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## **Sekaigo: Esperanto, international language, and the transnational dimension to Japan's linguistic modernity**

In 1906, the international language Esperanto exploded onto the scene in Japan, establishing a community of speakers and practitioners which has persisted to the present day and which was long the largest non-European national Esperanto movement in the world. On the face of it this was an unprecedented and unexpected event in Japanese history. However, this article demonstrates that it was the culmination of a rich history of thinking (and implementing) ideas about *Sekaigo* ('world language') during the Meiji period. This intellectual tradition is an important and overlooked dimension of Japanese language debates – existing scholarship has focused on the creation of a standardised national language but, by writing international language back into the historiography, Japan's 'linguistic modernity' is revealed as a more complex and multi-faceted phenomenon.

Different international languages, including Mori Arinori's English language proposal, treaty port pidgins, and planned languages including (but not limited to) Esperanto, reveal how the need for more effective transnational communication was seen as an emergent problem fundamental to modernity and modernisation, and one potentially as amenable to rational reforms and new intellectual developments as was national language.

Keywords: Japan, Asia, transnational history, language reform, interlinguistics, Meiji Period, Esperanto

### **Introduction – the Esperanto moment of 1906**

In the spring of 1906, Japan was still in the afterglow of its unprecedented military victory over Russia the year before. Fêted abroad, Japan's domestic response was considerably more conflicted, with unrest originating from all parts of the political spectrum. Ōsugi Sakae, a leading Japanese socialist, was arrested for his part in one of these protests. He was sent to Tokyo Prison in Ichigaya where, far from idly waiting out his sentence, he got to work (Stanley, 1982, p.43). Ōsugi was neither the first nor the last socialist to seek to make productive use of his time in jail: like many, Ōsugi read various key texts, seeking to refine his theoretical understanding of Marxism and

socialism, but he chose also to expand his language skills. He came to call this practice *Ichihan Ichigo* ('one crime, one language'): each time he was imprisoned he would choose another language to study (Ōsugi, 1992, p.158). In later years, during other sentences, he would study Italian and German, but that first time in 1906 he chose a different tack: Esperanto. In a letter to a friend, he described his daily routine:

First, in the morning, I read Feuerbach's 'On Religion', and Albert's 'On Free Love'. In the afternoon I focus on Esperanto. Last month I practiced reading but now I split my time half reading, half writing. Diligently running one-by-one through boring grammar exercises and the like is the sort of thing that, if one weren't in prison, would be totally impossible, I think. However, on my own conversation is impossible. Then there are only a couple of hours between dinner and lights out. During that time, I am reading a collection of Tolstoy's short stories. (Ōsugi, 1964, p.390)

Whilst he fitted in Esperanto amidst a number of socialist thinkers and influential Western writers, prison, then, offered some opportunities for focus and concentration that ordinary life did not. And if prison denied Ōsugi conversational partners, in other respects he was far from alone in his newfound interest in the planned language: outside the prison walls, others were taking up Esperanto in Japan in increasing numbers.

Indeed, they were doing more than just study. After the magazine *Chokugen* ran a profile of Esperanto in March 1906, May saw the creation of a national association, the Nippon Esperanto Societo (NES); a second one, the Nihon Esuperantisto Kyōkai (or JEA, after the Esperanto translation), was formed the following month, ultimately absorbing its forerunner (JEI, 1956, p.8). By the time Ōsugi was released in July, Esperanto in Japan was up and running and being covered by major newspapers such as the *Asahi Shinbun* and the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, clubs had begun to open in the major cities

and advocates were giving a series of promotional talks attended by hundreds, making for a fully-fledged boom (Hatsushiba, 1998, pp.19-21).

Ōsugi's encounter with Esperanto was more than a passing fad. He attended the first national Esperanto congress in September 1906, reading out a translation of the Momotaro myth to a crowd that included other socialists, journalists, lecturers from various universities, and even Hayashi Tadasu, the Foreign Minister (Hatsushiba, 1988, p.21). From there, between other prison spells (and hence, of course, other languages), he continued to practice and promote Esperanto, teaching it to young Chinese anarchists and using it to disseminate information about the revolutionary struggle in Asia.<sup>1</sup> But his was just one path through Esperanto – others came to the language not in prison, but in bookshops in Europe, whilst working in Manchuria or America, or via a wide range of friends and other intermediaries, and they would go on to make use of the language in a similar myriad of ways – writing letters, reading magazines, welcoming guests from overseas and making trips themselves.<sup>2</sup>

This boom marked the beginning of a movement which has persisted to the present day, supported by a community of speakers and practitioners which for much of that time formed the largest national Esperanto community outside of Europe, and amongst the largest in the world.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the language never gained the traction that its advocates desired, Japanese Esperantists were active at the League of Nations, in the Japanese wartime empire, and in villages across the country, featuring notable figures such as Yanagita Kunio, Deguchi Onisaburō, Nitobe Inazō, and Miyazawa Kenji, as well as thousands of other, less well known individuals.

In recent years, works such as Gotelind Müller (2006), Ulrich Lins (2008), Nancy Stalker (2008), Sho Konishi (2013) and Ian Rapley (2015) have begun to take this movement seriously, bringing Esperanto out of the footnotes of Japanese

historiography to consider its position and significance in East Asian history. However, they have tended to read the boom of 1906 as an unprecedented event, and as tied to the socialist response to the Russo-Japanese War, seeing Esperanto as, for example, ‘an expression of a forgotten grassroots movement of ‘worldism’’ (Konishi, 2013, p.261).

