

## **YAKUDOKU: JAPAN'S DOMINANT TRADITION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

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### *Abstract*

The mainstream of the teaching of English in Japan is *yakudoku*. In this method, English is first translated into Japanese word- by-word, and then the resulting translation is reordered to match Japanese word order. In Japan, the learning of the *yakudoku* technique is often identified with the goal of studying English itself. In fact, *yakudoku* is a deeply rooted sociolinguistic tradition in Japan, which dates back over a thousand years to when the Japanese started to study Chinese. This paper examines the nature of *yakudoku* by investigating how it has continued to be used in foreign language learning in Japan. The implication of the *yakudoku* tradition for the teaching of English today is also discussed.

### **1. Introduction**

In choosing a teaching method for an EFL country, it is important to investigate the methodological antecedents. That is, those who try to improve the English language education of an EFL country should not ignore its indigenous educational traditions. Otherwise those traditions may become obstacles to the diffusion and implementation of the innovations which the reformers promote (Henrichsen, 1988).

As was briefly described by Hino (1982), Japan has a long tradition of foreign language learning called *yakudoku* ( 訳読 ). In the present paper, the sociolinguistic nature of *yakudoku* will be examined with an emphasis on its historical aspects, and its implication for the teaching of English today will be discussed.

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## 2. What is Yakudoku?

*Yaku* ( 訳 ) means “translation,” and *doku* ( 読 ) means “reading.” Yakudoku is defined as a technique or a mental process for reading a foreign language in which the target language sentence is first translated word-by-word, and the resulting translation reordered to match Japanese word order as part of the process of reading comprehension (Kawasumi, 1975). An illustration of the yakudoku process might be as follows:

[Target language sentence] She has a nice table in her room.

Stage I [The reader mentally makes word-by-word translation.]

She has a nice table in her room  
kanojo motteiru hitotsu-nosutekina teburu naka kanojo-noheya

Stage II [Translation reordered to match Japanese syntax.]

kanojo kanojo-no heya naka hitotsu-no sutekina teburu motteiru

Stage III [Recoding in Japanese syntax.]

Kanojo-wa kanojo-no heya-no naka-ni hitotsu-no sutekina teburu-wo motteiru.

There are two aspects to yakudoku. One is the regressive eye movement resulting from the word-by-word translation. The other is the fact that the meaning is not understood directly in the target language but only via translation (Ueda, 1979).

In teaching students how to read English, teachers introduce students to the yakudoku technique. This may be referred to as the Yakudoku Method of teaching English, the method used by the majority of Japanese teachers of English from junior high to college level. The Yakudoku Method aims to teach yakudoku skills to a stage where the student is able to use the technique without help from the teacher. The teacher's job in class is to explain the word-by-word translation technique, to provide a model translation, and to correct the student's translation (Kakita, 1978; Tajima, 1978).

Two nation-wide surveys conducted by the Japan Association of College English Teachers (Koike et al., 1983, 1985) showed that from 70 to 80 per cent of Japanese teachers of English in high schools and universities resorted to the Yakudoku Method. Hino (1987a) also found that 70 per cent of his university students had been taught to read English solely with this method. Yakudoku is “the” method in the teaching of English in Japan.

### 3. Disadvantages of the Yakudoku Method

For many Japanese students, reading English and yakudoku are the same thing (Matsumoto, 1965; Tazaki, 1978). They are neither aware that it is much more natural to read English in the original word order nor that it is desirable to read directly in English without recourse to a Japanese translation. Hino (1987a) observed that Japanese students of English tend to use the word *yakusu* (= translate) synonymously with *yomu* (= read). Having been trained to read English via translation, they have come to identify this with the process of reading in a foreign language itself. It may even be that the goal of reading a foreign language text is regarded as simply to render it into a possible Japanese equivalent, without consideration of the value of the translation in understanding the contents of the original. Once the English is transformed into Japanese, it is considered read (Tazaki, 1978; Osawa et al., 1978). Conversely, if an English text has not been recoded into Japanese, "reading" is not considered to have taken place (Ueda, 1979; Kakita, 1978). The yakudoku habit clearly is a severe handicap for the Japanese student. It limits the speed at which the student reads, induces fatigue, and reduces the efficiency with which s/he is able to comprehend. The meaning of a text is obtained via Japanese translation, and is only an approximation to the original.

