by democratically oriented reforms such as land reforms, the reform of the education system and the revision of the constitution in order to remove the locus of sovereignty from the emperor to the people.

Given that 'democracy' became one of the most often heard catchwords of these years, the previously suppressed supporters of script reform (including but not limited to romanisation supporters) saw their chance and advanced arguments on several grounds. One was that legal documents, including the new constitution, should be capable of being easily read by all citizens; it was pointless to write democratic concepts into the laws of Japan if the difficulty of the language and script used prevented the populace from reading them. Another, which echoed the early Meiji Period arguments, was that the reconstruction of Japan required an advance in levels of scientific and technological knowledge among the general public rather than among professionals alone, and that the time spent studying characters should be replaced by time spent studying science. Language reformers such as Yamamoto Yūzō (1887–1974) coined the slogan "kokugo wa kokumin zentai no mono" (our language belongs to all the people) during this period.[25]

Thus buoyed by the backing of the democratisation ethos, a couple of months after Japan's surrender in 1945 members of the Japan Romanisation Society joined with two other language groups supporting script reform – the Kana Mojikai (supporters of kana as the national script) and the Kokugo Kyōkai – to present SCAP (Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers) with a joint proposal for language reform. Six months later, the former two announced that they would work towards the abolition of characters by propagating (in the case of the Romanisation Society) Nippon-shiki romanisation. Tanakadate Aikitsu, president of the Japan Romanisation Society, made a further appeal in 1946 in the form of a petition to the Kokugo Shingikai (National Language Council, the body in charge of national language policy since 1934) entitled "Make Rōmaji our Script!", which was discussed by the Council but was not considered an appropriate way to proceed. During this Occupation period, the linguistic landscape was littered with examples of romanisation on public signs, including street and station signage. To a certain extent this mirrored the experience of colonised societies elsewhere, although of course Japan itself has never been colonised and the use of the alphabet on public signs during the Occupation was intended to facilitate convenience of movement for the occupiers rather than to signal a move towards entrenched use of the script of the victors in all aspects of life.

Rōmaji supporters still refer to this period as the golden age, when events seemed to conspire towards the realisation of their goals. In 1946, the report of the US Education Mission to Japan's chapter on language reform recognised that learning characters represented a hefty investment of time and suggested that consideration be given to adopting

[25]See Gottlieb, *Kanji Politics*, for a discussion of these activities.

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romanisation, with the exact system of romanisation to be decided by a commission of influential Japanese educators and politicians. Concerned that the 85 per cent of Japanese students who did not proceed beyond elementary school at that time lacked the linguistic skills needed for democratic citizenship because of the time needed to master the existing orthography, the report argued that the use of the alphabet "would lend itself well to the growth of democratic citizenship and international understanding".[26] A contemporary American observer and advocate of romanisation for Japan agreed with this: "Though the time saved acquiring the writing tool could be spent in studying the glories of Japanese militarism, it could also be devoted, as the United States Education Mission suggested, to studying the virtues of the democratic way of life. It is in this sense that the Mission stressed the democratic potential of Romaji".[27]

Although the language of the report verged on the overblown in places, as in its opening statement that members felt called upon to give a friendly stimulus for language reform "and with it every encouragement to this generation to begin at once that for which all future generations will surely call it blessed" (p. 20), it concluded calmly enough that "the adoption of romaji would constitute a major contribution to the transmission of knowledge and ideas across national boundaries" (p. 23). This recommendation gave great hope to romanisation advocates, but it was in no way binding and in the event was not taken up. As is made abundantly clear in the memoirs of Joseph C. Trainor, who served in the Occupation's Civil Information and Education section (CIE) for a year during the relevant period and discusses the various attempts made by zealous American advocates of romanisation inside the Occupation administration to enforce their views in Japan, Occupation policy was that the nature of the Japanese writing system was a matter for the Japanese themselves to decide.[28] Even the purported link between democracy and orthographic change was not sufficiently strong to win the day: others such as Yamamoto Yūzō were diligently applying the same idea to their campaign to simplify the existing script system, with greater success.

