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Is Japanese a Polysystemic Language?**(The Problem of Chinese Loanwords within the Present-Day Japanese Grammatical Structure)**

Abstract

The problem of the so called words of Chinese origin (Sino-Japanese words, *kango* words) in modern Japanese is very well known and has been studied by many Japanese and foreign linguists. The synchronic status of these words within present-day Japanese, however, has not yet been determined from a general linguistic point of view, i.e. as a problem of linguistic structure. The manner how *kango* words occur in Japanese texts seems to indicate that they are more than mere lexical items since in many Japanese texts not only individual *kango* lexemes but also phrases and even sentence-like strings, consisting of *kango* only, may be frequently observed. The acceptable use of *kango* in Japanese requires a special *kango* grammatical competence, i.e. internalization of special Sino-Japanese grammatical rules. Consequently *kango* can be regarded as a distinctive subsystem of modern Japanese and Japanese itself can be considered a polysystemic language. This means that three types of sentences can be formed in this language: homogeneous ones, in either subsystem, or heterogeneous ones by both subsystems. It is the last type of sentence which is the most common. The mutual relation of both subsystems seems to be not equal, with the host (genuine) subsystem playing the role of supersystem. (Structure of the Japanese language. Chinese loanwords and their linguistic status. Sino-Japanese subgrammar of modern Japanese.)

It is a common opinion that Japanese is a "mixed" language since in addition to *wago* (genuine Japanese words) it possesses many *kango* and *gairaigo* (i.e. Sino-Japanese and foreign words).¹ Still it would be difficult to speak of the role of *kango* in modern Japanese without some preliminary terminological remarks.

¹ The first version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Japan, September 1983, which was organized by the Tokai University and Sheffield University in Sheffield, U. K. The present study forms a part of a larger study under preparation concerning the problem of co—and polysystemism in East Asian languages. In April 1983 at the AKSE Conference in Copenhagen I presented a similar paper concentrating on the same phenomena in modern Korean. The writer wishes to express his gratitude to Professors Adam Weinsberg and Wiesław Kotłowski of Warsaw University for their suggestions and comments.

It is not by accident that such an important linguistic term as *kango* is ambiguous in Japanese. It means either "Chinese (Sino-Japanese) word, (or words)" or "Chinese language". The fact that in most cases the former meaning rather than the latter is intended, does not eliminate the ambiguity.

The same situation can be observed with regard to the other basic term used in Japanese descriptions of the phenomena discussed below. This is the term *jukugo* which may denote any linguistic element consisting of several Chinese characters.² The question arises—are there not some underlying reasons in linguistic reality which account for this ambiguous character of both terms?

The presence of *kango* in Japanese is a well-known fact and has been described in many works by Japanese and foreign linguists.³ Still, one necessary and important thing is left to be done: the position of *kango* in modern Japanese should be examined from a general linguistic point of view, i.e. as a problem of linguistic structure as such.

In its scope such an investigation must be limited to the synchronic status of *kango* in Japanese, despite the inevitable use of such implicitly diachronic terms as *Sino-Japanese* or *genuine Japanese*. The synchronic character of the present study must be especially emphasized since in many definitions of *kango* we can find expressions like *Chūgokugo kara kita kotoba* "words that came from Chinese".

The second thing to be emphasized here is the distinction, not always respected in Japanese research, between the script and the language itself.⁴

Naturally we should be aware of the special and unique character of the relationship between *kanji* and *kanGO* but the present discussion will be centered on the linguistic side of the phenomena.

Finally, the writer feels forced to stress that many of his observations are already explicitly or implicitly included in available descriptions of Japanese.⁵ The present study is aimed at building up a unified hypothesis out of such isolated remarks.

Most previous studies have been limited to a lexicological point of view, i.e. the various Sino-Japanese words were treated as separate lexical items distinguished from other words only by purely lexical features.⁶ In many other descriptions of *kango* the problem has been treated from the standpoint of word-formation theory, highly

² As to the meaning of *jukugo* 熟語 see *Kokugo daijiten* 1981, p. 1235 and Tōdō 1978, pp. 252–261.

³ See Alpatov 1983, Tōdō 1969 and Yamada 1940. There is no need to recall here that the presence of *kango* which admittedly constitute a large part of the Japanese vocabulary is especially prominent in technical terminology, cf *kahen-mensekiyoku* 可變面積翼 "variable geometry (swing) wing" and so on.

⁴ See Yamada 1940, where the traditional classification of *kango*, based on the number of *kanji* within a word or a phrase, is applied.