Yakudoku also has detrimental effects on the other language skills — listening, speaking, writing. Students who have been trained in yakudoku reading employ a similar strategy in listening comprehension. They attempt to understand speech by translating every sentence into Japanese (Tazaki, 1978). As a consequence, they cannot follow speech unless it is delivered slowly, and they find comprehension a tiring, imprecise, and ineffective process. In speaking and writing, the yakudoku process is applied in reverse. A Japanese sentence is composed, translated into English word-by-word, and then the words are reordered according to English syntax (Matsumoto, 1965). The result is seldom idiomatic English sentences, and is produced very slowly.

In spite of these serious disadvantages, why is the Yakudoku Method so prevalent? It is important to note that the Course of Study for English prescribed by the Ministry of Education which defines and controls the contents of English teaching in junior and senior high schools, makes no mention of the skill of translating English into

Japanese (cf. Mombusho, 1978a, 1979a). In other words, the Education Ministry by no means encourages yakudoku. The Yakudoku Method of teaching English is not necessarily something that is politically imposed upon the teachers by the administration, but is a long established tradition which exists at a deeper level of the sociolinguistic structure of Japan.

#### 4. History of Yakudoku

Yakudoku as a method of reading has a long history, though exactly when it started is still unknown. It goes back more than a thousand years (Suzuki, 1975), when the Japanese began to read Chinese, that is, the first foreign language they studied. They read Chinese by translating it into Japanese word-by-word. This process is basically the same as the current yakudoku practice. For example:

[Target language sentence] 每見秋瓜憶故丘<sup>1</sup>  
 Stage I [Word-by-word translation]

見 秋瓜 憶 故丘  
 goto miru shuka omou kokyu

Stage II [Reordering]

shuka miru goto kokyu omou

Stage III [Recoding in Japanese syntax]

Shuka-wo miru goto-ni kokyu-wo omou

However, there is an important difference between the original form of yakudoku and the current yakudoku practice in reading English. Today, yakudoku is usually an implicit mental process. Yakudoku in reading Chinese, on the other hand, was an explicit process. At Stage II, some symbols are added to indicate the Japanese word order:

每<sub>レ</sub>見<sub>ニ</sub>秋瓜<sub>ニ</sub>憶<sub>ニ</sub>故丘<sub>ニ</sub>

The symbol <sub>レ</sub>, for example, indicates the reversal of the two adjoining characters. Symbols <sub>ニ</sub> and <sub>ニ</sub> above came from Chinese numerals, but are used here as signs which direct the reordering according to a set of rules. At Stage III, Japanese postpositions and suffixes are written in *katakana* beside the Chinese words:

毎<sub>レ</sub>見<sub>ニ</sub>秋瓜<sub>ニ</sub>憶<sub>ニ</sub>故丘<sub>ニ</sub>

Even today, this method of reading classical Chinese is taught in senior high schools in Japan as part of the instruction in the Japanese

language, following the Course of Study for the National Language issued by the Ministry of Education (cf. Mombusho, 1978b, 1979b).

Having perfected the yakudoku technique, in later years the Japanese came to apply it to the study of other foreign languages. In the 19th century, the Japanese produced textbooks for the study of Dutch in which the yakudoku technique was used. *Kunten Oranda buntten* (1857) is a typical example of the application of yakudoku to Dutch, with the word *kunten* in the title meaning the symbols used for the reordering. For each Dutch sentence in this text, the Japanese equivalents of the Dutch words are written out in *kanji* with postpositions and suffixes added in katakana, which are to be reordered according to the same symbols as the ones used in reading Chinese. For example:

諸ノ本名ガ之婦人  
 Alle-eigennamen van vrouwen  
 ニ上レ

(Reprinted in Sogo, 1970)

After Dutch, yakudoku was applied to the study of English. The following is an excerpt from *Eibei taiwa shokei* (A shortcut to English conversation, 1859), an English textbook written by Manjiro Nakahama (1827-1898) toward the end of the Edo or Shogun Period. The Japanese words in *hiragana* are word-by-word translations, which are to be reordered into the Japanese word order in accordance with the reordering symbols:

わたくし よろこぶ ことを みる おまんの おけるを よき うまきことに  
 アイアム ハベ ツ シー ユー イン グーリ ヘルス<sup>2</sup>  
 I am happy to see you in good health.

