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

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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 nonliterates, 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, Ferdman (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.[1] Another person who stresses the importance of the level of the individual in literacy studies is Akinnaso. Akinnaso (1991:93) writes: "[i]t is not only the literate whose consciousness is impacted by

literacy. Nonliterates 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 [2] (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 characterstics 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.[3] 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

in 1986.   In his survey most of the subjects were junior high
school and high school students and female company workers.

   In order to know whether university students use marumoji and
what attitudes they have toward it, I gave a questionnaire to
sixty-two female freshman and sophomore studets at the university
at which I teach.   From the responses, I have selected those of
forty students who were and are able to use such writing style.
Those forty students, junior high school students six years ago,
can write both the standard type of writing and marumoji writing.
The following responses are those that were marked more than 95
percent.   Among them were:

   (1)subjects learned how to write marumoji through mimicking the
      characters when they saw them in letters or notes of their
      friends (But this does not always mean that they had
      practiced);
   (2)subjects did not remember how they started to use the style
      (They answered that they had started unconsciously to use
      it);
   (3)subjects do not use it in formal contexts such as in formal
      letters, school examinations, term papers, etc. (Only two
      out of those forty students answered that they sometimes
      used the style in their term papers and final examinations
      at the university. The rest of the students answered they
      never use the style on such occasions as examinations or
      letters to their superiors.).

Among the responses whose percentage is nearly 80 are:

   (4)marumoji appears "cute," "tender-hearted," and "close to the
      reader," which means marumoji evokes more intimate feelings
      for these subjects--be they readers or writers--than do
      non-marumoji writings (In other words, marumoji looks more
      personal; typeface gives a cold and "metalic" feelings.);
   (5)it is easy for subjects to express their true feelings
      through marumoji when they communicate with females of their
      generation;

(6)when subjects respond to letters written in marumoji, they
   also tend to respond using marumoji.

These responses seem to make it clear that they have not learned
how to write marumoji in a curriculum-driven way, rather they
seem to have been developing special feelings such as solidarity
among them. It also shows that they can code-switch according to
certain contexts. It is wellknown that particular "nonstandard"
speech can be used in order to convey solidarity among peers.
These responses show that, in writing, too, but not in its
structure or grammar or vocabulary, the writing style itself can
also function very effectively for conveying solidarity among
peers. As in speech, solidarity can be expressed in their own
vernacular. In the case of marumoji, it shows that it is
possible in writing, too.

   Other than solidarity, "sincereness" to the writer/reader
herself is worthy to be mentioned here. Eleven out of the forty
students make a diary, and they answered that marumoji seems to
be "sincere" to them. This seems reasonable because marumoji
writings well reflect their vernacular rather than the impersonal
formal voices which may be written in the standard style.
Needless to say, that standard writing is suitable and "sincere"
for other people.

How It Functions at the Social and Individual Levels

   The *Mainichi Shimbun*, June 28, 1984, reported that teachers at
Kanazawa Women's High School had advised students not to write
marumoji because the students would be handicapped when they
apply for a job. Another article, in the *Asahi Shimbun*, May 22,
1985, reported that the Ministry of Education had published
guidelines for the teaching of writing in school settings, which
recomended that teachers teach students the "standard" way of
writing. Despite such edicts, marumoji is still used widely,
especially by young women. According to a survey that was taken
at a junior high school in Kyoto, the same article reported that
nearly 72 percent of third-year female students used marumoji.

(It also stated that nearly 20 percent of thrid-year male
students also can write marumoji-like characters. However, I
have never seen the style among the writings of male university
students.) It can be said that marumoji has not been admitted as
the style to be used, at least, in formal settings. It can also
be said that the style has not been accepted as a "standard" form
of writtten Japanese by the authorities and by those who actually
use the style. At the social level, at least in school settings
and some "formal" contexts such as an office environment, then,
the style is not acceptable. But at a group or an individual
level, the style can function very effectively as the aforemen-
tioned discussion shows.

One of the definitions of literacy can be stated as follows:
"...literacy in a culture is fluency and knowledge of a whole
swirl of languages and knowledges--the ability to understand,
use, to function within a subgroup or sub-medium of
communication" (Browne and Neal, 1991:166). This type of
definition is based on the notion of so-called functional
literacy, which includes the possibility of not admitting
cultural relativism. The positive aspect of the literacy events
of marumoji writings, however, cannot be described from the point
of view of functional literacy. It has nothing to do directly
with fluency or knowledge of a language. There is no "authority"
to enforce the learning and writing of marumoji, no standardized
norm for using it, and no educational institution for teaching
it. It has nothing to do with whether she is fluent in standard
Japanese. So, for example, she will write her message freely
without taking care of the grammatical or orthographical mistakes
in her writings, even though she is not good at writing in
school. In the school setting, her mistakes may often be
corrected by her teacher, which will make her feel that she
cannot express herself in school writing. However, in personal
notes or letters, or confessional books*, she may be freed from
such anxiety. Even for the students who cannot write marumoji,
of course, she may be able to write freely using the ordinary
characters outside classroom settings. However, the difference
between the former marumoji writing and the latter with the

ordinary character writing outside classroom settings is that marumoji writing is "admitted" as an informal and special code for young women's writings, at least by those young girls who use it. This acknowledgment both by the users and by a group of people will facilitate the feeling of solidarity among them.