A significant American figure in the whole debate over romanisation at this time was Robert King Hall, a staffer in the education division of the CIE section who was utterly convinced that the alphabet was the answer to what he saw as Japan's linguistic problems and the threat they posed to true democracy. In 1949, he wrote:

> There exists evidence that the majority of the Japanese people are unable to read writing necessary to the development of their democratic tendencies. It has been charged that this is caused by the excessive difficulty of the written form of the Japanese language rather than by the absence of an adequate system of compulsory education . . . Japan must first determine in what ways the present system of the written language is an obstacle to the development of democratic tendencies among the people. If the existing writing system is in fact found to be unsatisfactory, Japan must then determine a practical and effective simplification.[29]

[26]United States Education Mission to Japan, *Report of the United States Education Mission to Japan* (Washington DC, 1946), p. 22.
[27]J. De Francis, 'Japanese language reform: politics and phonetics', *Far Eastern Quarterly* 16 (19) (1947), p. 220.
[28]J. C. Trainor, *Educational Reform in Occupied Japan: Trainor's Memoir* (Tokyo, 1983).
[29]R. K.Hall, *Education for a New Japan* (New Haven, 1949), p. 294.

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During Hall's period of service in Japan, he attempted to expedite the use of the alphabet in Japanese textbooks and, when that failed, to influence the Education Mission's report on the issue, also unsuccessfully. Nevertheless, Japanese rōmaji supporters succeeded in obtaining permission from the Civil Information and Education section to run an experiment to see whether elementary school pupils would learn faster if rōmaji were used in non-language courses. While initial indications seemed positive, the experiment was cut short and written up as inconclusive.[30]

In the event, the decision taken was to remain with the existing orthography but to rationalise and streamline it by putting limits on the numbers of characters to be taught for general use, simplifying characters' shapes, putting a cap on the number of readings a character could have and modernising the kana spelling. Rōmaji, while not adopted as the only script, was nevertheless recognised as having a role to play in written Japanese, albeit not an official one. A rōmaji programme was instituted in schools on a voluntary basis from 1947, with schools left free to decide on which system they taught and how they taught it. The following year, the Rōmaji Research Committee was set up to advise on teaching matters. Textbooks also first became available in this year, published in both Hepburn and Kunrei systems.

In 1950, the Rōmaji Research Committee became the National Language Council's Rōmaji Research Division and set up three subdivisions of its own to work on spelling, education and *yokogaki* (writing horizontally with spaces between words, not normally done in Japanese but naturally necessary when writing romanised Japanese). Three years later, the National Language Council recommended to the Education Minister that the kunrei-shiki style be given precedence, with the other two systems reserved for international contact situations where reversing the previous system of Romanisation might cause difficulties; this was ratified as "Rōmaji no Tsuzurikata" (How to spell with the Alphabet) in 1954, superseding the earlier 1937 kunrei directive.

While the National Language Council enshrined in the cycle of postwar script reforms the decision to continue with the existing three-script system, albeit in rationalised form, the more conservative of its members who opposed the changes feared that they were witnessing the thin end of the wedge. It seemed to them, given that many supporters of both romanisation and kana were vocal members of the Council, that the script reforms were nothing but an interim stage in the process of abolishing characters altogether. Playing on a resurgence of conservative sentiment in the late 1950s and early 1960s, therefore, they convinced the Education Minister to change the system by which Council members were chosen for each new term and to request a reconsideration of the cycle of reforms to see whether changes had been too hastily made. The Rōmaji Research Division was abolished in 1962 as part of this reorganisation. Romanisation supporters, upset by the speed at which the changes were being pushed through, joined with the Kana Mojikai and the Language Policy Discussion Group to work out a plan to oppose them which was forestalled when the Ministry announced the final revision of the Ordinance a bare ten days later. From that time

[30]For details, see Unger, *Literacy and Script Reform in Occupation Japan*, and H. Wray, 'Nationalism, cultural imperialism, and language reform in Occupied Japan', in *Asian Nationalism in an Age of Globalization*, ed. R. Starrs (New York, 2001), pp. 253–290.

