

REMARKS ON THE SPECIFICITY OF JAPANESE CULTURE*

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These remarks were inspired by Shuichi Kato's impressive "History of Japanese Literature", available to me in a German edition (Kato 1990). In a way, his book is atypical because the author has transcended the framework of a routine history of national literature and actually tried to sketch a philosophical evaluation of Japanese culture, including language. Kato justifies this step by the central role of literature in Japanese culture as a whole, stating that in Japan the history of literature represents (at least to a considerable extent) the history of thought and sentiment (Kato 1990: 13).

Kato's approach is implicitly confrontational since other cultures, namely Chinese and European, are at least briefly considered and characterized where necessary. In accordance with most Japanese scholars, Kato emphasises a few traits as both distinctive and salient for understanding the spirit of Japanese civilization. They are Japan's extraordinarily strong consciousness of cultural identity based on historical continuity, loyalty to tradition and the tendency of focusing on a non-systematic, emotional, situational and matter-of-fact world view (no doubt in accordance with the spirit of collective solidarity and, on the other hand, with an obvious predilection for detail). Japanese culture is viewed by Kato as being closely linked to the reality of life and evading metaphysical speculations – unlike European culture, both ancient and mediaeval, that has produced a plethora of abstract philosophical systems. Perhaps this is due to the integrating role and to the absolute, universal nature of religion in Europe. Japanese religion, on the other hand, has lacked such properties, which supported acceptance and an extensive, seemingly mechanical cumulation of ideas and innovations without feeling the need to reject traditional heritage.

One should avoid thinking that the Japanese culture is radically different from either European or Chinese culture in this respect. Some scholars have warned against such rash conclusions (cf. Dumoulin 1980: 79). Adherence to tradition and the need for innovation are two ubiquitous complementary properties, only their proportion may be different. Another pair of opposites relevant for the characteristic of a culture is that of individualism and collectivism. No society can be

* This paper was supported by Grant agency: grant No. 999 351.

defined as purely individualistic or collectivistic. We always have to put up with some compromise of the two complementary values. In comparison with Western societies, Japan is notable for a lower level of individualism. Testimony to a subdued individual identity may be found in language. For example, personal pronouns are context- and situation-bound (*boku* – *ware* – *ore* – *atashi* – *watashi* – *watakushi* etc. all meaning I, me) and changing one's name was not unusual in Japan in the past just as e.g. in Oceania and elsewhere. The example of the apostle Paul proves that such a change of identity is not completely unknown within the realm of our civilization either. According to E.S. Shteyn, the so-called contextual personality must not be mistaken for an absence of self-consciousness or for a kind of "inhumanity" of culture but may be interpreted as a guarantee of excessive social integration (Shteyn 1990: 188).

It would be naive to believe that the "cumulative proclivity" of the Japanese is a manifestation of their inability to discern the essence of imported novelties. Rather the contrary, it proves their pragmatic and common-sense attitude to the surrounding world as well as their commendable determination to preserve their spiritual identity in the ever changing world and their firm intention to enrich it with useful and desirable novelties.

The continuity of literary creation in Japan is admirable. Tanka, known since 8th century A.D. as a typical representative of Japanese poetry, is still the most important lyrical form, and haiku, dating from the 17th century, is also as vigorous as ever. And this despite the introduction of free verse in the 20th century. Analogous continuity is typical for theatre and for aesthetic standards. The so-called cumulative development pattern underlines the homogeneity and historical coherence of Japanese literature, despite the incessant flood of novelties. In Japan, the old is not wiped away by the new. Instead, everything useful is saved and accumulated. The same pattern can be observed in everyday life. Marked conservatism coexists with interest in innovations.

The same attitude is observable in the field of language. From the 5th century A.D. on, the Japanese have employed Chinese characters. They have assigned them both their (approximate) Chinese readings and to some extent also their Japanese lexical equivalents together with their Japanese readings. Although a very simple syllabic script, *kana*, appeared in the Heian era, the Japanese were not willing to give up the characters and their complex writing system may be characterized as a combination of Chinese characters with syllabic graphemes reserved for the grammatical markers. However, Chinese continued to be employed, alongside Japanese, as a medium of fiction and poetry. This usage continued right into the 20th century. After the Meiji revolution, the extensive inventory of domesticated Chinese borrowings became the source of thousands of Sino-Japanese compounds. They helped the language to cope with the necessity of absorbing the impact of Western civilization in a relatively brief period. And the "awkward" and complicated writing, source of so many problems, supplied

a stimulus for the invention of such useful devices as word processors and telefaxes.

But let us turn to some specific features of the language that are parallel to those observed in literature. According to Kato, the Japanese sentence is closely linked to the particular situation in which the partners communicate. Keen attention is paid to the status and age of the partners, and a highly elaborate and diversified courtesy style has developed. Another peculiarity of Japanese is the frequent ellipsis of any explicit reference to the speaker or even to the listener unless it is an absolute necessity to mention them. This is no purely formal feature of the language but rather a manifestation of communicative vagueness as a cultural feature. This vagueness is related with the urge to subdue the role of ego in contact with other people and to make communication socially as smooth as possible.

Both the complexities of courtesy and the omission of sentence subjects are deeply rooted in the philosophy of social life of Japanese communities. The scope of mediaeval society was rather closed, people tended to communicate within a fairly narrow circle of persons, persons who knew each other, had no problem choosing the proper level of courtesy, and an extensive stock of shared information rendered their speech heavily context- or situation-dependent. That is why the Japanese avoid superfluous verbalism as undesirable and regard nonverbal communication as an ideal that deserves to be aimed at. In our modern era, many more strangers can and must communicate, and in such a situation one would expect that the courtesy style may gradually undergo simplification, which is actually taking place with the young generation nowadays.

