Nicoletta Spadavecchia

THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE IN THE PROCESS OF SOCIO-POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN MODERN JAPAN

It is a wide-spread notion and a well-known fact that today Japan is to be counted among the countries which are industrially most advanced. But the why and how of this remain, often and unfortunately, a total mystery.

The lack of an adequate answer on the part of the Western world to the many questions about the "Japanese phenomenon" has caused, and still causes, huge, and at times irretrievable, errors of appraisal. Such errors may be a threat to the relations of the Western world with the nation with which we are dealing.

Nowadays the fear of such a danger is often and deeply felt by the economic and political world of Japan, which realizes the need, on the part of the Western countries, of a deep investigation into the contemporary realities of its own country, in the light of its cultural and social evolution. In 1868 the emperor Meiji issued the "Oath of the Chart" (Go-kajō no Seimon) in 5 articles, in which he stated: "Let the customs of the past be abolished....Let knowledge be searched in every part of the world" (1) -today's Japan appears to encourage the West to do the same towards itself.

The linguistic dimension is a clear witness to the real differences in culture between Japan and the West. When studying Japanese civilization, one feels the immediate necessity to carry out, on parallel lines, a cultural as well as a linguistic research, where the language works as a steady practical support to the progression of the investigation itself.

The Japanese vocabulary, the structure of its sentences, its ideograms and phonetic writing (2) are objective obstacles to communicating easily with the world of that country. In fact, they hide an even more relevant reality -that is, the different mental and
spiritual moulding of its people.

One should not underrate nor forget that, since the dawn of its civilization, Japan learnt to fight the battle of the islander who must keep his independence, while at the same time retaining close ties with the outside world. The continuous manoeuvring between this double, equally vital, necessity has forever formed the mainspring of the Japanese historical, social and cultural process, thus giving rise to the extremely interesting phenomenon of adjusting foreign elements to their own ways of being, of living, of thinking, of behaving. The geographical areas which have culturally influenced Japan in a direct, predominant way are China and the West. The former has exerted its influence, at alternate periods, during the whole of Japanese history. The latter affected Japan for the first time around the middle of the XVI century, through the colonization by the European powers, and then again from the end of the XIX century up to now, through the relations with Europe and with the United States of America.

The aim of this paper is, to analyse some of the phenomena of cultural and linguistic interaction belonging to this latest period. Before studying these, however, it is essential to mention the most obvious results of both the Chinese and the European influences during the earlier stages of cultural interaction.

As far as China is concerned, its advanced civilization around the VI-VII century after Christ formed the pattern of Japanese socio-political life (3). With regard to language, Japan adopted Chinese monosyllables, to be used beside Japanese polysyllables, as well as the Chinese ideograms taken as a whole, to replace the original Japanese handwriting, of which there are no tangible traces left. Nearly a thousand years after this, the first stage in the forming of its language, Japan went through another period of cultural and linguistic enrichment (namely, at the time of the above mentioned contact with Europe around the middle of the XVI century), by which the Japanese vocabulary profited, thanks to the creation of new terms corresponding to
notions, technics and materials of European origin. While taking into account these examples when external cultural elements were used - according to a system which the history of Japan makes us believe is still existent -, we will now analyse the reactions of Japan to the pressing presence of the West in Asia from the middle of the XIX century onward. Since then one notices a fast, non-stop evolutionary process in every aspect of the life of that country - an evolutionary process which consists in its adjusting to the patterns of Western political, economic and social life.

The language had to be adapted first, and the outcome was that, if the structure of the Japanese sentence could not conform itself to a linear translation of the Western sentence (not even the pliable and versatile minds of the Japanese were able to succeed here), the language was, on the other hand, considerably adding to its wealth of words by means of neologisms. These were borrowed from the languages of those countries which had been chosen as models within a given cultural environment.

