SOCIOLINGUISTIC RESEARCH IN JAPANESE LITERACY EVENTS
--Nonstandard Writings among Young Japanese Women--

Kyuichi Kikuchi
Asia University
Tokyo, Japan

BACKGROUND

There are many approaches to literacy because studies on it can be possible from any relevant discipline such as linguistics, education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc. The definitions of literacy are also varied. One of the recently received notions of literacy is that it is not simply a matter of reading and writing skills. From this perspective literacy is considered to be socially constructed practices (Langer, 1987; Street, 1984; Cook-Gumperz, 1986), and sometimes it is thought to alter the way we perceive the world we live in (Freire, 1970). Another view of literacy sees it as realized cognitive consequences which can be associated with civilization, rationality, logical and abstract thinking, etc. (Goody & Watt, 1963; Havelock, 1963; Ong, 1982). This view, if it is taken literally in literacy-oriented educational circles, may lead to a careless distinction between the literates, and the nonliterate, who are likely to be seen as inferior to the former. Literacy is also discussed from the point of view of culture and at the level of the individual as well, even though not many discussions on literacy at these two levels have been done so far. At cultural levels, Fidman (1990:194), for instance, states that "...literacy is a culturally defined construct." He also points out that "[t]o ignore group membership is to deny an important part of the individual" (p.183), which suggests the need to consider literacy at the levels of the group and the individual. Another person who stresses the importance of the level of the individual in literacy studies is Akinaso. Akinaso (1991:93) writes: "[i]t is not only the literate whose consciousness is impacted by
literacy. Nonliterate are also affected. They have their own conceptions about literacy and they are aware of the impact of literacy on their lives and their environment. They sometimes change their conceptions and uses of literacy just as literacy changes the structure of knowledge and the patterns of social relations in their society."

In this essay I will try to illustrate one of the literacy events in Japanese society at the level of the group, which also illustrates literacy at the level of the individual. For considering the relationships between a particular literacy event and a group or an individual, I will describe a special kind of writing popular especially among young girls in contemporary Japan.

**MARUMOJI** *(rounded characters) Writings*

Marumoji is a unique style of writing in which the edges of the characters are rounded-off. It is applied to all the forms of writing in Japanese such as *hiragana*, *katakana*, *kanji*, numerals, and even Roman letters appeared in the writings. To assist the reader who is unfamiliar with this style of writing, some facts relating to and characteristic of marumoji are summarized below.

a) Orthographic characteristics
   *written in rounded style
   *close to informal speech
   *invented symbols for punctuations
   *some illustration in marginal space
   *horizontally written in most of the cases
b) Functional characteristics
   *used most frequently by young women teens to early twenties
   *used most often in informal writings such as personal letters or notes
   *used in print chiefly to differentiate actual speech from ordinary statements by making such speech conspicuous (a recent phenomenon)
c) Others

*started to be used around 1974 and became widely used around 1978, especially among school girls (Yamane, 1986)
*considered not to have been created by an individual (It might have been created by an individual, but it is difficult to identify who s/he was.)

Since it became conspicuous in the writings of school girls, marumoji has often been discussed from a negative point of view, especially by educational authorities. It is not, of course, a standard form of writing in Japanese, and, not surprisingly, schools do not teach how to write it. However, it functions quite effectively and properly in particular contexts, namely, in personal letters, notes exchanged among school girls, etc.

In order to clarify its origin, Yamane (1986) examined the notebooks (a kind of visitors' confessional notebooks) which have been kept since 1966 in Jikishian, a temple in Kyoto. Most of the visitors to the temple, even today, are women. He surveyed 3,188 entries, 70.4% of which were determined to have been written by women. Between 1967 and 1973 marumoji did not appear in any entry. By 1977, only about 5% of the writings were marumoji-like characters. However, in 1978, the percentage rose to 13.2% and since then nearly 20% have been written in marumoji (Yamane, 1986:88).

Marumoji is widely used all over Japan. Yamane suggests two possible marumoji catalysts: characters called Nar-moji that were specially designed for popular fashion magazines and those characters that have lost their hane, or serifs, and are used on TV. The popular fashion magazines in which Nar-moji is used most often are an an and non-no. The readers of the magazines are called an-non-zoku (a group of people who carry the magazines and visit the places introduced in them). Jikishian is a site introduced by these magazines. According to Yamane, the percentages of Nar-moji used in an an from 1972 to 1974 are respectively: 1.4% in 1972, 11.3% in 1973, 22.8% in 1974, and 27.9% in 1975.
Characters used on TV had to be created within the confines of scanning lines. Because of the smaller number of scanning lines, Ming typeface characters were not suitable for TV, whereas the boldface ones, used back in 1954 by NHK, were. The boldtype, which is also called Gothic typeface, does not have triangular serifs at the ends of horizontal strokes, as the Ming type does, which is one of the characteristics of marumoji. It is difficult to prove that these two factors are major catalysts of widespread use of marumoji. Yamane hypothesizes that marumoji appeared on the basis of the following three conditions--rapid writing, horizontal writing, and the use of shapen (mechanical pencil). It is true that marumoji appear most frequently in horizontal writings. I have seen only one example of marumoji in vertical writing. It is easy to see how speed affects the shape of written characters. It is also reasonable to assume that writing becomes more rounded when it attempts to mimic actual speech, as can be seen in stenographic characters. The third factor is also seemingly appropriate because mechanical pencils can be moved more smoothly than other available writing utensils.

The marumoji writings are close to informal speech. Perhaps this close association provides some evidence for the origin of marumoji: as a desire arouse to write spoken forms, writers began to write more quickly, eventually employing the smooth point of the mechanical pencil to help them achieve this and finally resulting in the development of a kind of cursive style. These three conditions can be called facilitating factors. However, other than for such technical reasons, there are, I suppose, some other important factors for which marumoji has become very popular among members of a particular group and generation. People who use it seem to attribute some special positive reasons for using it.

When and Where do People Learn/Use it?

According to Yamane (1986), marumoji style came into use around 1974 and started to be used nationwide around 1978. In the mid-1980's, it was discussed in the media and the term marumoji became very popular, especially after Yamane's book was published