However, by considering Esperanto 1906 as a linguistic phenomenon, this article seeks to place it as the culmination of rich but largely forgotten history of Meiji era thinking and practicing ideas of international language. The significance of this hitherto overlooked tradition is that it reveals a preoccupation with transnational communication that was intertwined with more familiar debates about domestic language reform.<sup>4</sup> This not only places Esperanto in a greater context, it also represents an opportunity to expand our understanding of the changes in language during the Meiji era.

The existing historiography of language in the Meiji period has placed it in the context of nation making and modernization, from the emergence of doubts about the suitability of the Japanese language prior to the Meiji Restoration of 1868 (Hunter, 1986), through to real change in the decades which followed. The key concepts in the historiography of Meiji era sociolinguistics are *Genbun Itchi*, the unification of spoken and written Japanese in a standardised national language (*hyōjungo*), and *Kokugo*, the inclusion of this new ‘unified style’ (Jacobowitz, 2015, p.5) as one marker of the emergent modern Japanese nation.

Nanette Gottlieb (1991, p.7) represents these changes as a process of ‘language modernization’: the transformation of the Japanese language in order to make it better reflect the needs of a changing society, most notably to render it more effectively used by a greater proportion of the Japanese people.<sup>5</sup> Not only did this involve streamlining a legacy of complex literary styles, it also involved the relegation of regional variation to

the status of dialects and the elevation of the Edo/Tokyo vernacular style as a national standard (Shimoda, 2010). In short, Japan's linguistic modernity has hitherto been seen as the teleological story of the rise of a uniform national language.

The history explored in this article reveals that Japan's linguistic modernity had a global dimension as well as a national one. After the end of Japan's period of isolation, the second half of the nineteenth century saw rapid growth in Japanese engagement with the West across a range of different spheres, from diplomacy to trade to intellectual exchange, each with their own linguistic imperatives and demands. Whilst Douglas Howland (2002) and Lydia Liu (1993) have explored the importance of translation in East Asian experiences of modernity, this article goes beyond translation to reveal how, faced with issues of communication across linguistic, cultural, and political borders, a number of Japanese thinkers were drawn to the question of the right language for international exchange and, at the same time, the practical necessity of making contact meant that others were involved in developing (partial, contingent) solutions to this international language problem, practice developing alongside theory. These two trends of linguistic philosophy and linguistic practice culminated in the Esperanto boom of 1906.

Just as Seth Jacobowitz's (2015) recent work documents the role of material and intellectual innovations such as the telegraph and shorthand in stimulating the reforms of the domestic Japanese language, this article argues that technology and ideas of modernity prompted thinking about international communication. Whilst the primacy of the modern nation-state means that contemporary scholarship equates linguistic modernity with the rise of the standardised national language, the history of Japan's international language debates challenges that teleology, revealing that in the contingent moment of late nineteenth century Japan, the problem of international communication

was seen as as amenable to the provision of modern reform as the domestic tongue. Esperanto or one of its precursors, it seemed, might prove the linguistic equivalent of the metric system, reforms to timekeeping, or the steam train and ship: a modern innovation solving an emergent modern problem.

In summary, this article argues for the inclusion of the question of international language in Meiji Japan as an important dimension to Japan's linguistic modernity, one which has to date been overlooked. Recovering this history involves shedding new light on familiar topics (Mori Arinori's language proposal and the *Meiroke Zasshi* language debates), placing other languages into new contexts (Yokohama Kotoba), and detailing moments that have hitherto not been examined (Volapük), bringing them all together to recover a forgotten line of thinking and to expand our understanding of language in late nineteenth century Japan.

### **Theory and practice: the international dimension to the early Meiji era language debates**

Ideas of international language and communication were involved in the debates over language reform right from the outset of the Meiji period, reflecting the degree to which the modernisation of Japan was an inextricably tangled mix of domestic reform and international repositioning. The connection between home and abroad can be seen through the proposals of Mori Arinori, perhaps the most famous of the early Meiji contributions to language debates. Whilst almost all commentators on Japanese language reform seem to have found time to revisit Mori's work, there are few hints in this historiography of the extent to which he was interested in international communication as well as domestic. Revisiting his work, however, reveals not only a focus on the need for reform to the Japanese language, but also a keen awareness of the need to facilitate better communication with the wider world, and significantly, also the



interface between international and national language, placing transnational communication at the heart of Meiji period linguistic change.

Mori's call for a reformed Japanese and the wider use of English in Japan took the form of two texts: a letter to American linguistic scholar William Whitney in 1872, and then the introduction to his 1873 book, *Education in Japan*. In them he explored a range of possibilities centred around the adoption of some modified form of English as the (or perhaps a) national language of Japan. Although his suggestions were met with polite scepticism by Whitney, and then by a range of criticism and ridicule by both Japanese and foreign commenters alike, many other writers on the Japanese language subsequently wrestled with his ideas and positioned themselves in relation to them (Lee, 2010, pp.7-8).