A model document in this connection is offered by the Constitution of 1889, *Dai Nippon Teikoku Kenpō* (Constitution of Imperial Japan), which was drawn up by a group of Japanese leading politicians with the collaboration of foreign jurists (4). By such a Constitution new political rôles were ratified around the person of the Emperor (5), in the form of a Diet (*Kokkai Teikoku Gikai*), of a House of Peers (*Kizoku-in*), of a House of Representatives (*Shūgi-in*), and of an electoral system (*senkyo-seido*), in conformity with the Prussian pattern. This document is seemingly an innovation, since in its text both Chinese ideograms and the *katakana* letters have been used, the latter to render the phonetic parts, according to a system which was employed for the first time in official documents in the first Meiji year (1868), thus replacing *kanbun*, that is, writing Chinese style with ideograms only. As to the vocabulary of the Constitution of Imperial Japan, it is of the traditional kind, and was borrowed from the political language typical of the country. Nevertheless new concepts appear
to have been introduced by way of the classic procedure of neologisms being formed by the aggregation of two or more Chinese ideograms.

Japan was moving through its phase of "modernization" in the least possible traumatic way, so as not to arouse reactions of complete, irreversible rejection. An example of this can be found in the chronological table of the institutional changes which brought to the promulgation of the Constitution -this was carried out gradually and with caution in the following way: creation of the Daijō-kan, the central organ of the government -the name of which was taken from the Great Council of State of the Nara period (710-784); within it there worked, from 1871, a Chamber of the Right (U-In), a Chamber of the Left (Sa-in) and a Political Chamber (Sei-in) (6), according to a nomenclature which had been used since the Nara period. These were replaced, in 1875, by the Daishin-in, or Supreme Court of Justice, and the Genrō-in, or Senate. Furthermore, in 1885, the office of Naidaijin, a kind of Home Secretary, was established, and in 1887 the Sumitsu-in, or Private council, was set up, with the specific task to sanction the Constitution. Such were the outlines of Meiji politics -namely, the acceptance of Western institutions within the Japanese traditional political system (7).

The innovatory trends dominating Japan during the first Meiji period owed their existence to the introduction of that whole body of ideas which had developed in Europe since the end of the XVIII century, and which spread in Japan through the translation of the most significant works of the Western "liberal" trends. The notions of freedom (jiyū), of democracy (minshū), of people (jinmin), of people's rights (minken) played a very important part at the time when the Japanese political world opened to popular participation (8).

It is however noteworthy that remainders of the characteristically, exquisitely Japanese frame of mind are left within those notions. Jiyū has the traditional meaning of "following one's own heart, one's own thought" -it involves freedom of action. The Japanese are aware of
socio-political freedom, but such freedom is limited in its practice by the habit of acting only as freely as it is allowed by living in a community (9).

The word minshu was already in use in ancient China with the meaning of "the person who rules over the people". During the Meiji period the original meaning was turned over and minshu came to signify a "government of the people". To obviate so substantial a difference, the term minshu was associated with new concepts of Western origin, such as kokka, a state (hence minshu-kokka, a democratic state), or shugi, an ideology (hence minshu-shugi, a democratic ideology, a democracy) (10). Jinmin is derived from the "citizen" of the Western republics—it is a logical transformation of the word shinmin, the meaning of which is "a subject" or "a follower". The text of the Meiji Constitution refers still to shinmin, not so much with the meaning of "a follower", as with that of "an object of rule". Finally, the term minken retains some aspects of the mentality from the previous Tokugawa period (1600-1868), as it refers to the rights of the privileged "samurai" class.

Just as the principles of British liberalism had been accepted, in the same way the notion of socialism (shakai-shugi) was introduced about the beginning of the XX century, followed soon afterwards by that of capitalism (shihon-shugi), both of Marxist inspiration. About 1920, with the translation of "The Capital" into Japanese, the Marxist terminology entered the current intellectual language, to such an extent that the majority of political, social and economic text-books employed Marxist vocabulary, even when they did not share its ideology.

In the light of our history, we have again in front of us the image of a Japan which is at the same time traditional and "westernized", ambivalent and ambiguous in its Western type façade and in its content that is closely tied up with its history.

