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# Bilingualism in Daily Life

## The Roman Alphabet in the Japanese Writing System

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In the seventh century, the Japanese language adopted the Chinese script. It represents one of the most striking cases of languages in contact. In the last five years, Japanese has entered a new phase of languages in contact, this time not through the borrowing of Chinese characters, but through the increasing use of the Roman alphabet in the Japanese writing system. Some have called this new phase the beginning of a "second Chinese invasion." This novel use of Roman letters is particularly evident in the field of advertising. Japanese is now unique because it uses the three existing types of writing systems in the world: alphabetical, syllabic, and ideographic. This paper examines the use of the Roman alphabet in advertising and various areas of Japanese life. It also considers the possible consequences of this new addition to the Japanese script for the Japanese language and culture. A Japanese scholar has even stated that in present-day Japan, a Japanese totally ignorant of the Roman alphabet would be seriously inconvenienced.

## *Acknowledgement*

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Many Japanese like to say that their country is monolingual, monocultural and monoethnic.<sup>1</sup> It is true that Japan enjoys a remarkable linguistic and cultural homogeneity, but this fact does not shield it from contacts with other languages. Even the most monolingual countries in the world have been and are influenced by other languages. In fact, the borrowing of the Chinese writing system in the seventh century by the Japanese represents one of the most striking cases of languages in contact. The Japanese transformed their language by the massive borrowing and creating of new lexical items through the medium of Chinese characters. The adoption of the Chinese writing system was not an easy task. Chinese is about as different from Japanese as any language can be, in terms of phonological system, grammatical categories, and syntactic structure. However, it is one of the characteristics of Japanese culture to be able to borrow, transform, recreate, and give its own identity to the final product. To complement the Chinese writing system the Japanese invented two kana syllabaries which are used as supplementary writing systems alongside the Chinese characters.

In the last five years, however, Japanese has entered a new phase of languages in contact. It seems that history is being repeated. Some have called this new phase the beginning of "a second Chinese invasion",<sup>2</sup> this time not through the borrowing of Chinese characters, but through the increasing use of the Roman alphabet<sup>3</sup> in the Japanese writing system. This novel use of Roman letters is particularly evident in the field of advertising. Toshiaki Nozue, in an article entitled "Kookoku to yokomojigo" [Advertising and the Roman Alphabet],<sup>4</sup> describes the use of the Roman alphabet in advertising as the vanguard of the assimilation of the Roman alphabet into the Japanese writing system, similar to the assimilation of Chinese characters.

The Japanese writing system has the distinction of being the most complicated in the modern world.