(Reprinted in Kawasumi, 1975)

In the Meiji Period, the reordering symbols were replaced by numerals, a simpler way of indicating the Japanese word order. Still, the process of word-by-word translation and reordering itself remained the same. Below is an excerpt from *Soyaku Rigaku Shoho* (First lessons on natural philosophy with Japanese translations, 1871), an English text which in the modern term would fall into the category of content-based language instruction. The Japanese equivalents for each English word in *kanji* and *katakana* are numbered by *kanji* numerals.

What hemisphere is America in?  
 ドノ 半球ニ 有カ アメリカガ 於テ  
 一 ニ 五 四 三

(Reprinted in Sogo, 1970)

The explicit writing of numerals also gradually came to be less frequently used in the reading and teaching of foreign languages. However, the essential process of yakudoku, though more implicitly, continued to be widely practiced. Yakudoku is a strong educational or sociolinguistic tradition in Japan, which enjoys a history of over a thousand years. But that is not to say that it has been without its critics.

## 5. Criticisms of Yakudoku

An early critic of yakudoku was the Confucianist Sorai Ogyu (1666-1728) with his disciple Shundai Dazai (1680-1747) (Suzuki, 1975). Ogyu voiced objections to yakudoku in his book *Gakusoku* (Rules of learning) written in 1727. His main point may be summarized as follows:

The traditional method of reading Chinese is a misleading one, which should be avoided. You cannot truly understand Chinese in this way. Chinese should be read as Chinese.

(Kawasumi, 1975)

Ogyu warned that the spirit of the Chinese people could not be grasped through yakudoku, which is merely a literal translation that ignores the linguistic and cultural differences between the two languages.

Gentaku Otsuki (1757-1827), scholar of the Dutch language and culture, criticized the application of yakudoku to Dutch in his book *Rangaku Kaitei* (Steps in Dutch studies) written in 1788. His main argument is similar to Ogyu's criticism:

In reading Dutch, beginners may use the method used for reading Chinese, but it is desirable for advanced readers to read directly in the original word order. You can understand the contents more clearly this way. Dutch often loses its meaning if rendered into Japanese.

(Kawasumi, 1975, 1978)

It is recorded that some people, though very few, were able to read directly in Dutch. The 19th century scholar Genichiro Fukuchi was one of them. He describes his experience and that of two other non-yakudoku readers:

In those days, most people read Dutch in the same way as they did Chinese. Mr. Seikyo Sugita read, however, directly in Dutch without translation. Others achieved understanding only via word-by-word translation. I also read directly in Dutch, though I may sound arrogant. . . . I insisted that Dutch should not be read via such forward

and backward translation. . . . Rinsho was just 14 years old, but he read Dutch in my way. He was able to read three times as fast as the other students.

(Reprinted in Kawasumi, 1978. Translation the present writer's.)

Though Fukuchi said "in those days," the situation actually remains unchanged even today. A large number of Japanese believe yakudoku to be the normal way to read a foreign language.

In 1911, Yoshizaburo Okakura of Tokyo Koto Shihan Gakko (presently the University of Tsukuba) published a book entitled *Eigo Kyoiku* (English language education). This was the first systematic study of the teaching of English in Japan. Here, we find a thorough criticism of yakudoku:

In the teaching of English in our country, students are taught to translate word-by-word, with forward and regressive eye movement. This is a strongly established convention. I think this comes from our traditional method of reading Chinese, in which Chinese words are reordered to match Japanese word order. . . . This is a wrong method, which treats Chinese not as a foreign language, but as a kind of Japanese. We should not use this method in studying English. . . . It is a pity that everyone considers this to be the only way of reading foreign languages.

In reading Chinese, it is best if you understand the meaning of a text in the original word order. The contents are understood well enough in this way. As a matter of fact, this is the best way to achieve understanding. Likewise, direct reading is the best way of reading English in terms of time, energy, and efficiency.

(Reprinted in Kawasumi, 1978. Translation the present writer's.)

Today, criticisms of yakudoku are frequently found in Japanese TEFL journals as well as in books and magazines for the general public. In spite of these criticisms, yakudoku still dominates the way Japanese read foreign languages. It dies hard.