Another linguistic issue of philosophical relevance is word order. Canonical rules of sentence structure require that the verbal predicate occupies the last position within the sentence and is immediately preceded by the direct object. From the point of view of the functional sentence perspective, the predicate (or, to be more precise, the rheme) represents new information while old information (the theme of the utterance) occupies the initial position in the sentence. In most European languages, the object follows its predicate and this would seem to be a more natural position for it, not only because the verbal predicate is a kind of link between the agent of the action and its patient but also because it is usually the object that displays the highest measure of novelty within the sentence. I am, however, not sure, that the Japanese sentence advances from what is singular to what is general as Kato maintains (Kato 1990: 19); these ideas come from another conceptual domain. If there is any advance, it is one from what is familiar to what is new, for this is in accordance with the rules of communication as an exchange of information. Perhaps Kato meant to allude to another putative feature of Japanese thought, i.e. a dislike for any large-scale arrangement or organization of space. This dislike is manifested, according to Kato (Kato 1990: 19), in such divergent fields as no doubt architecture and fiction are. The famous and volu-

minous *Story of Prince Genji*, although not lacking an overall conception, presents the individual episodes as more or less interesting in themselves, independently of the whole. *Konjaku monogatari* is rather a collection of short legends and anecdotes and *Utsubo monogatari* also displays just a minimum of internal coherence (Kato 1990: 19).

The same property seems to be characteristic of modern fiction as well. For example, Yasunari Kawabata's novel *Yama no oto* (The Voice of the Mountain) is lacking the typical structure of European novel; there is no gradual escalation of tension steering toward the final resolution of the conflict. Instead, the reader has to deal with a sequence of events, sometimes just with a mosaic of episodes organized along different lines, perhaps in accordance with the philosophy of letting things happen naturally, as they will, one after another, with vigor, as expressed in the *Kojiki*, the Bible of shintoism and Japanese ethics.

This so-called principle of letting things take their course (Masuda 1992: 94) implies another precept, i.e., that of suppressing ego. Perhaps this is why the speaker prefers expressing his views and wishes in a vague or indirect manner, so as to grant the listener a greater degree of freedom to interpret and decide; perhaps this is why the writer does not feel like imposing too definite a conceptual construction upon his readers so that they can draw their own conclusions when reading. In both instances we have to deal with an attempt to minimize the contrast in the degree of activity displayed by the active and the passive participants of the communication. All this takes place in full harmony with the spirit of collectivism. In personal communication the mood of harmony can best be achieved with the aid of a language that prefers a vague manner of speaking, abounding in hints and allusions. The communicants avoid establishing direct links between phenomena because this manner does not oblige them to anything they would not be willing to accept (Neverov 1982: 76-77).

The Japanese enjoy conforming to public opinion. There is a definite feeling against upstarts and "overt and covert forces go to work to ostracize those members" in Japanese society (Masuda 1992: 83). And if the society does not appreciate those who stand out, one cannot be surprised by the statement that "the Japanese may be weak in developing original basic theory of epoch-making inventions by themselves, but when it comes to the refinement of existing techniques, they cooperate to produce first-rate technology through the cumulative process of making small improvements on a trial-and-error basis" (Masuda 1992: 54).

It is hard to agree with the view stated in the publication of the Masuda Foundation team that Japan already has its own scientific logic, highly analog in nature, while Western scientific logic relies on digital-type thinking. The Europeans are blamed for their reductionism while Japanese science, even if dividing the objects, does not always clearly define the borders between things, but rather, sets the borders in such a way as to divide things at an appropriate point (Masuda

1990: 55–56). Another surprising and disturbing allusion is that these desirable features are inherent not only in Japanese but also in Oriental science (sic) in general. Are these hints timid symptoms of the revival of Pan-Asianism or of a feeling of superiority? Japanese science may well be oriented towards analog thinking, multilateral classification, and modal logic but this is not in contrast to the “digital thinking, tree classification, and determinist logic of the West”. Both types of thought have been pursued in the West and not as a result of Japanese impact. No scientific cognition, neither in Europe nor in Japan, is possible without discretization of the surrounding reality and the next phase relies on the synthesis which is inevitably subjective, just as the analysis preceding it. This is due to the restricted capacity of the human (not only Western but also Japanese) brain vis-à-vis continuous and inexhaustible reality. The opposition of Western “digital” thought and Japanese “analog” thought belongs to the realm of myths, just as the hypothesis that the Japanese language is unique and completely inaccessible to other people and that the Japanese have different (and implicit more perfect) brains than the rest of mankind. Such a surprising hypothesis was namely postulated by the otorhinolaryngologist Tadanobu Tsunoda (Tsunoda 1978). In his book, Tsunoda assumed that the peculiarities of Japanese culture and language are due to the structure of their brains and therefore foreigners are unable to fathom the depths of Japanese music, language, and culture in general. And familiarity with other languages may even deprive the Japanese of their unique faculties (Tsunoda 1978: 23, 90–107).

Subsequent experiments have not confirmed Tsunoda’s hypothesis and V.M. Alpatov (Alpatov 1988), and R.A. Miller (Miller 1982), believe that this idea belongs to the realm of ideology, not science. It can be viewed as an attempt to support the idea of the uniqueness of the Japanese people among the peoples of the world, if not an overture to the revival of the idea of Asianism (cf. Takeuchi 1992).

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