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on, rōmaji advocates were marginalised; having lost the chance to influence policy from within the public sector, their work was thereafter restricted to the private sector.

In sum, the main thrust of the democratisation phase of the romanisation movement was the argument that characters and the historical kana spelling system were relics of feudalism and were therefore not suited to a democratic postwar age. While support for a democratised writing system was strong in general during this period, romanisation was not the favoured candidate, as the cultural heritage argument proved too strong to be overturned. In the event, the government decided that democracy's prospects could best be improved by rationalising the existing orthography.

Computerisation

Until around 1980, the main message of the romanisation groups remained – despite all evidence to the contrary – that only romanisation would allow Japan to close the technology gap with the west, facilitate international communication and allow proper office automation with a convenient typewriter. Such a typewriter would allow touch typing; operators could thus use it to compose text as they went along, whereas the existing cumbersome Japanese machine was suitable only for reproduction of previously handwritten texts in print.

In the decades following the Second World War, it was the third of these arguments that seemed the strongest selling point, particularly after the first word processors appeared in the United States in the 1960s and 70s. Opinions along these lines were usually couched in terms of national and social disadvantage. It was argued, for example, that the lack of an affordable, portable, easy to use typewriter prevented individual citizens from communicating ideas easily and openly through typed pamphlets and other forms of *minikomi* (newsletters and small-circulation magazines, as opposed to *masukomi*, the mass media), thus making a mockery of the idea of free exchange of opinions.[31] In other words, the difficulty of the Japanese typewriter was represented as a barrier to the intellectual life of the nation which could be resolved through the use of the alphabet.

The invention of the first Japanese word processor in 1978 and the subsequent rapid uptake of the new technology during the 1980s dealt a severe blow to this argument. Although the input method remained (and remains) multi-step and therefore not as fast as an alphabet-using machine, electronic character retrieval from internal dictionaries meant that the problem of the size of the character set – such a problem on a mechanical typewriter constrained by limits on its physical size – was no longer an issue. It could therefore no longer be argued that Japan's orthography impeded office automation and therefore national progress. Articles by romanisation and kana supporters zeroed in on what they saw as defects of the new machines (e.g., their relative slowness compared to western word processors), but it could not be denied that this technology represented a major breakthrough, which has since allowed also the construction of a sizable Japanese-language presence on the Internet. Optimism died hard, however: one article argued that because users could now retrieve characters easily, this would in time cause them to realise how very complex and wasteful of time and energy the Japanese script was. The romanisation movement should therefore not

[31] K. Saitō, 'Taipuraitaa Arekore 1–6', *Rōmazi Sekai* 595 (1989), p. 23.

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ignore or criticise the word processor but rather adopt it as its symbol of the push towards adoption of the alphabet.[32] Despite such optimism, the hopes of the writer have not yet been realised.

Others who are similarly unconvinced of the computer 'cure-all' claims include Hannas, who argues that the gap between alphabet users and character-users on computers in terms of computerisation will continue to widen because of input time and because of the impact that will have as numbers and diversity of applications continue to increase. Computers, he contends, have been developed to meet the needs of alphabet-using languages, and it is simply not possible to adapt them successfully to the needs of East Asian languages as long as those languages continue to use characters.[33] In this view, the gains made in handling the character set through electronic memory retrieval are no more than cosmetic, disguising the actual magnitude of the continuing problem.

Prospects for Romanisation in Japan

Romanisation proved unlikely to be a realistic option for Japan in earlier times, and I believe that this is still the case today. Japan has one of the world's largest publishing and printing industries, and its newspaper circulation figures far surpass those of the United States or the United Kingdom. Of the top ten of the world's most widely circulated newspapers, seven are Japanese.[34] The overall cost and the practical mechanics of changing the existing infrastructure and associated peripherals away from the multi-script system constitute a huge barrier to romanisation when taken in isolation; when we consider them in combination with the strong, enduring affective attachments to the existing orthography and the role that it plays in national language ideology, it becomes clear that romanisation is highly unlikely.