# SONY

## "Software"を、"Softwear"だと思ってる方へ——。

ソニーは、"Software"を、"System"の"wear"だと考えています。

<p>ソニー株式会社 人事部 人事課 M係 東京都品川区北品川6-7-35 千141 ☎(03)4483179</p>	<p>ご相談に応じます。 応募書類は返却いたしません。 応募の秘密は厳守いたします。 東通主1年間に弊社応募のある 方は対象となりません。</p>	<p>（勤務地）厚木・品川 （通考日）6月1日(日)予定 書類送考の上、詳細通知 （入社日）</p>	<p>（提出書類）履歴書（複写紙・写真貼付） 希望職種明記・職務経歴書 志望理由を含め、B5判 用紙3枚以内、形式自由で、 返信用封筒（宛先記入、切 手不要） （締切日）5月24日(日)必着 （通考日）6月1日(日)予定 書類送考の上、詳細通知 （入社日）</p>	<p>（待遇）給与・弊社規定により決定 休日・完全週休2日制（土・ 日、祝日）年末年始・夏休他 （提出書類）履歴書（複写紙・写真貼付） 希望職種明記・職務経歴書 志望理由を含め、B5判 用紙3枚以内、形式自由で、 返信用封筒（宛先記入、切 手不要） （締切日）5月24日(日)必着 （通考日）6月1日(日)予定 書類送考の上、詳細通知 （入社日）</p>	<p>（応募資格）募集職種に 知識を有し、実務経験のあ る方、年齢35歳以下 （待遇）給与・弊社規定により決定 休日・完全週休2日制（土・ 日、祝日）年末年始・夏休他 （提出書類）履歴書（複写紙・写真貼付） 希望職種明記・職務経歴書 志望理由を含め、B5判 用紙3枚以内、形式自由で、 返信用封筒（宛先記入、切 手不要） （締切日）5月24日(日)必着 （通考日）6月1日(日)予定 書類送考の上、詳細通知 （入社日）</p>	<p>（応募資格）募集職種に 知識を有し、実務経験のあ る方、年齢35歳以下 （待遇）給与・弊社規定により決定 休日・完全週休2日制（土・ 日、祝日）年末年始・夏休他 （提出書類）履歴書（複写紙・写真貼付） 希望職種明記・職務経歴書 志望理由を含め、B5判 用紙3枚以内、形式自由で、 返信用封筒（宛先記入、切 手不要） （締切日）5月24日(日)必着 （通考日）6月1日(日)予定 書類送考の上、詳細通知 （入社日）</p>	<p>（応募資格）募集職種に 知識を有し、実務経験のあ る方、年齢35歳以下 （待遇）給与・弊社規定により決定 休日・完全週休2日制（土・ 日、祝日）年末年始・夏休他 （提出書類）履歴書（複写紙・写真貼付） 希望職種明記・職務経歴書 志望理由を含め、B5判 用紙3枚以内、形式自由で、 返信用封筒（宛先記入、切 手不要） （締切日）5月24日(日)必着 （通考日）6月1日(日)予定 書類送考の上、詳細通知 （入社日）</p>	<p>（応募資格）募集職種に 知識を有し、実務経験のあ る方、年齢35歳以下 （待遇）給与・弊社規定により決定 休日・完全週休2日制（土・ 日、祝日）年末年始・夏休他 （提出書類）履歴書（複写紙・写真貼付） 希望職種明記・職務経歴書 志望理由を含め、B5判 用紙3枚以内、形式自由で、 返信用封筒（宛先記入、切 手不要） （締切日）5月24日(日)必着 （通考日）6月1日(日)予定 書類送考の上、詳細通知 （入社日）</p>	<p>（応募資格）募集職種に 知識を有し、実務経験のあ る方、年齢35歳以下 （待遇）給与・弊社規定により決定 休日・完全週休2日制（土・ 日、祝日）年末年始・夏休他 （提出書類）履歴書（複写紙・写真貼付） 希望職種明記・職務経歴書 志望理由を含め、B5判 用紙3枚以内、形式自由で、 返信用封筒（宛先記入、切 手不要） （締切日）5月24日(日)必着 （通考日）6月1日(日)予定 書類送考の上、詳細通知 （入社日）</p>	<p>（応募資格）募集職種に 知識を有し、実務経験のあ る方、年齢35歳以下 （待遇）給与・弊社規定により決定 休日・完全週休2日制（土・ 日、祝日）年末年始・夏休他 （提出書類）履歴書（複写紙・写真貼付） 希望職種明記・職務経歴書 志望理由を含め、B5判 用紙3枚以内、形式自由で、 返信用封筒（宛先記入、切 手不要） （締切日）5月24日(日)必着 （通考日）6月1日(日)予定 書類送考の上、詳細通知 （入社日）</p>	<p>（応募資格）募集職種に 知識を有し、実務経験のあ る方、年齢35歳以下 （待遇）給与・弊社規定により決定 休日・完全週休2日制（土・ 日、祝日）年末年始・夏休他 （提出書類）履歴書（複写紙・写真貼付） 希望職種明記・職務経歴書 志望理由を含め、B5判 用紙3枚以内、形式自由で、 返信用封筒（宛先記入、切 手不要） （締切日）5月24日(日)必着 （通考日）6月1日(日)予定 書類送考の上、詳細通知 （入社日）</p>
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### (通信・情報処理技術スタッフ募集)

Figure 1

The incorporation of the Roman script makes this system even more complex. Japanese is the only language in the world using the three types of existing writing systems in the world:

- 1) the alphabetical system where *ideally* one sound is represented by one symbol of the system,
- 2) the syllabary system where each symbol represents one syllable of the language, and
- 3) the morphemic system (so-called ideographic) where *ideally* every written symbol represents one morpheme of the language.