It's important to stress that there is considerable ambiguity about exactly what Mori was arguing. Whilst he advocated that the Japanese 'adopt a language like that of English', the closest he came to pushing for abandoning Japanese was in the 1873 essay, in which he suggested that 'all reasons suggest its disuse' (Mori, 1873, p.lvi). In other parts of the two documents he seems to suggest various overlapping ideas – the replacement of Chinese influence in the Japanese language by English, English and Japanese to be used in parallel, the Romanization of Japanese, and/or the creation of a written vernacular Japanese based upon the spoken form. Indeed, much of the post-war academic scholarship on Mori's proposal has focused on seeking to pin down exactly what it was that he was suggesting.<sup>6</sup>

The question of exactly what Mori intended is unlikely to ever be settled; indeed, it seems entirely possible that he, an innovative thinker unafraid to test out new ideas, had not settled upon a single final outcome.<sup>7</sup> But, however vague Mori's proposed solutions were, he was clear about the problems he sought to tackle, and

issues with an international dimension represent one major theme. In his original letter to Whitney he wrote:

The spoken language of Japan being inadequate to the growing necessities of the people of that Empire, and too poor to be made, by a phonetic alphabet, sufficiently useful as a written language, the idea prevails among us that, if we would keep pace with the age, we must adopt a copious and expanding European language. The necessity for this arises mainly out of the fact that Japan is a commercial nation; and also that, if we do not adopt a language like that of the English, which is quite predominant in Asia, as well as elsewhere in the commercial world, the progress of Japanese civilization is evidently impossible. Indeed a new language is demanded by the whole Empire. It having been found that the Japanese language is insufficient even for the wants of the Japanese themselves, the demand for the new language is irresistibly imperative, in view of our rapidly increasing intercourse with the world at large... The only course to be taken, to secure the desired end, is to start anew, by first turning the spoken language into a properly written form, based on a pure phonetic principle. It is contemplated that Roman letters should be adopted. Under such circumstances, it is very important that the alphabets of the two languages under consideration—Japanese and English—be as nearly alike as possible, in sound and powers of the letters. It may be well to add, in this connection, that the written language now in use in Japan, has little or no relation to the spoken language, but is mainly hieroglyphic—a deranged Chinese, blended in Japanese, all the proportion of the letters of which are themselves of Chinese origin.<sup>8</sup>

And a year later, in *Education in Japan* he suggested:

In the style of expression, the spoken language of Japan differs considerably from the written, though in their structure they are both mainly the same... The words in common use are very few in number, and most of them are of Chinese origin. There are some efforts being made to do away with the use of Chinese characters by reducing them to simple phonetics, but the words familiar through the organ of the eye are so many, that to change them into those of the ear would cause too great an inconvenience, and be quite impracticable... The march of modern civilization in Japan has already reached the heart of the nation—the English language following it suppresses the use of both Japanese and

Chinese. The commercial power of the English-speaking race which now rules the world drives our people into some knowledge of their commercial ways and habits. The absolute necessity of mastering the English language is thus forced upon us. It is a requisite of the maintenance of our independence in the community of nations. Under the circumstances, our meagre language, which can never be of any use outside of our islands, is doomed to yield to the domination of the English tongue, especially when the power of steam and electricity shall have pervaded the land. Our intelligent race, eager in the pursuit of knowledge, cannot depend upon a weak and uncertain medium of communication in its endeavor to grasp the principal truths from the precious treasury of Western science and art and religion. The laws of state can never be preserved in the language of Japan. All reasons suggest its disuse (Mori, 1873, pp.lv-lvi).

The problems that Mori identified in language in Japan can be enumerated as a general unspecified inadequacy for modern life, the role of Chinese influence on the language, the large number of homophones, and the split (diglossia) between written and spoken Japanese – all issues of domestic language – but they also include others that are international: questions of commerce (which can be read in context to be *international* commerce), the transfer of foreign knowledge, and the general use of languages overseas.

There are a couple of hints in the historiography at this international dimension to Mori's thinking. Lee (1996, p.11) notes that Whitney's response to Mori was the suggestion of a diglossia of English and Japanese (although not explicitly noting that this was at least in part a division between domestic and international), whilst Hall (1973, p.193) includes Whitney's suggestion that, 'if Mori intends to adopt English for the purposes of international communication (as he does), [then a reformed form of English would be inferior to the actual language as spoken]'. However the majority of the rest of the historiography has focused squarely on the implications for the Japanese language and language within Japan. So whilst Jacobowitz (2015, pp.97-110) traces

Mori's influences amongst Anglophone orthographic reformers, establishing patterns of transnational intellectual flow and the connectedness of Japan's linguistic debates with those overseas, he is still squarely focused on the Japanese language: Mori's proposal was to adopt 'a simplified form of English as the basis for Japan's national language' (Jacobowitz, 2015, p.102).

Both Patrick Heinrich (2012) and Lee Yeounsuk (1996, pp.7-14) trace the ways in which Mori's ideas were interpreted over time, most notably the rise of the idea that he was proposing the abolition of Japanese and its replacement by English.<sup>9</sup> Lee (1996, pp.12-13) stresses how subsequent interpretations of Mori's work have been shaped by an ideology of a single Japanese language (*Nihongo*, or *Kokugo*) that only began to coalesce in the years after Mori was working. Indeed, it would perhaps be easier to grasp Mori's intentions were we to talk at many points about 'the system of Japanese languages', rather than 'the Japanese language'. This would allow us to recognise that, even with the establishment of a national standard, use of language within Japan, then and now and as with any territory, was a mix of registers, regional variants, written and spoken styles, minority languages, and foreign languages used within Japan. Thus international languages – languages required to talk out beyond Japan's borders – were one dimension of this system – one that Mori was alert to, but one that even the more sensitive scholars of his proposal have largely overlooked.