Beside the political sphere, the law also resorts to words of Western derivation, even if they are employed with different meanings and in different historical
situations. An instance of this is to be found in the introduction of the notion of right (hō) and of the distinction between public (kōhō) and private law (shihō), with a terminology which could bring one to believe that it were part of the culture of each and every Japanese. In fact, the words hō, kōhō and shihō were already in the Japanese language, but with a different meaning. The ideogram of hō covers a very wide semantic area, as it refers to any norms of ethics, from the rule of Confucius to the Buddhist "Law"; it is therefore not surprising that it should be employed with the new Western meaning. On the other hand, kōhō and shihō express concepts that are totally different from the ones covered by the equivalent "public law" and "private law"—they privilege morals rather than the law, and the group rather than the individual. According to the current Japanese mentality, the individual is not really important as an isolated entity, but he is so when regarded as part of a group. Within the group, there exist bonds of the conventional and emotional kind, which tie him up closely with the others. Such bonds influence his behaviour, by means of something which goes beyond a mere contract or a mere legal norm. It is therefore totally understandable that the Japanese individual feels an instinctive refusal of anything that has to do with a legal contract.

After resuming diplomatic relations with the European nations and the United States of America, Japan was bound since 1854 by economic and legal constraints, due to treaties which had been drawn up at different times by the various powers. This was the irony of fate for, two and a half centuries earlier, Japan had withdrawn into almost complete isolation for fear of becoming a settlement of Europe. The Japanese leaders fought against the "unequal treaties" which were turning their country into something much like a colony, and tried (as we mentioned above) to adjust their own legal system to that of international law. Within 20–25 years, Japan succeeded in removing from diplomatic documents those clauses which were ratified by the extraterritorial rights to which foreigners were entitled on Japanese territory. While the
expression *hōgai hōken* (extraterritory) disappeared definitively from the treaties that were stipulated with the Western nations in 1889 (11), with the progressing of the military events which brought Japan to the limelight there appeared, in connection with the rights which were acquired in Asian territory, the word *shokuminohi*, so far indicative of the Western colonies.

After the conflict of 1894-95 between China and Japan, China was forced to surrender to the enemy Taiwan, which became "colonial university", as Goto Shinpei, its head of civil administration, put it. The Japanese boasted of pursuing a policy not of exploitation, but of investments within the colony for the sake of the colony itself (12).

The expansionist policy which Japan followed after that had a disconcerting effect in the eyes of the West: without taking into account the historical and contingent reasons causing Japan to claim "Asia to Asians", Japan was seen as part of the world context and its policies were regarded in the same way as the policies of any Western nation. As a rule, the Japanese politics of the first half of the XX century is approached eurocentrically not only by the historical critics of the West, but even by those of Japan—which gives more grounds for ambiguousness and ambivalence. In the light of its international politics, Japan comes to be regarded as a new imperialistic power, a colonialist, a nationalist and a capitalistic one. In the formative process of such new words, in Japanese respectively *teikoku, sokumin, kokka-shugi, shihon-shugi* (13), we notice no longer a mere translation of political theories to be rendered in their conceptual meanings—in fact, within ten years, the term *kokka-shugi* gives way to *nashionarizumu*—to mean the movements of militarism after the first World War—and to *fashizumu*—as regards home politics. Such neologisms are no longer rendered with ideograms, but simply with the phonetic transcription of Western words into *katakana*.

What is worth underlying here, thus leaving aside ideologic and political disquisitions on this topic (14), is the new linguistic phase which began in the forties and developed after the war. The presence of the United
States on Japanese territory in the form of a military government of occupation (Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers) introduced a wave of changes which influenced even the sphere of language. A huge number of neologisms of Anglo-Saxon origin were brought in, and new meanings were given to many terms which were already in use. This linguistic phase has been marked by a tendency to privilege phonetics rather than the idea behind each ideogram. In the Meiji period, when the Japanese became aware of the questions connected with the socio-political life of modern man, they began to employ neologisms which, as has been stated above, were rendered by ideograms. Although this method did not have traumatic consequences on the process of assimilation of such neologisms, it did nevertheless cause, on the part of the Japanese, a distorted knowledge of the meanings of the newly acquired words and, on the part of the West, failure to become aware of the cultural value of ideograms as they were used in translation. But, after the second World War, new words began to be transcribed into the *katakana* alphabet (the same which was employed beside ideograms in the drawing up of official documents) -just in the way their pronunciation sounds to a Japanese listener.

