



Japanese Signs as a Learning Resource?

Paul Black

(paul.black@cdu.edu.au)

Charles Darwin University, Australia

Masumi Nakahara

(masumi.nakahara@cdu.edu.au)

Charles Darwin University, Australia

Abstract

The abundance of signs and similar print in the urban environment of Japan can provide authentic materials to support the learning of written Japanese. While there have been some past attempts to use pictures of signs for the teaching of Japanese reading, digital photography now makes it easy to develop electronic resources for a more systematic approach to exploiting these authentic texts, which range from ones quickly mastered by beginners to ones challenging to intermediate learners. After considering how such signs might be used as a basis for computerised reading instruction, we will consider how they can also provide bases for discussing various aspects of Japanese culture and daily life.

1 Introduction

This paper explores the use of Japanese signage as a resource for the teaching of Japanese reading. Our interest in this area grew out of the personal experiences of the first author¹, who as a Japanese language learner in Japan found that the main thing he was reading in Japanese was the extensive writing in the daily urban environment, including various types of signs, posters, public notices, and street or window menus; for brevity we often refer to these as just 'signs'. Since he had a clear need to cope with such materials well before he had any need or sufficient ability to tackle such things as letters, newspapers, and books, it seems worthwhile to examine the role Japanese signs might play in mastering literacy in Japanese.

With regard to literacy in general, we ascribe to a Multiliteracies approach (e.g. New London Group, 2000) that treats written language as only one aspect of six types of 'design' elements (Linguistic, Visual, Audio, Gestural, Spatial, and Multimodal) that can be exploited for creating meaning. While it is possible to focus on written language, as we will do here, this is only a matter of focus rather than a practice based on a belief that written language has some special status or is better treated in isolation. The reason the elements are called 'design' elements is to emphasize the fact that the pedagogical goal is not to master 'competencies', based on established practices in the past, but rather on learning to draw on design elements as resources that may even be used for creating new genres of communication in the future; examples of why this is important can be seen in recent developments in (often multimodal) communications on the World Wide Web, including the journal you are now reading. The Multiliteracies movement has also identified four key elements of pedagogy, namely Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, Critical Framing, and Transformed Practice, but to a great extent these simply cover practices that have become reasonably well established in recent years.

The scope of the present paper is far narrower than the above statement may suggest. Rather than to concern ourselves with a Multiliteracies approach to Japanese in general, our focus is on a particular problem, namely the difficulty of mastering the Japanese writing system even at the level of mere decoding. This has been said to be one of the main reasons that it takes about 2600 hours for an English speaker to master Japanese to a level that requires about 960 hours for a major European language (Savage, Clulow & Salehi, 2002). While there are many ways to approach the Japanese writing system, of course, our concern here is only with how pictures of Japanese signs might usefully be exploited for this purpose. What we will say in this regard should be compatible with various theoretical frameworks; it will not depend specifically on a Multiliteracies approach.

This paper proceeds by considering the phenomenon of written language in the public Japanese environment (Section 2), the extent to which it has been exploited in teaching materials (3), and how it might be exploited further for the teaching of both written Japanese (4) and more general aspects of Japanese culture and daily life (5). The paper draws on research originally begun in 1991 and considerably extended in 2003-04 with the collection of some 4200 digital photos of Japanese signs, a few of which can be seen on these pages².

2 Public written language in Japan



Fig. 1: Writing on stone banisters on Mount Takao (left), meal posters filling the window of a Chinese restaurant in Asakusabashi (centre), and a sign not to feed the carp in the Imperial moat (right).

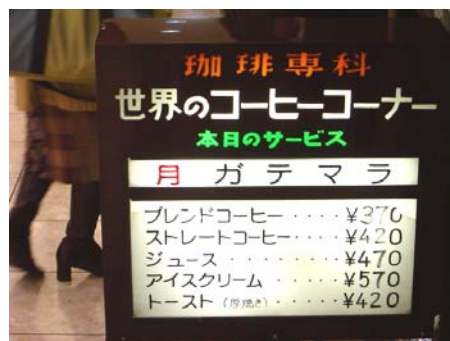


Fig. 2 Menu on a sign in front of 'World's Coffee Corner'.

Written language seems ubiquitous in the Japanese urban environment. It is found not only on store fronts, signs, posters, banners and panel vans but also on walls, windows, pavement, floors, steps, and sometimes even banisters. In the middle of the outer moat of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo a sign sticks out of the water to tell us not to feed the carp (see Fig. 1 for this and other examples). Written text has a more ephemeral existence on the electronic signboards in some subways and buses — often accompanied by recorded announcements — and occasionally on buildings or in front of shops, not to mention some uses on television.

