

Performative Power of Language: Japanese and Swearing

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Abstract

Swearing in early modern England was described as “performative language.” Since Japanese is a “swearless” language, this performative power makes Japanese people develop an extreme degree of verbal caution. This verbal nervousness in performative situations comes from the Japanese belief in kotodama, an idea that language directly influences reality. This belief affects the actions and lives of Japanese and their relationships with neighbors. Examples of the influence of kotodama on Japanese language use include the avoidance of English use during the war (giving power to the enemy), rewording of historical realities which angered Japan’s neighbors, difficulties of mentioning names and classical Japanese dance-drama, kabuki. All incidents which are affected by kotodama involve a deception or a covering-up. Kotodama dominates Japanese people and it can give them a strong desire to avert the truth.

Key Words: Japanese, performative language, swearing

Introduction

English swearwords have been growing with the times and they have so many varieties now. Swearing has come to be commonly accepted; it’s a social phenomenon in English speaking countries. However, there are some languages which don’t have swearwords. Montagu (1967) says “Swearing, interestingly enough, is not a universal phenomenon: American Indians do not swear, nor do the Japanese, nor do Malaysians and most Polynesians” (55).

As a matter of fact, there are some swearwords in Japanese like “*chikusho*” (animal, beast) or “*kuso*” (shit), however there are hardly anywhere near as many as the English ones, so that Japanese has been deemed an officially “swearless” language. In a previous paper I focused on how Japanese translators dealt with foreign novels full of swearing. I examined two translations of J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* separated by four decades. I found that even though the translators—one the famous novelist Haruki Murakami—employed different strategies, both managed the task of the purpose of the swearwords.

My present study attempts to go deeper into the nature of swearing itself. According to Mohr (2003), swearing in early modern England was described as “performative language.” As we all can imagine, swearing around that time didn’t mean the rude or offensive language people now use when they get angry. Rather, it involved swearing in the original meaning of the word, in which an oath, a solemn vow is directed towards God, a kind of opening up of “sacred space.” Mohr defines performative language as “language that itself does something or forces its readers or hearers to act in certain ways” (3). It “compels God to act as a witness and judge of the swearer’s words.” How about Japanese? Does the small amount of swearing available in Japanese function as such performative language? In this paper, I will focus on such performative language, describing its nature and aspects and what kind of effect it has on Japanese society.

Performative power

Coulthard (1977) explains the performative act by using the idea of J. L. Austin. Coulthard gives 3 example sentences of performative language as follow:

‘I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*’ – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stern.

‘I do’ (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife) – as uttered in the course of marriage ceremony.

‘I give and bequeath my watch to my brother’ – as occurring in a will. (13)

The first one would be uttered at the launching ceremony for a vessel. We hear the second one ‘I do’ at the wedding. The third one is the act of bequeathing. I’ll look at the most familiar one, wedding vows. The bride and groom make God to be the witness of their marriage by saying ‘I do.’ Motohiko Izawa, the author of *Kotodama*, examines the differences between Christian wedding and Japanese Shinto wedding.

Do Japanese wedding vows work as performative language just like Christian ones do? The vows the Japanese Shinto wedding priests deliver are called *norito*. What does *norito* mean? Josef M. Kitagawa explains the meaning of the words by quoting from Felicia Bock,

The first part, *nori* is the conjunctive stem of the verb *noru* – to tell, recite, command (superior to inferior), reveal (as the divine will), decree – and the second part is *to*, a noun. *To* has been taken by some scholars of the past to stand for *koto*, but that would be redundant in this case. The theory of modern scholars... is that *to* means a spell or magical device. Thus the compound *norito* would mean the chanting or reciting of the spell. The combined form of *norito-koto* is “words for reciting a spell”. She also points out that:

Cognates of *noru* are: *inoru*, to pray; *nori*, law, rule; *norou*, to curse, to imprecate; *noroi*, a curse, a meladiction; *noburu* or *noburu*, to tell, express, relate, narrate, state; *notama(fu)*, to speak, to tell (superior to inferior) Cognates of the archaic word *to*, a spell, are; *tona(fu)*, to make sounds, and the verb *tonaeru*, to name or call. (xxiv - xxv)

When Shinto priests perform religious rituals, they recite *norito*. It's a collection of expressions from the above-mentioned “words for reciting a spell”. The direction of the language is from God (superior) to people (inferior). The following quotations are the oath at the Christian wedding followed by the *norito* Izawa gives.