Indeed in recognising the role of border-crossing communication, Mori was alert not only to the vital role of language in Japan's growing contact with the rest of the world, he also recognised that this contact took different forms, in different locations and with different objectives. Mori argued that some use of English in Japan was vital for (international) commerce, for the maintenance of Japan's independence, and for the gathering of knowledge. These three dimensions to foreign relations – trade,

law/diplomacy, and intellectual exchange – were all of paramount importance to Japan's new position in the world, and thus he argued that it was vital that the restructuring of Japan's linguistic world facilitated progress in all three.

Different objectives and contexts put different demands on their participants, revealing different aspects of language. For example, Douglas Howland's (2002) work reveals various translation strategies, ranging from repurposing existing terms to coining neologisms, that were developed in the drive to introduce Western political concepts to Meiji Japan, whilst Tao (2005) and Williams (1910) reveal the variety of different languages put to use during the Perry mission in the development of sets of parallel treaty texts. Indeed, foreign contact and its linguistic demands were not new to the Meiji era – the literary 'Brushtalk' enabled by the shared heritage of Chinese characters across East Asia, and the Dutch studies paradigm in late Tokugawa Japan, with its institutional apparatus of interpreters and more informal networks of engaged scholars, both represent context-specific solutions to pre-Perry issues of cross-border communication (Howland, 1996; Hellyer, 2009). However, the opening of the treaty ports and the first dispatches of Japanese on missions to China, America and Europe changed both the volume and nature of Japan's foreign contact. Mori's threefold categorisation was a reflection of this change, highlighting areas such as government and intellectual exchange which he was intimately involved in himself, but another which he was not: trade.

The new treaty ports were transnational and transcultural 'contact zones', home to ongoing exchange based around trade and commerce, and as such they were to site of a pressing need for practical solutions to question of transnational communication.<sup>10</sup> The 'Ports lingo' which grew up in Yokohama and elsewhere, was the product of a much less thoughtful and deliberate process than Mori's plans, but it was an immediate

solution to the setting of the treaty ports, and as such it is an important addition to the history of the international languages of Meiji Japan. Not only does it reiterate Mori's stress on the different dimensions to Japan's international communication problems by highlighting a very different stage to the usual historiographical focus on literature, intellectual flows and politics, the language also demonstrates a pragmatic approach to the problems Mori identified, something which is another important dimension of the international language issue. Many different peoples were coming together in Yokohama to do business and they had a pressing need to enable functional communication in order to ensure the smooth running of everyday business. As a result, alongside Japanese and English and other national languages, they developed their own on-the-fly language.

Surviving evidence of the language which has been variously known as 'Yokohama Kotoba', Yokohama-Pidgin Japanese, and 'Pekesaranpan', is very limited – almost all scholarship on it draws from two, interconnected sources. The most significant of these is *Exercises in the Yokohama Dialect* (Anon, 1879), a pamphlet published in 1879. As Basil Hall Chamberlain (1890, p.368) noted in *Things Japanese*, the other major source, the pamphlet was something of a joke, making use of spoof quotes from fictional newspapers and increasingly ridiculous sample sentences, but nevertheless it documents a language being used to conduct everyday life in the early years of treaty port Japan. Chamberlain speculated that, whilst the Chinese treaty ports tended to develop pidgin Englishes because the Chinese were adept at foreign language acquisition, Yokohama Kotoba was based on Japanese because the locals were less linguistically skilled (or perhaps less experienced). However, it was populated by words of Western origin, and others from other Asian languages, presumably imported

alongside the growth of trade. For example, the name 'Pekesaranpan' derived from words within the pidgin which appear to have been of Malay origin.<sup>11</sup>

The scantiness of the surviving detail of Yokohama Kotoba reveals something of the non-textual and informal nature of its practice and also of how the historical archive is constructed and what it privileges. But whilst the activities that made up Yokohama Kotoba may lie outside the well documented, bureaucratic, and official forms which are typically preserved, what does survive serves as a reminder of the scale and imperatives of trade-driven contact in the treaty ports. Yokohama Kotoba was not the language of contracts and major deals, but it was the language of minor activity – making small-scale arrangements and ensuring the smooth running of everyday life. This is important because, whilst the treaty ports, with multiple nationalities working in close proximity, were the perfect setting to illustrate the need for a pragmatic approach to transnational communication, nevertheless the simple, immediate need to get a message across, however it was done, arose in other settings and with other languages. So, for example, Williams's (1910) firsthand account of the Perry mission and Beasley's (1950) work on the role of castaways in the opening of Japan both reveal that major diplomatic encounters, too, faced simple, practical questions of communication.