The recent introduction of the Roman alphabet into the Japanese system should not be confused with the restricted use of Arabic numerals (used in horizontal writing in place of kanji numerals) and the related use of Roman capitals in certain acronyms, for instance "3DK" [having three rooms plus a dining room with kitchen]. This usage is well known and started several years ago. The novel use of the Roman alphabet described in this paper is far more extensive. Words which until four or five years ago used to appear in magazines and newspapers, on



Figure 2

television, on billboards and advertisements of all kinds, in the katakana syllabary, particularly loan-words from English, French, and other languages, suddenly started to be written in Roman letters. This use was extended to Japanese names and even to Japanese words, in some cases in the middle of a Japanese sentence written in the Japanese script, presenting therefore the simultaneous use of kanji, kana, and Roman letters. Figure 1 taken from the newspaper *Asahi* (11 May 1986) is a typical example of sentences containing the three writing systems. In figure 2 *O Te Arai* (washroom), found in a bar in Tokyo, one can see Japanese words written totally in Roman alphabet. In a fascinating article, "Yokomoji ga minna no mono ni natta" [The Roman Alphabet Belongs to Everybody], Hiroshi Ishino<sup>5</sup> affirms that, in present day Japan, a Japanese totally ignorant of the Roman alphabet is at a serious disadvantage.

This paper examines the use of the Roman alphabet in advertising and various areas of Japanese life. It also examines the possible consequences, linguistic and cultural, of this new addition to the Japanese writing system.







Figure 5

In some cases, the use of the Roman alphabet is simply an effort to create the moods, the customs or the atmosphere of the foreign language and culture where the products originate, or to confer on a Japanese product a 'foreign' quality. Figure 9 shows the name of a beauty product by Shiseido, 'Clé de peau' also written in katakana. In most cases, the average Japanese will not understand the meaning, either because he does not know the foreign language or because the words in the Roman alphabet are meaningless or mistaken. 'Clé de peau' [Key of Skin] of figure 9 is difficult to interpret even for a French speaker; 'Cafe de Pub' of figure 10 is meaningless; 'Là Bonheur' in figure 11 should be 'Le Bonheur'; and 'Home-ing' of figure 12 would be meaningless for the person who cannot read the Japanese caption ('Home-ing' refers to house renovation). However, the sight of the foreign name - or the Japanese name - in the Roman alphabet makes up for lost meaning. It acts as a kind of charm, a magical incantation.

Nobuyuki Komai, Head of the Product Development Section at Sony, emphasized another advantage of foreign words written in the Roman alphabet: "From our point of view, foreign words are very easy to use





Figure 6

because the alphabet is something that people take at face value. With the word *love* in Roman letters, we can work that into a graphic design and it carries a kind of cuteness and charm. But the Chinese ideogram for 'love' (愛), we couldn't put that on a kid's school bag. It would carry a feeling of intrinsic difficulty, create resistance instead of sales appeal."<sup>8</sup>

Jared Lubarsky, in an article entitled "Names that Sell",<sup>9</sup> has noted that loanwords which have been adapted to the Japanese language and are written in katakana still have their uses in consumer marketing, but it's the unadulterated foreign words written in the Roman alphabet that really move merchandise. They are attached to automobiles, chocolate bars, and shaving lotions with an exuberance unmatched anywhere in the world. For the native speakers of languages from which these loanwords originate, the results are sometimes hilarious. In the same article, Lubarsky gives the following examples: "The Japanese consumer eats *Germ Bread* and quenches his thirst with a soft drink called *Pocari sweat*. He wears *Trim Pecker* trousers and uses *Blow Up* deodorant. His wife dries the baby with a talcum powder called *My Pee*. He dines at French restau-



Figure 7

QUARTERLY MAGAZINE FOR JOYFUL PENSION LIFE

# ペンション情報

'86・夏号/本日発売/付録共・定価530円

**特集=とびっきりの夏**  
夏こそ訪れたいペンションエリア/ペンションをベースにしたビーチガイド  
おすすめリゾートのケーキ屋さん  
最新調査・全国2150軒ペンション一覧

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## WALK

6月号  
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特集・今、チャレンジ・ウォークがおもしろい

山と溪谷社

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Figure 8

rants with names like *Le Maquereau* [which could be taken as *The Pimp*], and spreads his lawn with *Green Piles* fertilizer.”<sup>10</sup>

Companies, small or big, feel that their names printed in Roman letters provide them with a new corporate identity. For instance, *KEN* in figure 13 is the name of an important real estate company. This advertisement appears in many places in Tokyo. It is certainly not designed for foreigners since only the name of the company is written in Roman letters, the rest is all in Japanese. Figures 14 and 15 are examples of small businesses with their names advertised in both Japanese and Roman letters. In figure 16 the name appears only in Roman letters.