Oath at the Christian church:

Do you, (name), accept in Holy Matrimony this woman (man) for better or for worse, in sickness or in health until death do you part? (255)

Norito at the Shinto wedding:

I humbly speak before you. Today, on this fulfilled lively day, offering rice, sake and variety of food, with great music and dance, name and name are here to hold the beautiful wedding solemnly with matchmaker, name. The marriage vows will not change eternally, these two will care and help each other and their respective families to flourish and enjoy prosperity now and in future generations. (163-165).

Izawa points out that even though the oath at the Christian wedding include both good things (better, health) and bad things (worse, sickness) which comprise a reasonable estimate of the actuality of a person's life; *norito*, on the other hand, includes only positive words. It is because of the idea of *kotodama*. Michio Ono, the author of *Norito Nyumon* (An introduction to *Norito*) explains, “In ancient times, people believed that language has a spiritual power and its work is miraculous. This is what we call the belief in *Kotodama*.”

If someone says a benediction, happiness will come, but if they say should curses, they will come to grief (12).” *Norito* is based on the idea of this *kotodama*. Izawa says the belief in *kotodama*, an extreme cautiousness towards language, dominates the behavior of Japanese people.

A literal translation of *kotodama* is “the spirit of language.” Izawa defines *kotodama* as “the synchronicity of language and its entity (which is to say) actualizing the substance of the words by voicing them (12).” For example, if someone says it'll be raining tomorrow, it will actually happen. The act of voicing the words is called *kotoage*. We can see this *kotoage* act in a lot of situations in Japan, wedding vows for instance. I'll examine some of the examples Izawa gives and see how they affect people.

Method

Library research is used as the method to find many sources relate to the analysis. Besides, descriptive qualitative is a method as the focus analysis, because descriptive means involves collection or technique used to specify delineate or in another meaning, qualitative analysis, that it is an emphasize on process and meaning that are not rigorously examined or measured, in terms quality, amount, intensity or frequency. Qualitative research stresses on the social constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape such iniquity. Such researcher emphasizes the value of laden nature of inquiry. They had seen answers to question that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. (Norman, 1994:4)

This paper elaborates the Swearing in early modern England which was described as “performative language.” Since Japanese is a “swearless” language, this performative power makes Japanese people develop an extreme degree of verbal caution. This verbal nervousness in performative situations comes from the Japanese belief in *kotodama*, an idea that language directly influences reality. This belief affects the actions and lives of Japanese and their relationships with neighbors. Besides, this paper also explores the entire thing that could influence the performative language situation.

Discussion

3.1 *Kotoba-gari* (word-hunting)

During World War II, *kotoba-gari* (eradicating language) was used for English loanwords in Japanese. People thought using English is the act of *kotoage*. Izawa explains the reason as follows:

This is what the Japanese army must have thought. “English is the language of our enemy. Using the language of the enemy (performing *kotoage*) means making the power of *kotodama* which belongs to our enemy more powerful. It’ll benefit them, so we won’t let anyone use it. That will lead us to the victory by doing so.” (35)

This idea of *kotoba-gari* affected baseball in Japan from 1943 – 1945. All the baseball terms like “strike”, “ball”, “safe” or “out” were translated into Japanese. Strike, for instance, is “*sei-kyu*”(right ball) and ball is “*aku-kyu*”(wrong/bad ball). *Kotoba-gari* affected not only baseball, but also other things, for instance, the names of magazines or food. The following table 1 is a list of those words.