Yokohama Kotoba has been very marginal within the linguistic historiography of Meiji Japan, but by writing international language questions back into that historiography, and by remaining aware (as suggested earlier) of the system of languages operating within Japan, rather than restricting focus to a single monolithic Japanese language, we can place it within a space of different languages, thereby expanding our understanding of linguistic change in Meiji Japan. Whilst Yokohama Kotoba might have been a simple pidgin, developed in an unplanned and haphazard fashion rather than the result of scholarly consideration, and the conversations that took

place in it might have been direct and uncomplicated, it was nevertheless a medium of much trans-ethnic contact, and the facilitator of many encounters in a location of considerable complexity. As such, it is an important part of the history of Japan's linguistic modernity. Indeed, when another language project, Volapük, was proposed in the Japanese press, Yokohama Kotoba was one of the areas to which the new proposal was explicitly seen to provide a solution, revealing that, for Meiji era Japanese themselves, it was one part of Japan's complex of modern languages (*Yomirui Shinbun*, 30 December 1887, p.3).

#### **The road to Esperanto: Japan's encounter with international auxiliary languages**

Mori's solution to the problem of international communication rested upon the introduction of a modified form of English into a more established place in Japanese life. So whilst Seth Jacobowitz (2015, p.107) connects Mori's interest in reformed forms of English to broader language reform movements which would lead to the likes of Esperanto in subsequent years, his proposal was in many respects fairly conventional: the study and use of a foreign national language. Few foreigners could be expected to learn a relative linguistic minority like Japanese, so the burden of adopting new languages in order to facilitate cross border communication would fall predominantly on the Japanese themselves, forced to learn one or more Western languages. Indeed, as we shall see later, this was an ever-present problem for Meiji era intellectuals looking to draw on modern ideas originating across the world.

However, others were thinking more expansively. In 1874, only a year after Mori's suggestions, the Confucian scholar Sakatani Shiroshi published an article in *Meiroke Zasshi*, turning his mind to the broader nature of international contact and the strictures language placed upon those seeking to exchange knowledge. *Meiroke Zasshi*



was the highest profile magazine of the age and the forum for many of the debates over internal language reform. Where others in the magazine were debating the phoneticisation of Japanese into the likes of *Rōmaji* and Hiragana, Sakatani focused on transnational communication, arguing for the creation of a new language to facilitate easier global intellectual flows.

His proposal, and the location of its publication, not only stresses once again that questions of international and national language were fundamentally intertwined, it also represents an alternative vision of linguistic modernity to the perfection of the Japanese language. Whilst subsequent history has seen national languages predominate, even in the spheres of international and transnational contact, this and other projects stand as examples of thinkers who saw other possibilities from the new era and new methods of linguistic reform.

Sakatani Shiroshi's essay called for a 'common world language' (*Tenchikan Dōbun Dōgo*, perhaps also translatable as 'universal language'):

Even after a hundred years, the various countries with whom we have relations will preserve their identity, and it will be necessary to use the English and French languages with the English and the French, the Russian and the German languages with the Russians and the Germans, and the Chinese and Korean languages with the Chinese and Koreans... We cannot avoid studying all these languages with utmost diligence since their use is already mandatory... How unfortunate it is that these differences consume so much time and seriously interfere with the spread of enlightenment to the five continents! If you ask me what should be done, the only solution is to make the languages of the world one (Sakatani, 1874, translated in Braisted, 1976, p.136).

Sakatani imagined that this language would be used primarily in public discourse, but that it might ultimately lead to a gradual decline in the private use of existing national languages. He linked it to European philosophers' hopes of putting an

end to war, arguing that this was an unachievable goal until the nations of the world put aside their self-interest, and that a shared language for international communication was ‘an advantage for all countries alike without regard to their wealth or power’ (Braisted, 1976, p.136).

In the context of Meiji Japan, modernization and modernity were complicated by their relationship to Westernisation. The exposure to new post-Enlightenment ideas flooding in from the West was the key driver of an era of radical possibility, but this prompts the question of which phenomena were modern, which merely Western, and which neither or both. In language specifically, Seth Jacobowitz’s work (2015), demonstrates how important material and intellectual innovations from the West were in the standardization and unification of a single national Japanese language, thereby establishing *Genbun Itchi* as a globally situated process. But Sakatani’s ideas seem to have been less a borrowing of ideas from the West, and more the fruit of the fertile intellectual environment cause by the influx of new ways of thinking and new possibilities for challenging the status quo, an independent insight prompted by the confrontation with the cacophony of European languages – contact with the West, not as a source of knowledge, but as a catalyst for new thinking.

Sakatani’s reputation is as a conservative, Confucian-influenced member of the Meirokusha (de Bary et al, 2006, p.46); his intervention in the language debates of the 1870s has received less attention than others who were writing in the same pages. However, looked at through the lens of international language, the essay is more notable. What is most striking is the degree to which his vision prefigures Esperanto and, more broadly, the general class of ‘international auxiliary languages’. Many of the characteristics of Sakatani’s ideas – proposing a dedicated language for international communication separate from domestic languages, the connection of a world language

to mutual understanding (and even world peace), and the idea of a common (neutral) language as a leveller – are exactly those which motivated international auxiliary languages in Europe. Although the first examples can be traced back to the early nineteenth- and even eighteenth-century (Eco, 1994, pp.321-322), when Sakatani wrote his essay in 1874, the first successful one, Volapük, was still five years from creation, ten years from real popularity, and almost fifteen from its introduction to Japan.