The reasons for this phenomenon go beyond a sheer renewal of the language. In fact this habit of introducing neologisms according to how they sound (and not any more on the basis of the ideas they represent) appears to denote a change in the attitude of the Japanese towards the world. It looks like an attempt to emancipate themselves -it looks as if they were now eager to differ from the cultures that, in the course of history, had been the touchstone from which to draw inspiration. From the West Japan continues to readily seize new trends, as well as to share its experiences and to accept its ideas -even to accept the various definitions that the West elaborates, one after another, of Japan itself. Expressions such as "economic animal" and "neo-colonialism" (15) (which refer to Japan's economic expansion into Asia and into the rest of the world) are recorded and introduced
into the everyday language—but they are rendered again with phonetic signs so that they clearly express concepts of a different origin from their own.

This new linguistic stage is a symptom of a particularly delicate moment in the evolutive process of Japanese society. The fact that idea and sound, that is to say, the constituent principles of two quite different methods of writing, should come to acquire the same value and the same use in Japanese—this fact discloses a fresh approach which may solve not only strictly linguistic problems. It will be the concern of the new generations in Japan, who are used to operating syncretic syntheses among different systems, to determine the rôle that their own country intends to play in the years to come.
NOTES

(1) The Oath of the Chart (March 1868) was the first official document drawn up according to the new formula employing both ideograms and the *katakana* alphabet.

(2) The compound nature of Japanese makes this language difficult to classify and employ. By simplifying its characters as much as is possible, the following elements can be pointed out: a quantitatively considerable vocabulary, made out of words of different origin (Japanese, Chinese, non-Chinese foreign); a complex grammar which combines two or more concepts within the same word; a syntax that is founded on the principle of a "modifier" preceding the notion to which it refers; an ideographic and phonetic writing that resorts to *kanji* (Chinese signs) to express an idea, and to the *hiragana* and *katakana* alphabets to transcribe the merely phonetic aspects of words.

(3) Confucianism was especially felt as a socio-political doctrine, given its interest in the relations among people belonging to the same family or social group.

(4) An essential part in the writing up of this Constitution was played by the German jurist Karl Friedrich Hermann Roesler —see J. HALLIDAY, *Storia del Giappone Contemporaneo*, Torino, 1979, p. 46.

(5) Since 1868 the Emperor had taken up again his rôle as a political leader of the nation, following up a movement (known as "Meiji Restoration"), which had been led and supported by the *samurai* of Chōshū, Echizen, Tosa and Satsuma.

(6) The Chamber of the Right carried out a legislative function, that of the Left an administrative one, and the Political Chamber supervised both of them —see P. BEONIO BROCHIERI, *I movimenti politici del Giappone*, Roma,
(7) The paramount importance attached to tradition by the new Meiji government is shown by the date chosen to promulgate the Constitution —February 11th, the foundation of the Japanese empire (February 11th, 660 B.C.).

(8) In 1874 the Movement for the People's Right (Jiyū Minkaen Undō) was started, thus opening the way to the making of various parties. About 1881 the Party of Freedom (Jiyū-tō) and the Progressive Constitutional Party (Rikken Kaishin-tō), both of liberal inspiration, were founded.


(10) After World War One the transcription of the English term into the katakana alphabet —demokurashi— was preferred to the translation of its meaning into ideograms.

(11) Apropos of the question about extraterritorial rights, see F.C. JONES, Extraterritoriality in Japan, London, 1931.


(13) The substantivized forms are quoted here.


(15) Ekonomikku animaru and neo-koroniariizumu respectively, began to be used in the Western countries in the Seventies.
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