Our concern here is just with texts that can be thought of as signs of some sort or other, including posters and notices, since these are easily dealt with in photographs. This essentially covers such things as menus (see Hinder, 1988), maps, and timetables as well, since examples can also be found on signs (as in Fig. 2). Here we will not deal with several other types of public writing of daily importance. One is the package labelling that could have helped the first author's wife realise that the green ice cream she was buying was green tea-flavoured rather than pistachio (see Krouse, 1986 for a useful introduction to, and some discussion of, the formalities of labelling). Other types include business cards (*meishi*), which rarely if ever involve writing not also found on signs, and the electronic or other text of ticket machines and ATMs, which involve special considerations.

Coping with Japanese signs is a bit different from dealing with those in languages written in the Roman alphabet. In the latter, even one totally ignorant of the language may at least recognise place names and family names, but in Japanese these are relatively challenging, since they are often written in *kanji*, the characters originally borrowed from Chinese. At the same time, some Japanese signs are relatively easy for the English speakers in that they use English loanwords written in the *katakana* syllabary, and thus make it easier to start to be able to read signs than one might expect.

Even if visitors to Japan find no other need for Japanese, they cannot avoid this wealth of written text in the environment. To some extent they may be able to manage without reading it, especially since important information and sometimes other signs are in English (see MacGregor, 2003) for a recent survey of language use in a sample of 120 signs in an affluent Tokyo suburb. However, even casual visitors can find some ability to cope with Japanese writing valuable, while residents without such an ability may realise that they are essentially functionally illiterate. In addition, learners can use a study of Japanese signs as a staircase to more demanding types of writing, as will be discussed in Section 4.

3 Past attention to signs

Considering the practical importance of signage in Japan, it is interesting that it has often been ignored in Japanese language teaching. For example, a Japanese language curriculum prepared for the Australian Committee for Training Curriculum (1994, pp. 9-16) took its reading goals to be 'Read a short dialogue or narrative passage' for all of its beginning and intermediate levels, with that for its highest level being 'Read simple authentic passages from various sources.'

At the same time, some writers have in fact seen some advantage to using pictures of signs as authentic texts accessible even to relative beginners. As one example, it was the use of signs in a Japanese language textbook by Alfonso, Noguchi and Wells (1982) that helped the first author realise their potential importance. A page or more of sign material can be found in various other textbooks produced in Australia (National Japanese Curriculum Project, 1993, pp. 62-63, p. 106; Evans et al., 1995, p. 34; 1996, p. 38, p. 61; Burnham, 2002, pp. 96-97, p. 138; Wackett & Okutsu, 2002, p. 18, p. 47, p. 70, p. 88) and elsewhere (Taniguchi et al., 1995, p. 52, p. 105). Other non-Australian examples include a book by Shaad (1987) that used about two dozen photographs of signs and menus to support the learning of the *katakana* syllabary, as well as the popular textbook *Japanese for busy people* (Association for Japanese-Language Teaching, 1994, pp. 16-18) that included 35 pictures of 'Signs in daily life', although without discussion of their import.

From as early as 1976, several books relating to Japanese have focused primarily on Japanese signs. Among these, De Mente (1978) saw the value of introducing Japanese learners to the signs and notices they were likely to encounter in the environment, although the book did not actually use photographs of signs; it merely gave over four hundred expressions likely to be seen on signs in such areas as airports, banks, restaurants, post offices, and subways. A later book by Moriyama (1987) purported to be a practical guide to Japanese signs, but it actually dealt with a variety of topics that did not always involve signs, such as drink, housing, medical matters, and family names. A book on *Reading Japanese signs* by McArthur (1994) is divided into 57 topics, ranging from commuter passes and boxed lunches to love hotels and antiques, each supported by at least one picture of a sign, form and/or other artefact bearing writing, followed by a transliteration and translation. The chosen examples tend to be more elaborate than basic, with no progression in difficulty, but in any case this small volume is now out of print.

Few of the books mentioned provide any exercises relating to the signs. Generally they simply present the signs as examples that the learner may try to read or simply study with the help of an accompanying translation and/or explanation. Those books which include signs among more general instructional materials sometimes ask learners questions to test their understanding of the signs.

Since print publication of photographs tends to be expensive, the emergence of electronic publication, such as over the World Wide Web, has made it far more feasible to publish collections of Japanese signs and exercises based on them. Black (1997b) developed simple interactive online exercises using Japanese signs, although only a small number due to the effort involved in scanning photographs to produce electronic images. Regrettably these exercises do not run properly on some computer platforms. Later collections have undoubtedly benefited from digital photography. While our own collection of some 4200 signs is not yet publicly available, Kelly (2003) has made some nine hundred pictures of signs available over the Web, while Hatasa (2000) has provided pictures of 164 Japanese signs that might be downloaded for teaching purposes. Various other sites publish pictures of Japanese signs for other purposes, whether historical or aesthetic; a good example is a site by Sato (2003) which also has links to a number of other sites.