Volapük was the work of a German priest, Johann Martin Schleyer, who first published it in 1880. During the subsequent decade, it gathered a community of speakers in Europe, spreading beyond Germany, most notably to France. There were numerous Volapük clubs in Europe, a range of publications and three congresses were organised, in 1884, 1887, and 1889, the last reportedly conducted solely in Volapük itself. However, this last congress marked the effective peak of the language's spread, as it revealed the cracks forming in the community of Volapük speakers. Schleyer wanted to retain a veto on all proposed changes to the language; denied this, he boycotted the congress. Marred by internal fallings-out regarding potential changes to grammar and structure, the 1890s were a period of self-destructive argument, causing a decline in the language's popularity. Although a small community of Volapük speakers continued into the twentieth century, by 1900 it had decisively been replaced by Esperanto as the leading candidate for widespread adoption (Forster, 1982, pp.46-47).

More significantly for the purposes of this essay, in 1888, just as Volapük was reaching its peak in Europe, it attracted attention in Japan. The first articles mentioning Volapük in Japan came as early as 1886 – firstly one written by the leading intellectual Katō Hiroyuki in the second issue of a new English language magazine *The Student*, and the second the following year, this time in *The Japan Gazette*, a Yokohama-based English language journal. However, they led to little response (JEL, 1956, p.3; Fujima,

1978, p.27). It wasn't until a Dutch doctor, Willem van der Heyden, also based in Yokohama, began to make efforts to promote it that Volapük began to attract a wider audience. The *Yomiuri Shinbun* was drawn to his suggestions, running an article introducing the language on 30 December 1887 ('Sekaigo', *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 30 December 1887, p.3), and following it up with a series of pull-outs covering the basic grammar in the new year. Between January and April 1888, these inserts built up to form an introductory textbook. They were supported by a series of articles on debates both for and against Volapük. Finally, in 1889, van der Heyden, together with a colleague named Sasaki Hayashi, published a Volapük-Japanese dictionary in order to help Japanese students learn the language (Heyden and Sasaki, 1889).

Volapük took the name *Sekaigo* ('world language'), a name that was also later widely applied to Esperanto. Although, as mentioned above, the debates surrounding Volapük suggested that it might replace Yokohama Kotoba in the treaty ports, it became clear that English was its chief rival, highlighting not only the ongoing presence of the pidgin but revealing Volapük as the union of the intellectual work of the likes of Sakatani & Mori with the pragmatic actually-existing transnational language of the treaty ports. Volapük was a language born of intellectual endeavour rather than situational accident, and it was created with the goal of furthering intellectual exchange and cooperation, but it was a language that could be learned, spoken and written – it could be put into immediate use.

Whilst Japan's Volapük moment was quite brief – after the flurry of activity in the pages of the *Yomiuri* over a span of about twelve months, Volapük seems to have faded from the popular consciousness – that is not to say that it left no trace. Students of Volapük would go on to be amongst the first adoptees of Esperanto in the late 1890s and 1900s, including Takusari Kōki, a leading figure in the development of Japanese

shorthand, and Oka Asajirō, one of the first exponents of Darwinian evolution in Japan. Oka in particular is significant because, he not only took up Volapük and Esperanto, he also developed his own international language, Zilengo.

Oka's example is a prime case of the linguistic burden felt by Meiji era scholars. As a biologist, he'd studied several languages prior and in addition to Volapük (his first encounter with Esperanto was in a German bookstore, looking for a textbook on Swedish), so it's perhaps no surprise that he felt the appeal of a dedicated international language (Oka, *La Revuo Orienta*, June 1936, pp.202-203). Still, his decision to develop a language of his own marks him out as unique in Japan. Zilengo – meaning 'our language' – very much represents a variant of the style of Volapük and Esperanto: using the Roman alphabet, drawing from a Latinate vocabulary and making use of suffixes for verb conjugation and grammatical structures in an effort to create a systematic, easy-to-learn language (*La Revuo Orienta*, April 1940, pp.142-145). It did have some native Japanese influences, however, eschewing the definite article and, according to Oka's telling, tying the suffixes in Zilengo which indicate part of speech to particles in the Japanese languages (*joshi*: short, postnominal words serving a range of grammatical functions). So, whereas Esperanto uses the suffix –o to indicate subject and –on for object, Oka used –a and –o respectively, echoing the Japanese particles *wa/ga* for subject, and *wo* for object:

Language	Esperanto	Zilengo	Japanese
Subject	<i>Patr-o</i>	<i>Patr-a</i>	<i>Chichi wa/ga</i>
Object	<i>Patr-on</i>	<i>Patr-o</i>	<i>Chichi wo</i>

Oka never promoted Zilengo – it's unclear whether he intended it to be a serious proposal, or a personal project-cum-thought experiment. Either way, when he

discovered Esperanto in 1891, he put his own effort to one side. As an unpublished, private exercise, it is not surprising that Zilengo doesn't play a significant role in historiography, but Volapük's absence is more noteworthy. The second half of the 1880s was a period of literary experimentation, with the likes of Futabatei Shimei writing in colloquial styles and the phrase *Genbun Itchi* being hotly debated (Twine, 1991, pp.137-143; Lee, 1996, pp.218-219). Despite occurring alongside this, Japan's Volapük incident doesn't fit well within the narrative of domestic language reform, and so it is absent from the existing literature.<sup>12</sup> However, when we focus instead on the question of international language, the significance of Volapük in the development of Japanese thinking becomes clearer, linking Mori and Sakatani ten years before the rise of Esperanto after the turn of the century.