But some students at a women's university in Tokyo have a slightly different attitude toward the style. According to a questionnaire I gave to eighty freshman and sophomore students at Nihon Women's University, only three used the style even in their personal writings. I wondered why there were so few. The answer is that sixty-two students think that they are not good at writing marumoji, which means they cannot write it beautifully or artistically. They don't think that marumoji is a special means of communication in writing, rather it is only one variety of writing style for them, from which they can choose. For them, then, marumoji is not a means of having "dialogue" among peers.

Another interesting point is that marumoji is used by almost every member of a group if it is used conspicuously in a group. I asked the same subjects to recollect their junior high school and high school days. Among those eighty students, who are from seventeen high schools, twenty students who are from seven high schools answered that nobody seemed to use marumoji in their classes at that time, even though they knew what marumoji was. This seems to suggest that marumoji is strongly favored by a certain group of people, and its use is also facilitated by group solidarity.

They also answered that they never use marumoji when they write to a person whom they have never met or talked to. This phenomenon also seems to suggest that marumoji is code-switched just as speech is also code-switched in a similar way.

Marumoji is sometimes used in public contexts. Most of its use in advertisements suggests women's speech or is speech addressed to females. It is sometimes used in order to differentiate (men's and women's) speech from ordinary statements. In this case the speech can be either male or female. I hear some recent word-processors available in Japan can produce marumoji style in

their printers.   These phenomena seem to show that marumoji is beginning to be accepted in public contexts, too.

Implications for Literacy and Schooling

School is usually believed to be set up to transmit literacy skills.   This will inevitably lead to the notion that "...certifiable school success can become a definition of literacy" and "how deeply internalized school labelling can be" (Smith, 1985:8).   Smith (1985:7) writes: "...what may have been at first thought of as the presence or absence of a skill becomes a question of personal identity."   This is why nonstandard scripts are not admitted or accepted by school authorities. However, school girls who write marumoji can make sense of the world with it.

It is true that criticism of marumoji is not so strong as that directed at incorrect writing because the latter is taken as a token of the uneducated.   Marumoji is sometimes believed to be used by "uneducated" young girls, which is not true.   It should not be considered to be the writing of the uneducated simply because it is nonstandard.   Nonstandard and uneducated are not synonymous as far as marumoji is concerned.

We can elicit some clues on individual literacy from marumoji. The first one is that even nonstandard writings can be a suitable means of communication for an individual.   We can admit **"idioracy"** just as we admit idiolect.   Even errors from a standard point of view sometimes are not errors from an idioracy point of view.   Another point is that individual literacy can be possible not only through formal schooling.   Literacy acquired through formal schooling is admitted as the standard, and is accepted by the society at large.   But for some segments of society, such literacy is not "sincere" if they have not mastered it.   The third one has something to do with "goodness" of writing.   Many people seem forced to believe that they cannot write as "good" an essay as some famous writers.   But if we take the view that a good writing for an individual is one which is sincere and meaningful to him, it is theoretically possible for

every one of us to write something "good."

   In school, speech can always be speech to be corrected by teachers, because "standard" dialect is favored as a means of instruction. Any deviations from the standard can be expected to be immediately corrected. Anything written in school is something to be corrected by the teacher. But the students must be allowed to use their own mode of communication, one which can be employed without fear of being corrected. It must share some common aspects with their inner voice or idiolect. In public formal contexts, it is difficult to break the rule (Speak the standard in school!), as local dialects are often considered to have lower prestige in Japanese society. However with marumoji writing, the writer can use the form without fear of immediate correction. This is why acknowledging an individual idioracy in writing is very important in living a life.

NOTES

   1. The concepts of group and individual are basically opposed, particularly if an individual has counter feelings toward the group. But in the present context an individual is expected to have positive attitudes toward the group, and sometimes to try positively to converge himself to the group.
   2. It is also called *manga moji* or *hentai shoujo moji*. But the most popular term is *marumoji*.
   3. But this was written on special writing paper in which the writer could not help writing vertically.
   4. Such confessional books are usually kept in places such as sightseeing temples, one-night hotels, fortunetellers' offices, etc., where any visitor can read someone's writings and write one's own.

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