## **6. Why is Yakudoku so Persistent?**

Why is yakudoku persistently practiced? As a cause of the widespread practice of yakudoku, many analysts refer to its easiness for the teacher (Tazaki, 1978; Ozeki et al., 1983; Ito, 1984). That is, the use of the Yakudoku Method requires little professional training, and also little preparation is needed for each class. Anyone who has studied English through yakudoku is able to teach it in the same way without much

effort. The inadequate training system of EFL teachers in Japan enhances this tendency (Ozeki et al., 1983; Hino, 1987a). Not having been exposed to alternative approaches, many teachers are liable to depend on the same old method with which they have been taught.

Mental discipline is also often cited as a major function of yakudoku (cf. Hiraizumi & Watanabe, 1975). The decoding and deciphering activities involved in the yakudoku process provide the learner with opportunities for mental training, and thus make the Yakudoku Method worthwhile.<sup>3</sup>

Though these analyses explain some aspects of the persistence of yakudoku, they are not necessarily considered to be crucial from the standpoint of the present paper. The fundamental nature of the yakudoku phenomenon is more sociocultural than pedagogical.

Once a practice is accepted as a tradition, it becomes a norm. No one is accused as long as s/he follows this norm. On the other hand, those who do not observe the norm are regarded as deviants. And the longer history the tradition has, the stronger the norm is. The society gets the tradition rolling in accordance with the law of inertia. This tendency is especially conspicuous in a rigidly structured society such as Japan. This is the sociocultural view of the survival of yakudoku that the present article is based upon.

Yakudoku was an effective method when Japanese first faced classical Chinese. The unfortunate fact is that yakudoku has become such a strong convention that Japanese find it very difficult to free themselves from this tradition even in the 1980s when English needs to be learnt as a means of communication rather than as a dead language.

## 7. Conclusions

In developing or selecting teaching methodology suitable for an EFL country, it is essential to investigate its indigenous sociolinguistic tradition. In the case of Japan, it is the yakudoku tradition of learning foreign languages, which has survived over a thousand years and is still alive and well. Yakudoku may even be viewed as the solid infrastructure of language teaching in Japan. In the past, yakudoku may have had its own value as one possible method of studying foreign cultures (Ito, 1978, 1984; Ozeki et al., 1983). However, in terms of the teaching of English for communication needed today, it is undoubtedly a serious handicap for Japanese students of English.



For years, many foreign teachers have been trying to introduce new, innovative methods to the teaching of English in Japan, but few of them have enjoyed remarkable success. It is easy to imagine that those teachers from abroad were not adequately informed of the yakudoku tradition. In fact, it may be argued that no new method could succeed in Japan unless it penetrates into this deeply rooted convention which governs the Japanese student as well as the Japanese teacher.

Pedagogy for teaching English in Japan should put its first priority on helping students overcome the yakudoku habit. In fact, a growing number of EFL teachers are making such efforts in Japan. Kasajima (1987) presents several techniques to achieve direct understanding in English, including sense-group reading which discourages the regressive eye movement caused by word-by-word translation. Sagawa and Furuya (1984) make extensive use of timed reading, using materials with limited vocabulary and comprehensible contents. Hino (1987b) suggests that comprehension practice in listening to English spoken at a normal speed would be effective in eliminating the yakudoku habit. Based on their own experience in learning English, some successful Japanese learners of English claim repeated reading aloud to be a good way to achieve direct understanding in English (Kunihiro, 1970, among others). Software for personal computers which integrates timed reading and word-group reading has also been developed. However, the use of these various approaches is still restricted to the minority of Japanese teachers of English.

Lastly, it should be explained that this paper is by no means another attempt to promote the misleading "Japan is unique" theory which is believed by some Japanese. In fact, the practice of the Yakudoku Method is not necessarily specific to Japan. The Grammar-Translation Method in the West, which grew out of the teaching of classical languages such as Latin and Greek, presents a close resemblance to the Yakudoku Method. In the East, Deyama (1988) reports that translation exercises similar to yakudoku play the central part in the teaching of English in Korea. Kanno (1986) even suggests that Koreans in their early history may also have used reordering symbols of their own when they encountered the Chinese language.

Yakudoku is not exactly a problem peculiar to Japan. Still, the fact remains that this tradition, which enjoys a long history, is a hard habit to break for the Japanese. It is necessary for all EFL teachers in Japan to be well acquainted with the nature of yakudoku.