#### **Selling *Sekaigo*: Esperanto, international language, and linguistic modernity**

Separated by fifteen years, the introductions of Esperanto and Volapük to Japan nevertheless had some distinct similarities. Both languages came to Japan in the context of a booming European scene, and just as with Volapük before it, the *Yomiuri Shinbun* was an early advocate for Esperanto. Where Volapük's main champion had been the Dutchman Willem van der Heyden, in Esperanto's case it was Kuroita Katsumi, a professor of Japanese classics at the Imperial University who was the key motive force in the first phases of coordinating and running the central Esperanto organisation, although a number of foreigners were also intimately involved in getting it off the ground.

If one international language were to find long term support in Japan, it is not surprising that it should be Esperanto and not Volapük. It would be odd indeed were the majority of Japan's international language movement to persist with an alternative to the global preference for Esperanto, not least because the major criterion for the success of

an international language is less some external measure of its perfection as a language than the network effects of its realisation in communities of actual usage. The difference in immediate local success, however, is less easy to explain by reference to international context, and perhaps owes something to the changing national context in which the two events took place. Between 1890 and 1906, the number of Japanese studying foreign languages and the degree to which Western learning had penetrated Japanese life had steadily grown. Moreover in the wake of the victory over Russia, Japanese perhaps felt more able and willing to embrace and take a lead in efforts to mitigate the problems of international communication, rather than meekly accept the need to study European languages. In the words of Katō Misao (1906, Introduction):

Our people, having won the laurel crown of victory [in the Russo-Japanese war], should launch out into the world, and have a duty to take the lead amongst the great powers, and to research and use this [Esperanto].

Where Mori had pointed to the use of English, and Sakatani merely imagined the possibility of a common world language, where Volapük was proposed but didn't find much support, 1906 saw increasing numbers of Japanese who were prepared to learn Esperanto in the expectation that Westerners should share the burden of language learning. This new-found confidence, the culmination of the ongoing preoccupation with international languages from the earliest years of the Meiji period, was the start of an Esperanto movement which, during the interwar period, grew to become one of the largest in the world and indeed, the largest outside of Europe.

However, whilst the outcome of the Volapük and Esperanto moments were very different, there also strong similarities in the ways in which the two languages were presented and motivated. Just as the early experiments with international language represent a challenge to a narrow conception of linguistic modernity that focuses on the

development of domestic language, the ways in which writers went about selling Volapük and Esperanto stress the significance of changes associated with modernity and modernisation in driving international language problems. The primary appeal of a planned language in both 1888 and in 1906 was as a functional solution to a problem emerging in an era of rapid globalisation:

In recent times the association between all the nations grows by month and by year, and thus those who would engage in the least exchange between the members of other nations must learn one or two, or even four or five languages; for those who study, in politics or in trade, the inconvenience is not inconsiderable (van der Heyden, *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 3 January 1888).

and:

As world intercourse becomes more incessant with every day, so do the differences between the languages of all the nations make inconvenience and disagreeableness more and more keenly felt...It has been a yearning in the hearts of many how convenient, how agreeable it would be were peoples throughout the world to use the same language. In short, the idea of Sekaigo has come to pass (Sakai Toshihiko/Kuroita Katsumi, *Chokugen*, 19 March 1905).

These were modern problems, tied to other developments of the modern world. Tani Shintarō, who wrote the majority of the *Yomiuri Shinbun*'s articles on Volapük, argued that, because progress in Volapük could be measured in months rather than the years required in studying English, fighting the adoption of Volapük because of the presence of English was short-sighted, akin to refusing to invest in the railways because of the existence of the roads (*Yomiuri Shinbun*, 18 February 1888). Likewise, in 1905-6, the early Esperantists, too, drew the parallel between their *Sekaigo* and the developments of modern technology. Katō Misao (1906) called it a 'new practical language of twentieth century reason', whilst Higuchi Kanjirō (1904, p.327) suggested that, in a world with remarkable resonances to the contemporary process of globalisation, language remained



a key barrier:

Now, the uncanny power of steam and the superhuman power of electricity have made the globe small and brought all the nations close; in the number of days it would have taken to travel from the north of Japan to the south thirty years ago, one can now go to any of the nations of the world, a ten sen stamp is enough to communicate with all of the civilised nations and a few hours is enough to make contact by telegraph further than one thousand ri. Moreover, in recent years more telephone lines have been laid, and we are reaching an era in which radio communications will be of even more practical use. However, because the language of each country is different, there are many cases where new cultural conveniences cannot be made use of.

Whilst Esperantists also placed the language within a historical tradition of language creation dating back to the philosophical languages of the likes of Leibnitz, presenting it as an incremental development rather than a disruptive discontinuity, nevertheless it was usually presented as a fundamentally modern phenomenon, to be compared to the railway and the telegraph in its power to enable better communication.