⁵ See Alpatov 1983, who treats *kango* in a similar way i.e. as a subsystem of modern Japanese.

⁶ See Matsui 1982, Suzuki 1978, and Harada 1966 (pp. 143–148).

developed for classical and Slavonic languages.⁷ But application of the word-formative framework to the linguistic material in question has proved very difficult.

Some *kango* words are easily characterizable within this framework, for example *shōsetsuka* 小説家 “novelist”, consisting of the stem *shōsetsu* and the suffix *-ka* or

hijindōteki 非人道的 “inhuman”, consisting of the negative prefix *hi-*, the stem *jindō* and suffix *-teki*.

But in many cases one must acknowledge the existence of stemless compounds consisting only of bound morphemes, such as *gyorui* 魚類 “fishes”, *kaiyō* 海洋 “seas and oceans”, *kokunai* 国内 “in the country”, *bakkin* 罰金 “a fine (monetary)” and so on.

Moreover, the manner in which *kango* elements occur in Japanese usage seems to indicate that they are more than mere lexical items, whether motivated (semantically regular) as *jidōsha* 自動車 “automobile” or unmotivated, as *bungaku* 文学 “literature”.

And what is especially important, in various modern Japanese texts we can easily identify as their common constituents not only individual *kango* lexemes such as

cha 茶 “tea”

mon 門 “gate”

chōonsoku 超音速 “supersonic”

shinjisshōshugi 新實証主義 “neopositivism”

but also phrases like:

anzen-daiichi 安全第一 “safety first”

nichijō-sakanji 日常茶飯事 “an everyday occurrence”

geiin-bashoku 鯨飲馬食 “drink like a whale and eat like a horse”

isshin-ittai 一進一退 “now advancing and now retreating”

or even sentence-like items:

chūsha-kinshi 駐車禁止 “No parking”

honjitsu-kyūgyō 本日休業 “No business today”

shōben-muyō 小便無用 “Not a public convenience”

saikō-kimitsu, etsurango-shōkyaku (haki) 最高機密閱覽後燒却 (破棄) “Top secret, burn after reading”

raiNichi-kangei 來日歡迎 “Welcome to Japan”

What is most characteristic and important is that the *kango* morphemes and lexemes are clearly perceived by all native speakers as differing in character from the rest of the language, though not as non-Japanese. The feature to which this impression is due is not phonemic in nature, though there are many phonemic peculiarities in Sino-Japanese.

⁷ Cf. Nomura 1977.

First, the *kango* morphemes are mono- or bi-syllabic as contrasted to genuine Japanese, polysyllabic morphemes. Second, there are some well-known differences in phonemic and allophonic composition and combinability between the two classes of Japanese morphemes.⁸ All these phonemic differences, however, are not relevant to classify a given element as Sino- or genuine Japanese.

To see this one only needs to compare genuine Japanese *hai* 灰 “ashes” with Sino-Japanese *-hai-* 俳 “actor”, *ka* 蚊 “mosquito” with *-ka-* 可 “possible”, *seki* 関 “barrier” with *-seki-* 石 “stone” and so on.

Consequently it is its behaviour in linguistic performance which is decisive to the question of whether a morpheme such as *hai*, for example, belongs to one class rather than to the other.

The behaviour of the *kango* elements seems to be generated by a separate set of rules, which can be described as an autonomous Sino-Japanese subgrammar of present-day Japanese. This is why the acceptable use of any *kango* element within a Japanese text requires special *kango* (Sino-Japanese) grammatical competence. This means that the internalization of Sino-Japanese grammatical rules is included, as an additional subsystem in the grammatical competence of native Japanese speakers.

This is why the ambiguous character of the term *kango* was stressed at the beginning of this article. The term seems to be tacitly used in both meanings, because *kango* can be regarded as a kind of sublanguage embedded in a language. It has its own grammatical categories which sometimes have no counterparts within the genuine-Japanese subsystem. As examples of such categories we can list the following forms, differing from each other in stylistic value.

a) The prefix *ki-* 貴 is a marker of honorific use in the epistolary or diplomatic style. It combines freely with *kango* elements only. It is naturally, as most *kango* elements, of bound character and requires on its right side another bound *kango* element, this time with nominal function:

kikoku 貴国 “your country”

kisha 貴社 “your firm”

kika 貴家 “your home”

kitō 貴答 “your answer”

kisho 貴所 “your place”

kiran 貴覽 “your observation”

b) The prefix *hon-* 本 resembles functionally a demonstrative adjective and is used in the written official style of such texts as documents, diplomas, ceremonial addresses and the like:

hongoku 本国 “this country”

honkō 本校 “this school”

⁸ See Huszcza 1985a.