The alphabet has become such an important part of the language of advertising that in some sections of the clothing industry, Roman letters are the only way used to describe sizes, L, M, S, or the kind of shirts, T shatsu [T-shirt], V nekku [V neck], etc. Merchants claim that the same information written on the merchandise in Japanese would create difficulties and reduce sales. The alphabet is in. For younger Japanese who have learned the Roman

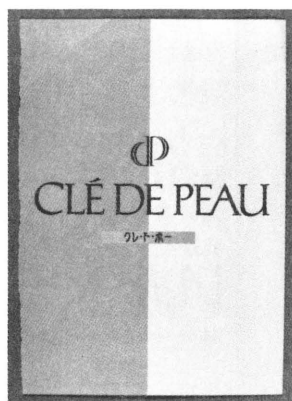


Figure 9

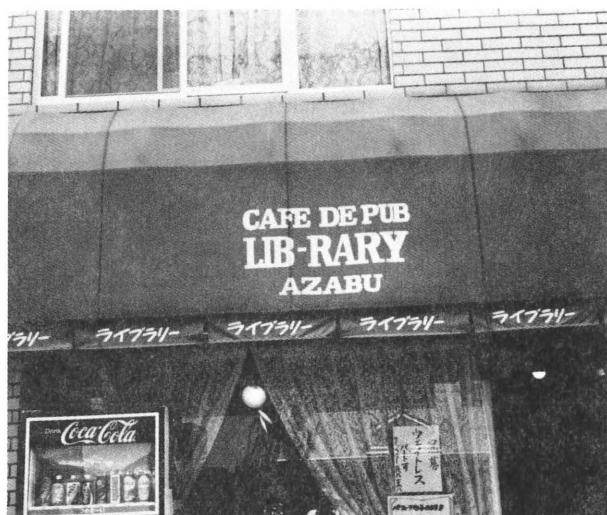


Figure 10

letters at school and have sung them, these symbols are not alien to their language. They are perceived as visual symbols that are part of their writing system, similar in shape to the kana syllabaries. In some cases, these Roman letters are so well assimilated to the Japanese script that they play the role of Chinese characters. They no longer have a direct relation to the original sound, but their primary function is to indicate meaning. The *F* used in elevators to indicate the floor is usually read with the sound of the Japanese equivalent word *kai*. Another frequent example is *versus* abbreviated *VS* and usually read in Japanese *tai*.

The use of acronyms or abbreviations of foreign or Japanese words written in capital Roman letters, quite restricted in the past, is now extensive and increasing all the time. Their simplicity and efficiency compared to the Japanese equivalent expressions amply justify their creation. For instance, *SDI* [Strategic Defense Initiative] stands for the Japanese “Staaoozu Amerika no Senryaku Booei Koosoo”, *KDD* stands for *Kokusai Denshin Denwa* [International Telegraph and Telephone]. There are two ways of reading these acronyms. One is letter by



Figure 11

letter, *S-D-I*, the other is more or less like the pronunciation of the English word, for instance *BASIC* [Basic All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code].

In Japanese, the English word for ‘computer’ is used, since computers and everything related to computers are from America. Along with the technology, the vocabulary has been imported. This vocabulary is naturally conveyed in the written style in a more efficient manner through the medium of Roman letters. For instance, in his paper, “Joohooka shakai no tosshutsubu” [The Importance of the Information Society], Toshio Ishiwata,<sup>11</sup> remarks that only four simple strokes of the pen are needed to write *VLSI* [ Very Large Scale Integration ], but the Japanese equivalent, *Daikiban shuuseki kairo* ( 大規模集積回路 ), requires a far greater number of strokes.

Professional baseball is another area where the Roman alphabet has been adopted. Names of teams and players on uniforms appear only in the Roman alphabet and it does not seem to cause any difficulty for the Japanese to read Japanese names from Roman letters.