	Original (English)	translated version
Sports	<i>ragubii</i> (rugby) <i>sakka</i> (soccer) <i>gorufu</i> (golf)	闘球 <i>tokyu</i> (fighting ball) 蹴球 <i>shukyu</i> (kicking ball) 芝球 <i>shikyu</i> (lawn ball)
Food	<i>saida</i> (cider) <i>furai</i> (deep-fried food) <i>kare raisu</i> (curry rice)	噴出水 <i>funshussui</i> (spouting water) 洋天 <i>yoten</i> (western tempura) 辛味入汁掛飯 <i>karamiiri shirukake meshi</i> (spicy sauce on the rice)
Pencils	<i>eichi bi</i> (HB-hard black) <i>eichi</i> (H-hard) <i>bi</i> (B-black)	中庸 <i>Chuyou</i> (medium) 硬 <i>Kou</i> (hard) 軟 <i>Nan</i> (soft)
Broad-Casting & Music	<i>maikurofon</i> (microphone) <i>anaunsaa</i> (announcer) <i>rekoodo</i> (record)	送話機 <i>sowaki</i> (transmitter) 放送員 <i>hosoin</i> (broadcaster) 音盤 <i>onban</i> (music disk)
Magazines	<i>Kingu</i> (king) <i>Yumoa-kurabu</i> (humor club) <i>Keizai magajin</i> (economy magazine)	富士 <i>Fuji</i> 明朗 <i>Meiro</i> (bright, cheerful) 經濟日本 <i>Keizai Nippon</i> (economy Japan)
Tobacco	<i>Goruden batto</i> (golden bat) <i>Cheri</i> (cherry) <i>Kameria</i> (camellia)	金鷄 <i>Kinshi</i> (golden kite) 桜 <i>Sakura</i> (cherry) 椿 <i>Tsubaki</i> (camellia)

Table 1. Translated words list

3.2 *Iikae* (rewording)

According to Izawa, *iikae* (rewording) often occurs in Japan. He explains as follows:

Japanese people who are under the control of *kotodama* believe in a correlation between words and the entity the words refer to. When they experience some difficulties or inconvenience in reforming the entity, they rephrase the words instead just as if they were reorganizing the actual entity. They are gratified by doing so. It’s their bad habit. In other words, they deceive people by fiddling with words. (70-71)

We can see plenty of examples of this *iikae* when we look at Japanese history. The following table 2 is a list of the *iikae* examples Izawa gives.

Original	reworded version
値上 <i>neage</i> (raising the price)	改定 <i>kaitei</i> (revision)
全滅 <i>zenmetsu</i> (annihilation)	玉碎 <i>gyokusai</i> (an honorable death)
敗戦 <i>haisen</i> (defeat, a lost battle)	終戦 <i>shusen</i> (the end of the war)
侵略 <i>shinryaku</i> (invasion)	進出 <i>shinshutsu</i> (advance) 事変 <i>jihen</i> (an incident) 入り <i>iri</i> (entering)

Table 2. *Iikae* words list

He said this rewording act is a kind of deception. Reworded ones sound better than the original; however it doesn't mean the entities referred to become any better. Even though the entities haven't changed a bit, the rewording makes people think they have. This *iikae* can cause the problems between Japan and neighbors. Rewording *shinryaku* (invasion) to *shinshutsu* (advance) created a considerable stir. In 1982, the Japanese Ministry of Education approved history textbooks which included the revision from *shinryaku* to *shinshutsu* about the invasion of China. China protested to the Japanese government about it. Keiji Nagahara (2001) says "Even though the recognition of their war of aggression by the Japanese could have provided an opportunity for amicable relations with Asian countries like China or Korea, the Ministry of Education itself didn't let the publisher recognize the historical reality of invasion with *shinryaku*. The Ministry also made them revise their reference to the resistance movement of Koreans under Japanese colonization to *boudo* (riot) (19)." The belief in *kotodama* affects not only Japanese, but also Japan's neighbors.

3.3 Names

Izawa says that there is another effect of *kotodama* in *Manyoshu*, the earliest extant anthology of Japanese verse. He names the first poem as an example. It was composed by Emperor Yuryaku.

#1

Girl with your basket,
with your pretty basket,
with your shovel,
with your pretty shovel,
gathering shoots on the hillside here,
I want to ask your home.
Tell me your name!
This land of Yamato,
seen by the gods on high-
it is all my realm,
in all of it I am supreme.
I will tell you
my home and my name. (translated by Hideo Levy, 2004)

This is a courtship poem from the Emperor to a girl. Asking her name doesn't seem such a great deal to us; however the Emperor takes it so seriously. Izawa explains the reason as follow;

In the world of *kotodama*, knowing somebody's name means to dominate that person.... Her name (word) and the entity which is represented by that name (herself) are inseparable. *Kotodama* unites the words and the entity they refer to. (59)

He also said "Her name means her everything. It is not just a word, it is she herself"(279). There are more poems about not revealing the name of someone important.