<i>hongetsu</i>	本月	"this month"
<i>honnen</i>	本年	"this year"
<i>hontō</i>	本島	"this island"
<i>honshi</i>	本紙	"this newspaper"
<i>honshō</i>	本章	"this chapter"
<i>honkō</i>	本稿	"this manuscript"
<i>honshi</i>	本誌	"this magazine"
<i>honten</i>	本店	"this store"

c) The grammatical category of number is very limited within the genuine Japanese subsystem and applies only to personal nouns and pronouns, while within the *kango* subsystem it can be ascribed to several clearly identifiable classes of expressions, for example compounds using *-rui* 類 such as:

<i>gyorui</i>	魚類	"fishes"
<i>chōrui</i>	鳥類	"birds"
<i>kairui</i>	貝類	"shellfish" ⁹
<i>chūrui</i>	虫類	"worms and insects"
<i>irui</i>	衣類	"clothing"
<i>shurui</i>	酒類	"alcoholic liquors"
<i>nikurui</i>	肉類	"meat"
<i>kinzokurui</i>	金屬類	"metals"
<i>shokuhinrui</i>	食品類	"food"
<i>kajitsurui</i>	果実類	"fruits"
<i>kagurui</i>	家具類	"furnishings"
<i>shokkirui</i>	食器類	"tablewares"
<i>keikirui</i>	計器類	"scales"

which can be interpreted as a kind of generic plural. Another class of a similar kind is formed by compounds such as:

<i>ganseki</i>	岩石	"rocks"
<i>kasen</i>	河川	"rivers"
<i>kaiyō</i>	海洋	"seas and oceans"
<i>gyūba</i>	牛馬	"cows and horses"

⁹ From the functional point of view there are in present-day Japanese two elements of the surface shape of *KAI*: one being included in the *wago* subvocabulary (cf. *kaihiro* 貝拾い or *yakigai* 焼き貝) and the other being a *kango*-like element (cf. *gyokairui* 魚貝類). And this is regardless of the fact that the so-called "on-yomi" of the character 貝 is *bai* which in turn seems to be an element of potential usage only.

jumoku 樹木 “trees”
koshō 湖沼 “lakes and marshes”
sōmoku 草木 “plants”
sangaku 山岳 “mountains”
sanryō 山陵 “mountains and hills”
sanga (sanka) 山河 “rivers and mountains”
san'ya 山野 “mountains and fields”
sansen 山川 “mountains and rivers”

Such meanings should be taken into account together with that of the well-known prefix *sho-* 諸 :

cf. *shokoku* 諸国 “countries”
shogei 諸芸 “arts”
shominzoku 諸民族 “nations”
shomondai 諸問題 “problems”

as sub-values of the category of number (varieties of the Plural).

d) Apart from this, some special verbal categories similar to aspect can be established here. This is the case of compounds with *mi-* 未 “not yet”, such as

miken 未見 “not yet seen”
michi 未知 “not yet known”
mitei 未定 “not yet decided”
mikan 未刊 “not yet published”
mihakkō 未発行 “not yet issued”
mihappyō 未発表 “not yet announced”
mikaiketsu 未解決 “not yet settled”

and so on.¹⁰

e) The prefix *sai-* 最 is often used in forming the superlative of adjectives:

saidai 最大 “the greatest”
saichō 最長 “the longest”
saikō 最高 “the highest”
sairyō 最良 “the best”
saitan 最短 “the shortest”

The examples listed above have been chosen at random as especially apparent and easy to recognize. It is possible, however, to indicate the whole fragments of grammar where the *kango* subsystem is used regularly. This happens in the case of numerals where the *kango* subsystem is not only separate from and parallel to the genuine-Japanese one., but also far more widely developed:

¹⁰ Cf. Martin 1975, p. 765.

cf. *dai-nijūrokkai* 第26回 “the twenty sixth”, *dai-jūyonkai* 第14回 “the fourteenth” (for counting meetings, congresses and so on) ¹¹

and

dai-sanjikka 第30課 “the thirtieth” (for counting lessons in textbooks).

Not all *kango* compounds are listed in dictionaries. This is so because in many cases they form an open set which can be considered to be generated by grammatical rules. Another reason is that *kango* compounds are frequently combined into sentence-like strings.

cf. *gishin-anki* 疑心暗鬼 “doubts gnaw at somebody”

ichiren-takushō 一連托生 “to be in the same boat”

shūshi-ikkan 終始一貫 “consequently”

muanda-mutokuten 無安打無得点 “no hit, no run (in baseball)”

fukusō-zui 服装隨意 “dress optional”

Many such expressions are idiomatic in character. But their constituents are combined according to Sino-Japanese grammatical rules and their decoding requires the use of such rules regardless of their idiomaticity.