Figure 12

This influence from the West is not a new phenomenon. Makoto Hibino, Executive Vice President of Dai-Ichi Kikaku, an advertising company, remarked<sup>12</sup> that Japan has been looking at the West for the last 200 years. Along with the technology and products, the names and expressions were also imported. This novel use of Roman letters is simply a further development of this same trend. There were times when this influence was opposed and felt to be dangerous to the purity of the Japanese culture. The Japanese of today offer no resistance to influences from the Western world. They avidly yearn for foreign customs, music, ideas, forms of leisure, clothing – all aspects of life. For them, the Roman alphabet is perceived as a standard form of writing, not something alien to the Japanese writing system. A comparison can be made with Japanese products which have unified and put together the best of two civilizations. The Japanese have combined in one system the three types of writing systems in the world.

It is tempting to speculate about the consequences of this novel use of the Roman alphabet on the Japanese writing systems and Japanese language and culture. The Japanese writing system, based on the use of

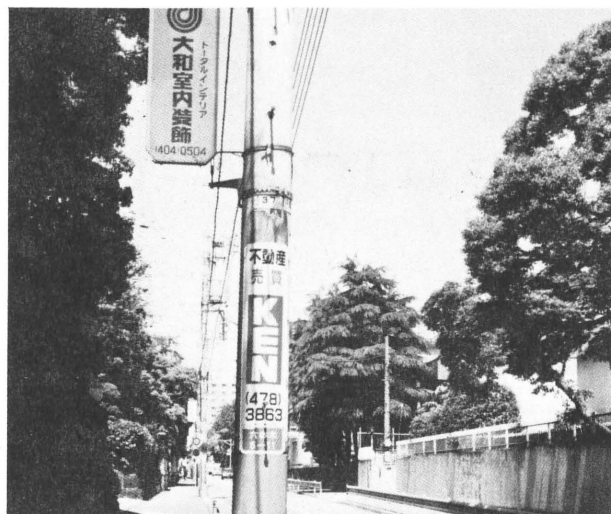


Figure 13

Chinese characters, is certainly one of the most complex ways of putting a language into a visual form. Takao Suzuki,<sup>13</sup> professor at Keio University, has endeavored to show the merits of Chinese characters for the Japanese language. They allow, he says, the ordinary Japanese person to understand such sophisticated terms as (短頭) *tantoo* 'brachycephalic' even if that person has had no earlier instruction in anthropology, because the Japanese readings of the characters *mijikai* 'short' and *atama* 'head' are known to everybody. Robert Brown<sup>14</sup> has shown convincingly that what Suzuki is describing is not meaning but etymology. Indeed, to know that the expression is composed of two characters meaning 'short' and 'head' does not give any insight in the real meaning of the expression, unless the person in question has previously learned the meaning of *tantoo*. The same could be said of the English speaker who knows some Greek and has some general idea of the etymology of the word 'brachycephalic'. Such words occur rather infrequently in the language, and do not in any way compensate for the burden of learning thousands of symbols, which often have more than one reading and sometimes more than one form.



Figure 14

Suzuki also brings forward the argument that Chinese characters are necessary to distinguish the many homophonous words of Japanese. However, it is very rare that the context where these words are used is not sufficient to yield the right interpretation. Japanese, engaged in conversation, with no visual support of any kind, use homophones without any difficulty.

For these reasons, Suzuki contends that at least in the case of Japanese, orthography is an integral part of what we should properly call *language*. When Suzuki writes: "Different graphemes, different meanings, and different associations attached to different characters sharing the same sound are exactly equivalent to those differences carried by a group of persons equally called Mary",<sup>15</sup> he is confusing semantics and graphemics, two independent systems. If one follows Suzuki's argument, one must also contend that illiterate speakers of Japanese would not be able to distinguish homophones. The French speaker who is able to distinguish through context, and without any visual support, the homophones *cou* [neck], *coup* [blow], and *coût* [cost] is not different from the Japanese speaker.



Figure 15

Is this recent use of the Roman alphabet leading to the romanization of the Japanese writing system?

First, it must be emphasized that the Japanese have done extremely well with their writing system.

