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.

Biodata

Hanayo Kosugi has been managing a small foreign language school near Nagoya, Japan, for about 16 years. She developed an interest in the topic of swearing during her undergraduate career at Okinawa International University, writing her BA thesis on the topic. She followed this up with an MA thesis on comparative swearing, looking at film ratings and the varieties of swearing on both sides of the Atlantic. A part of her thesis was later published in an academic journal. Now in the PhD program at Nagoya Gakuin University, she is taking a deeper look at the relationship between sacred space and language, delving deeper into Japanese attitudes towards language.
1. Introduction

English swearwords have been growing with the times and they have so any 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 Malayans 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.

2. 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 a 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; *noberu* or *noburu*, to tell, express, relate, narrate, state; *notama(f)u*, to speak, to tell (superior to inferior) …. Cognates of the archaic word *to*, a spell, are; *tona(f)u*, 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:
申し上げますのも恐れ多い〇〇神社の大前に、つつしんで申し上げます。遠い神代の昔、伊邪那岐・伊邪那美二柱の神が興し紡い創め給うた婚姻の道に習いまって、この度（新郎氏名）と（新婦氏名）が（媒酌人氏名）を媒酌人として婚礼の式をおごさかに美しく執り行おうと、数多の日はあるけれども、今日を生き生きとした満ち足りた日とつつしんで定めて、お洗礼しの咪のしてぐら及び御米、御酒、種々の食物を奉ってこのことを告げまつり挙みまつりますさまを、平らけく安らげく聞こし召し、また演奏いたします歌舞のわさをもいとししい喜ばしいと御観になりまして、今より将来、この夫婦の契は永久に変わることなく移りゆくことなく、いつつまでも相疎み、助け合って家門をいよいよ高くいよいよ広く起こさしめ給い、また世のため人の為に寿命長久に、子孫代々、盛んに繁茂する草木のように立ち栄えしほ絵えと、つつしんで申し上げます。(163-165)

(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.)

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.

2.1. 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original (English)</th>
<th>translated version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>sports</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ragubii(rugby)</td>
<td>関球 tokyu(fighting ball)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sakka(soccer)</td>
<td>賭球 shukyu(kicking ball)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gorufu(golf)</td>
<td>芝球 shikyu(lawn ball)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>food</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saida(cider)</td>
<td>噴出水 funshussui(spouting water)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>furai(deep-fried food)</td>
<td>洋天 yoten (western tenpura)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kare raisu(curry rice)</td>
<td>辛味入汁掛飯 karamiiri shirukake meshi (spicy sauce on the rice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>pencils</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eichi bi (HB-hard black)</td>
<td>中庸 Chuyou (medium)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eichi (H-hard)</td>
<td>硬 Kou (hard)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bi (B-black)</td>
<td>軟 Nan (soft)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Broad-casting</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maikurofon (microphone)</td>
<td>送話機 sowaki (transmitter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anaunsa (announcer)</td>
<td>放送員 hosoin (broadcaster)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.
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 *ikae* can cause the problems between Japan and neighbors. Rewording *shinryaku* (invasion) to *shinshitsu* (advance) created a considerable stir. In 1982, the Japanese Ministry of Education approved history textbooks which included the revision from *shinryaku* to *shinshitsu* 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.

2.3. 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

籠もよ み籠もち 堆串もよ み堆串持ち
この岡に 菜摘ます児 家聞かな 名告らせな
そらみつ 大和の国は おしなべて われこそ居れ
しかなべて われこそ座せ われこそは 告らめ
家をも名をも

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
あらたまの 年の経ぬれば 今しはと ゆめよ我が背子
我が名告らすな
Aratamano Toshinohureba Imashihato Yumeyowagaseko Waganorasuna
(We have been together quite a while; however please don’t tell anybody my name.)
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 names.

2.4. 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.

3. 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 readers…. 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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