The main point is that such sentences can be original and they are not only reproduced as standard idioms. Whenever necessary, a new text can be formed by the application of Sino-Japanese grammatical rules to Sino-Japanese morphemes. For example, in a book on the novelist *Akuta-gawa Ryunosuke* we find the following captions under pictures of the novelist:

Taishō-sannen-Teidai-zaigakuchū 大正3年帝大在学中 “The third year of Taisho, during his studies at the Imperial University”

or

Dōsa-kōenchū 同左講演中 “The same as in the left photo, during the same lecture”

In the same way a caption under the picture of a newly appointed ambassador of Japan to France can be formed as follows:

Chūfutsu-shinnin-Nihon-taishi 駐仏新任日本大使

If necessary, an advertisement can be formed with the use of the following string: *Chōrishi-boshū-keireki-nenrei-fumon-kōkyū-isai-mendan* 調理師募集経歴年齢不問 高給委細面談 “Cook wanted, experience not essential, no age limit, high salary, particulars to be arranged personally.”

Also as telegrams the following texts will be received with great pleasure, but without any surprise as to their forms:

¹¹ For the same functional reason as in the case of *kai* 貝 it would be better to interpret the allomorph *yon-* as a *kango* element than as a *wago* one. Cf. *daiyon* 第 4 vs. **daiyotsu*. We have to admit here some irregularities in the *kango* numerals, such as replacing *shichi* by *nana* and so on.

Danshi-shussei-bōshi-tomo-kenzen 男子出生母子共健全 “Son born, mother and baby well.”¹²

Shukusotsugyō 祝卒業 “Congratulations on your graduation!”

Shukudanshi-goshussan 祝男子御出產 “Congratulations on the birth of your son!”

Other examples could cause the recipient some anxiety:

Koshō-gen'in-fumei-shiji-kitai 故障原因不明指示期待 “Cause of damage unknown, waiting for instructions.”

Chōki-kenkyū-hitsuyō-taizai-enchō-kongan 長期研究必要滞在延長懇願 “Long-term study necessary, request extension.”

To give more examples: a trade union informing its members of the *shuntō* campaign results would probably use the following slogan:

Yōkyūgaku-daketsu 要求額妥結 “Salary demands fulfilled.”

or after winning a case at a court the success would be announced to members as follows:

Zenmen-shōso 全面勝訴 “Case won.”

Similarly, the label of a medicine bottle is likely to bear the following inscription:

Ichinichi-sankai-maishokugo-fukuyō 一日三回每食後服用 “To be taken three times a day after each meal.”

As can be seen this is a string of Sino-Japanese morphemes arranged according to Sino-Japanese subgrammar rules. At the same time it cannot be called into question that at least some of the above strings had never been produced before.¹³

As for the linguistic scope of such texts they are mainly used as slogans, legal formulas, directions for use, advertisements, map legends, questionnaires, traffic signals, column headings in tables, but despite these stylistic limitations the above mentioned facts show clearly that Sino-Japanese, or *kango*, should be described as a productive subsystem of present-day Japanese.

In the light of these facts it seems that a different view should be taken of the well-known difficulties of native Japanese speakers in accurately decoding a string of Chinese characters. Namely, in most cases these difficulties appear to be connected with the inability to correlate a given string with the proper subsystem. Consequently, the first question which every native speaker must ask himself is whether text T is homogeneous or mixed; if homogeneous it may be either in subsystem A, or in subsystem B.

A final problem connected with my topic is the practical question of transcribing *kango* strings with or without hyphens; as we have all experienced, the problem is

¹² The element *tomo* 共 “both” as contrasted to *tomo-ni* 共に seems to be a *kango*-like element being used in *kango* strings only. Cf *Fūfu-tomo-kenzai* 夫婦共健全 “Both husband and wife are well.”

¹³ Cf. Huszcza 1985b and 1986.

insoluble, which can hardly be explained except by the characteristic features of classical Chinese grammar, as having no clear-cut boundary between word-formation and syntax.