Japan has one of the highest rates of literacy in the world. This writing system has been used for literature, the arts, and the functioning of a powerful industrial country. Secondly, those who have blamed Japan for not adopting a simpler writing system seem to forget that reforms of writing systems are very difficult to realize. They have not succeeded in English where we still write six graphemes for three sounds in *knight* and where most of the letters used to represent vowels have several possible pronunciations. The recent innovative use of Roman letters in the Japanese script is certainly a very modest step in the direction of romanization, but, for the moment, one must agree with Unger that

unless and until there is a perception that the leaders of the Japanese society are prepared to foster a transition to the nonuse of kanji, it is doubtful that many Japanese will be willing to take the risks involved in beginning that transition individually.<sup>16</sup>





Figure 16

For Katsuaki Horiuchi,<sup>17</sup> the use of Roman letters is a welcome addition to the Japanese language and culture; it is simply the result of the realization that Western culture is becoming part of Japanese culture, or, as he puts it, Western culture is becoming a world culture. In Japan, both the West and the East have merged into one. Japan, writes Horiuchi, is like a crucible in which both culture and goods are harmonized, and one cannot see the end of this process.<sup>18</sup> Living in an insular country and enjoying a high degree of cultural and social homogeneity, the Japanese do not attach much importance to changes in the language as a danger to the purity of their culture, and therefore, according to Horiuchi, far from being cautious, they welcome the Roman alphabet and influences from other languages.<sup>19</sup>

However, not all Japanese agree with Horiuchi. Takao Suzuki, in a recent interview,<sup>20</sup> voices an opposite opinion. He perceives the proliferation of the Roman alphabet in the Japanese writing system as a sign of the degeneration of the Japanese culture and warns that the capacity of the Japanese to assimilate foreign cultures without losing their own identity is not infinite.

## Notes

- 1 For instance, Shibata, Takeshi. 1985. "Sociolinguistic Surveys in Japan: Approaches and Problems", *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 55, 79-88.
- 2 Shibata, Takeshi. 1986. Personal communication, Tokyo, May.
- 3 Also called the "Latin Alphabet".
- 4 Nozue, Toshiaki. 1985. "Kookoku to yokomojigo", *Gengo*, Vol. 14, No. 9, 59.
- 5 Ishino, Hiroshi. 1985. "Yokomoji ga minna no mono ni natta", *Gengo*, Vol. 14, No. 9, 44.
- 6 Nozue, Toshiaki. 1985. "Kookoku to yokomojigo", *Gengo*, Vol. 14, No. 9, 56.
- 7 Misspelling of English words and unusual syntax in English advertising could indicate a similar function.
- 8 Quoted in Lubarsky, Jared. 1984. "Names that Sell", *PHP*, Vol. 15, No.12, Dec. 41.
- 9 Ibid., 39.
- 10 Ibid., 39.
- 11 Ishiwata, Toshio. 1985. "Joohooka shakai no tosshutsubu", *Gengo*, Vol. 14, No. 9, 69.
- 12 Personal Communication, Tokyo, May, 1986.
- 13 Suzuki, Takao. 1975. *Tozasareta gengo: Nihongo no sekai*. Shinchoosha: Tokyo. Suzuki, Takao. 1975. "On the Twofold Realization of Basic Concepts: In Defence of Chinese Characters in Japanese", *Language in Japanese Society*, Peng, Fred C. C. (Ed.) Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press: 175-193.
- 14 Brown, Robert. 1985. "Aspects of the Japanese Writing System", *Japan Times*, 30 Nov.
- 15 Suzuki, Takao. 1977. "Writing is Not Language, or Is It?" *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 1, 416.
- 16 Unger, Marshall J. 1984. "Japanese Orthography in the Computer Age", *Visible Language*, XVIII, 3, (Summer), 250.
- 17 Horiuchi, Katsuaki. 1985. "Amerikanizumu kara datsueiyooka e", *Gengo*, Vol. 14, No. 9. 70-77.
- 18 Ibid., 77.
- 19 Ibid., 77.
- 20 Suzuki, Takao. 1985. "Yokomojigo no hanran wa Nihonbunka suitai no kizashi?" [Is the Proliferation of Roman letters a Symptom of the Degeneration of Japanese Culture?] *Gengo*, Vol. 14, 78-81.