These comparisons to modern technology are revealing. As mentioned, Seth Jacobowitz's (2015) retelling of the development of modern Japanese and the unified style stresses the importance of technology in this history, showing how material technologies such as the telegraph and linguistic innovations including shorthand acted to catalyse the transformation of written Japanese. In effect, as presented in 1905-6 and cast in the language of modern inventions, Esperanto (as indeed Volapük had been before it) was itself a form of intellectual technology. In later years the metric system, timekeeping, and longitude and latitude were also used to motivate it through comparison, conceptualising language as a phenomenon as amenable to rationalisation as time and physical space. Esperanto was a modern, rational, solution to a very modern problem of international communication, the culmination of a series of experiments and

ideas in international language which had spanned the Meiji period, in dialogue with the more familiar evolution of the Japanese language. International language was an aspect of Japan's linguistic modernity.

### **Conclusion**

In her contribution to *The American Historical Review's* 'Roundtable on historians and the question of modernity', Carol Gluck (2011, p.683) argues that 'the process of becoming modern is almost always a matter of trial and error, with constant improvisation for different purposes and cross-purposes'. Meiji Japan was host to a welter of different proposals, experiments and ideas reflecting this depiction well. Indeed, because it was so inextricably entangled with an encounter with the West and the wider world, it is no surprise that transnational activities were a fundamental part of Japan's first experiences of modernity. Language was no exception to this, so whilst the historiographical focus on the development of Japan's standardised national language reflects the centrality of the rise of the nation-state in Japanese (and global) modernity, the international dimension was another important part of Japan's linguistic modernity.

From Mori Arinori's suggestions, to the ports lingo of Yokohama, to Volapük and eventually the explosion of Esperanto into Japan, the international languages of Meiji Japan represent some of the 'zig and zags of improvisational modernity' (Gluck, 2011, p.683), attempts to devise modern solutions to the singularly modern growth in the demand for an effective medium for transnational communication. Whether one chooses to see them as failed experiments, or dead ends, or perhaps to recognise them as a continual presence in the background which, if they never gained the mass support they envisaged, nevertheless exerted influence on more central developments, the range of languages which culminated in Esperanto represents a part of the broad shadow space of alternatives and possibilities that formed a vital part of Japanese modernisation. As

such, recovering their history not only writes the international into Japan's linguistic modernity, it also stresses the question of language and language choice as a central problematic in modern Japan's trans- and international contact.

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- <sup>1</sup> Ōsugi (1964) vol.1 contains articles written in Esperanto for European magazines, whilst Muller & Benton (2006) reveal the impact of Ōsugi's activity on Chinese Anarchism and Esperanto.
- <sup>2</sup> The magazine *La Revuo Orienta* celebrated thirty years of Esperanto in Japan with a series of articles in June 1936 ('Tridek jarojn travivis Esperanto movado en Japanujo') detailing the various different experiences of the first generation of Japanese Esperantists.
- <sup>3</sup> See Forster (1982, pp.20-22) and Lindstedt (2010) for discussions of counting the size of Esperanto movements.
- <sup>4</sup> In the interests of readability, this article uses international language/communication and transnational language/communication interchangeably, but in other contexts it might be important to be more terminologically precise. For example, in the 1920s, a Marxist theory emerged which distinguished between *Kokusaigo* ('international language', a bourgeois project) and *Sekaigo* ('world language', a more truly universal language). Likewise Li (2016, p.32) includes a discussion of the various names given to Esperanto in Japanese-occupied Taiwan.
- <sup>5</sup> Another perspective on the modernization of Japan's language can be found in Essertier (2010).
- <sup>6</sup> See for example, Heinrich (2012, Chapter 2) and Lee (2010, Introduction).
- <sup>7</sup> Hall (1973, pp.189-190) suggests that the two texts reveal the development of Mori's thought from 1872 to 1873.
- <sup>8</sup> Letter from Mori Arinori to William D Whitney, 21 May 1872, quoted in Griolet (2013). I have chosen to quote these works at length, in order to fully see the nature of Mori's comments in context.
- <sup>9</sup> Both stress Mori's use of the phrase 'the language of Japan' and suggest that he intended this to mean the complex mix of Japanese and *Kanbun* (written Chinese). Heinrich points out that, according to Kobayashi (2002), Baba Tatsui was instrumental in establishing the

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general assumption that the adoption of English in Mori's work implied the abolition of Japanese, which has come to be the dominant interpretation. Another plausible explanation for more contemporary struggles to appreciate the nuance in Mori's proposals comes from Neustupný (1995), who argues that Mori's views were formed before modern conceptions of language and its relation to the nation were complete, with the implication that reading his work through the lens of *Kokugo* is somewhat anachronistic. Indeed, whilst Tessa Carroll (2001, p.53) does talk of Mori proposing a 'switch to English', she also notes that Mori was working in a time before Japan had an official standardised language, so in a sense there was nothing to switch *from*. The range of possible interpretations of Mori's proposal reflects the breadth of scope in what Cobarrubias (1983, p.66) calls the language ideology of Internationalization, which he stresses is not limited to replacement but can cover a range of other options from the official adoption of a (non-native language) through to less dramatic stances such as its mandatory inclusion in national education.

<sup>10</sup> The term 'contact zone' is due to Pratt (1992).

<sup>11</sup> 'Peke', to remove or clear away, and 'saranpan', or 'to break' (Daniels, 1948)

<sup>12</sup> Jacobowitz (2015, p.107) makes a brief mention of Volapük in a global context, but doesn't note its Japanese moment.