While infrastructure considerations are important, experience in other countries such as Turkey has shown that where the national will exists, they can be overcome. That national will, however, has never been present in Japan at either official or grassroots levels. The arguments advanced in terms of educational and corporate efficiency have not been sufficiently persuasive in cultural terms to bring about the kind of large-scale popular support or influential top-down leadership that a serious consideration of romanisation would require. Today, the rōmaji groups – despite the standing of some of their members – are largely considered a kind of oddball fringe.

Two of the earlier romanisation groups remain and continue to promote the alphabet, using the Internet as one arm of their activities. The Nippon Rōmazi Kai (Society for the Romanisation of the Japanese Alphabet), now a Kyoto-based incorporated group reporting to the Japanese Language Section of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, had a membership of approximately 85 people in 2007 and was headed by Umesao Tadao, first Director-General and then Professor Emeritus of the National Museum of Ethnology. Statements on the website made it clear this group was firmly focused on the future: it works "for the improved development of the Japanese language" and "the Japanese language of tomorrow"

[32]S. Muramatsu, 'Wapuro no fukyū wa rōmazi undō ni kōki', *Rōmazi Sekai* 588 (1985), p. 52.
[33]W. C. Hannas, *Asia's Orthographic Dilemma* (Honolulu, 1997).
[34]World Association of Newspapers (2005) *World's 100 Largest Newspapers*, online at http://www.wan-press.org/article2825.html (accessed 18 March 2009).

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through publications, lectures and other activities. Its main journal is *Rōmazi no Sekai*. In 1999 the society made public what it calls the "'99-siki' Nihongo no rōmazi hyōki hōsiki" (the 99-style method of writing Japanese with the alphabet), a slightly different method of romanisation adopted by the group and used in all their publications since that year. It is not based on the principle that the alphabet is the only script Japan should be using. Rather, since the three-script orthography is recognised as the accepted norm, this method of romanisation is considered no more than a transliteration of that orthography. The website of this group (www.roomazi.org) is written entirely in non-romanised Japanese.

The Nippon no Rōmazi-Sya couches its mission in terms of improving the linguistic life of the Japanese people by carrying out surveys and research on the use of Nippon-shiki romanisation and widening the use of romanisation in everyday life with a view to the development of Japan's education and culture. Its journal is *Rōmazi no Nippon*. This group's website (www.age.ne.jp/x.nrs/) is entirely romanised in Nippon-shiki style: the top page carries the banner "Nippongo o Rōmazi de! Nipponsiki no Rōmazi de! Intānetto wa Rōmazi de! Nipponsiki no Rōmazi de! (Japanese in Rōmaji, in Nippon-shiki Rōmaji, the Internet in Rōmaji, in Nippon-shiki Rōmaji!). The affiliated Nippon Rōmazi Kyōiku Kenkyūkai (Japan Society for Research on Rōmaji Education) carries out surveys and other research, holds national meetings, runs study groups and publishes material relating to rōmaji education.

Within Japan, then, there is little interest in romanisation as a national orthography rather than as a decorative and interesting adjunct to the three-script system. In my view it is unlikely that this will change over the present century, although there are several factors at work that might bring a change in attitude. One is the Japanese government's current policy to promote the teaching of English, into which large amounts of money are being poured; if the use of English takes deeper root than at present, it is conceivable that, within a generation or two, older attitudes regarding the sacrosanct nature of the existing writing system may change. Computer use and cell phone texting may also play a part. Scholars such as Yamada,[35] Unger[36] and Hannas have long argued that only romanisation will permit Japan to become a successful global player online, despite the evidence that the present system is working well and that Unicode has enabled communication between computers using different scripts in different countries. Finally, if Japanese were to become a truly international language used widely in other parts of the world outside Japan, which is not at present the case, then perhaps the sheer difficulty of coming to grips with the size of the character set might generate international pressure for a change, should the will be there.

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[35]H. Yamada, 'Ōsugiru kanji/kango ni dō kotaeru ka', *Gakujutsu Jōhō Sentaa Kiyō* 6 (1994), pp.1–56.

[36]J. M. Unger, *The Fifth Generation Fallacy: Why Japan is betting its Future on Artificial Intelligence* (New York, 1987).

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