If the polysystemic character of modern Japanese is admitted, then the question arising is that of the relation between the two subsystems. Now one can imagine a polysystemic language structure consisting of two subvocabularies, A and B, (i.e. here *kango* and *wago*) and two subsets of rules, i.e. A rules and B rules. Most of the lexical entries in either subvocabulary have more or less accurate counterparts in the other. But in the case at issue this correspondence shows a rather high regularity, the elements being mutually transposable:

A		B	
-kai-	海	<i>umi</i>	"sea"
-koku-	国	<i>kuni</i>	"country"
-chō-	長	<i>naga-</i>	"long"
-shū-	集	<i>atsumar-</i> , <i>atsumer-</i>	"gather"
-shi-	子	<i>ko</i> , <i>kodomo</i>	"child"
-ka-	家	<i>ie</i> , <i>uchi</i>	"house"

and so on.

But this is not a correspondence between the Chinese character "readings" since it would be difficult to call in question the correspondence of the following pairs:

A		B
-sho-	書 "book"	<i>hon</i> 本 (here it belongs to <i>wago</i> !)
-sho-	書, -jō-	状 "letter" <i>tegami</i> 手紙
-go-	語 "language"	<i>kotoba</i> 言葉

There are also gaps in one subsystem or the other:

A		B
∅		<i>nio-</i> 匂 "smell"
∅		<i>hatake</i> 畑 "field"
∅		<i>nag-</i> 風 "calm, lull"
-i-	医 "medicine"	∅
-yō-	洋 "ocean"	∅
-ka-	課 "lesson"	∅

Sometimes individual lexical entries from subsystem A can be incorporated into B cf.:

A		B
-cha-	茶	<i>cha</i> "tea" (but not -sa-)
-bun-	文	<i>bun</i> "sentence"

The main difference between the two subvocabularies is the bound character of all A morphemes contrasting with the free character of most B elements.

Consequently in present-day Japanese, considered as a polysystemic language, three types of sentences can be formed:

- homogeneous, genuine Japanese alone
- homogeneous, Sino-Japanese alone
- heterogeneous, using both subsystems.

The heterogeneous type of sentences is the most common. An important feature here is the typological difference between the two subsystems: Sino-Japanese is analytic and isolating, the genuine Japanese—synthetic and agglutinative.

For this reason the combination of the two subsystems in one sentence is very complicated, but there are, in Japanese, functional elements which serve as connectors, such as

- suru* cf. *senshin-banku-suru* 千辛万苦する “to experience hardships”
hyappatsu-hyakuchū-suru 百発百中する “never fail”
- naru* cf. *koritsu-muen-ni naru* 孤立無援になる “to stand alone against”
tokui-manmen-ni naru 得意満面になる “to strut like a peacock”
- no* cf. *kokuseki-fumei-no hikōki* 国籍不明の飛行機 “an unidentified airplane”
senzai-ichigū-no kikai 千載一遇の機会 “a one-in-a-million chance”
- de aru* cf. *sensa-banbetsu-de aru* 千差万別である “be of various kinds”
shinshutsu-kibotsu-de aru 神出鬼没である “appear in unexpected places”

and some others. These connectors also carry grammatical categories which are absent in Sino-Japanese, but must be indicated in any Japanese text, such as tense and so on.

In the language of which we are speaking texts can be formed in subsystem A, as for example:

dokusho 読書

and

raiNichi 来日

or in subsystem B:

hon-o yomu 本を読む

and

Nihon-ni kuru 日本に来る

and they are mutually transposable. Still, in the language which we are now describing there are also rules which are superordinate to both subsystems. Elements of subsystem A are combined in a text with elements of subsystem B by the use of special connectors: this is, as we have shown above, the task of such elements as *-suru* and so on. What should be stressed is that these overall grammatical rules are the only rules which apply in subsystem B. In concrete terms, the grammatical rules of genuine Japanese prove to be identical with those of the supersystem.

Finally one must be aware of the fact that there are three theoretically possible ways of incorporating *kango* into a description of present-day Japanese structure. Two of these ways would be of a rather extreme character.

The first would consist of treating *kango* not as Japanese but as classical Chinese and in stating that native speakers of Japanese are bilingual and form texts by constantly interweaving two different linguistic systems. But such an interpretation ignores the fact that no native speaker of Japanese believes *kango* to be non-Japanese, and that its phonemic structure, as stated above, is truly Japanese.

The second possibility, which appears to be as extreme as the first, is to affirm that *kango* is simply a set of loanwords and loan phrases within the Japanese vocabulary i.e. a purely lexical phenomenon. This interpretation in its turn neglects the above illustrated fact that Sino-Japanese is visibly productive according to its own grammatical rules.

Compared to the above two, the third possibility of interpretation, presented in this article, seems to be more adequate and to reflect Japanese linguistic reality more accurately.

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