#590

Aratamano Toshinohenureba Imashihato Yumeyowagaseko Wagananorasuna
(We have been together quite a while; however please don't tell anybody my name.)

#2947

Omounishi Amarinishikaba Subewonami Warehaiiteki Imubekimonowo
(I couldn't help myself in letting her name fall from my lips because I miss her so much, I knew I shouldn't.)

The two poems above show us how people felt about the importance of names. People could not use names most of the times, therefore everyone had by-names. Nowadays Japanese can only have one given name and one family name; however calling someone by their given name is still awkward. People usually use family names or the name of the social roles like job titles. There is a trace of *kotodama* even now in how Japanese feel about name.

3.4 Kabuki

The examples Izawa gives above, *kotoba-gari*, *iikae* and names have something in common. All of them involve a deception or a covering-up. Loanwords (originals) need to be translated into a constrained Japanese because of *kotoba-gari*. Many historical incidents were concealed by *iikae*. People had to use by-names instead of real names. This veil over the truth was also drawn over Kabuki, the highly stylised classical Japanese dance-drama. In the Meiji era, the government started interfering with Kabuki. Tetsuya Imao, the author of *The History of Kabuki*, claims the government requested two things of Kabuki authors/actors.

1. Do not perform anything shameful for parents and children to watch together. Do not create anything which might cause a wanton relationship between a man and a woman because people from the upper class or foreigners might see the play from now on.
2. The original purpose of drama is to encourage doing good and punish wrongs. Made-up stories should be abolished from now on. In some Kabuki plays, the character's real historical name has been changed intentionally, for instance, Nobunaga Oda is Harunaga Oda. In this case, children might remember the wrong historical fact because of it. Do not perform anything against the truth (156).

Imao explains the difficulties of those requests, especially the second one. He says "Since the seventeenth century, Kabuki has respected the value of fabrication.... That is the right course of Kabuki and actual state of Kyogen-kigo. Abolishing it meant to deny that value of the artistic fabrication Kabuki has developed"(158). Actually, one of the Kabuki actors, the ninth Danjuro Ichikawa had experimented with an idea similar to the government's over an extended period of time. He started changing the names back, using real costumes, rearranging the lines they delivered and eliminating the use of make-up. However, most people turned their backs on him even though his artistic talent had been highly estimated. He started thinking back to the original idea, "unnaturalness is the taste of Kabuki"(168-169). People didn't expect anyone to pursue the truth in Kabuki.

Conclusion

All the phenomena described above, *norito*, *kotoba-gari*, *iikae*, the names in *Manyoshu* and kabuki are under the influence of *kotodama*, an idea that language directly influences reality. They are the results of a nervousness in performative situations. People believe in the performative power of *kotodama*, so it made them develop an extreme degree of verbal caution; people could not speak the truth. Mohr talks about speaking the truth in the Christian world as follows;

A simple "yes" or "no" should, ideally, carry as much weight as an oath, should be able to secure the truth and serve as a pledge for future actions.... obscene words like "fuck," and "cunt" come to fill the role of Christ's "yes" and "no." Both kinds of words speak the truth – "yes" and "fuck" are the simplest and most direct words for certain things. (225)

What Mohr suggests to us is that sacred space is opened up by words which express the unadorned truth. In this sense, "fuck" functions in the same direction as Christ's words. So-called "bad words" can be an indication of being honest and straight out. Mohr says, "what is true is what is naked, without disguise, fully open to the eyes and understandings of viewers or reader. This openness is a key characteristic of obscene language (223).

Japanese is known for its paucity of any swearwords like fuck or cunt, a phenomenon I have been analyzing for nearly ten years. My current research makes me wonder, as documented above, whether the very fear of naked verbal truth might not be one reason for the absence of swearwords in Japanese.

It is difficult for Japanese to be fully open to the truth if they cannot be liberated from their belief in the power of *kotodama*.

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