Most of the above sites merely make electronic pictures of signs available, and it would be up to teachers or learners to decide how to make use of them. The one exception is the site by Black (1997b), which will be described further in Section 4.1.

A search of the World Wide Web turned up one other site of general relevance, namely a discussion of orthographic variants seen in Japanese signs and advertising by Halpern (2002). At the same time a search of the literature has failed to locate any scholarly discussion of how signs might be used in teaching Japanese reading, a lack we thus hope to remedy through the present paper.

4 Using signs for teaching reading

Japanese signs have several characteristics that make them pedagogically appealing. Firstly, they represent authentic material rather than text prepared for the purpose of language teaching, and it has been argued that exposure to such authentic material is necessary for successful learning languages (see e.g. Stern 1992; Crozet & Liddicoat 1997). This relates to viewing language use as a cultural act (see e.g. Kramsch 1993, p. 178). In addition, Japanese signs not only represent authentic materials, but ones commonly encountered daily by anyone visiting Japan, as noted in section 2. Thus the ability to read Japanese signs has considerable practical value.

A second point is that each Japanese sign, however brief, represents a whole text in itself. While there is still value in 'bottom-up' approaches to reading, such authorities on teaching literacy as Hood, Solomon, & Burns (1996), have taken the position that these are best integrated with 'top-down' approaches, which depend on considering whole texts in their social and cultural contexts. At the same time, to the extent that signs may also involve non-textual elements, such as

pictures, it is also useful to think of them in terms of the Multiliteracies approach mentioned in the introduction, since this focuses not only on language alone, as more traditional approaches to literacy have often done, but also on the importance of appreciating how non-linguistic elements can contribute to meaning.

Japanese sign material also has the advantage of being so varied that it could in theory be possible to design an extensive program on reading based entirely on photographs of Japanese signs. The resulting mastery of the Japanese writing system, if only at the level of decoding, could then provide a solid basis for moving on to consider other types of Japanese writing, even though these would involve the learning of additional genres and further details of language use. After considering how a program might be designed on the basis of signs alone (in Section 4.1), we go on to questions of sequencing (in 4.2).

4.1 Approaches to instruction

We presume that many teachers could imagine ways to make occasional use of signs in classroom study, perhaps integrated into other activities, such as role play or information gap exercises. We will not consider such possibilities further here, however, but instead focus on the question of whether and how pictures of signs might be used as the main basis for reading instruction. We would not see this happening in the classroom, because we believe that sustained attention to signs could easily become boring to a class, and it could in any case represent a waste of teaching resources to the extent that such instruction could be provided more efficiently by computer software.

The study of Japanese signs lends itself especially well to computer-based instruction because the signs lend themselves far more to reading than to writing, and thus the computer software need not attempt to deal with Japanese writing produced by the student. The signs can be dealt with through a comprehension-based approach that stresses the importance of understanding language as a basis for eventual production (extensive explanations of comprehension-based approaches can be found in such works as Winitz, 1981, and Courchène et al, 1992). This does not mean that instruction in writing may not also be important to reading ability (see e.g. Lightbown et al, 2002 with respect to English as a second language), and perhaps especially so for Japanese, for which a knowledge of stroke order is important for recognising handwritten variants of symbols. However, since there is little reason for learners to write signs in Japanese, we see writing as something to be dealt with separately from a study of Japanese signs.

That does not mean that a study of Japanese signs could not help support learning to read or write other types of Japanese texts to some extent, but only that there is reason to doubt that the study of signs alone could provide a fully adequate basis for learning to read even just the types of Japanese writing that appear on these signs. While we recognise the importance of integrating a study of Japanese signs with other types of instruction, however, how this might best be done depends heavily on who the learners are and what their purposes are for studying Japanese. For example, in research on primary, secondary and tertiary student use of computerised language learning materials available over the World Wide Web, Felix (2001, p. 308, p. 320) found that about half the students (55.4% in one of two studies) preferred using the Web-based materials in connection with face-to-face teaching, and yet a significant minority (34.6% in the same study) preferred to use the same materials without access to a tutor. In any case, here we will consider only the design of computer-based instructional materials that exploits Japanese signs.

Section 3 has already noted how digital photography makes it relatively easy and inexpensive to produce large electronic collections of signs. Software could then be designed to allow individual learners to access and work with the signs in such collections in a variety of ways to suit their own particular learning styles. In writing this we are thinking of adolescent and adult learners rather than young children, since such children may need more guidance, but in other respects the type of learning is open: the software could be used by anyone who felt an interest or a need for it; we would not advocate imposing it on learners who would not (yet) naturally need to read signs.

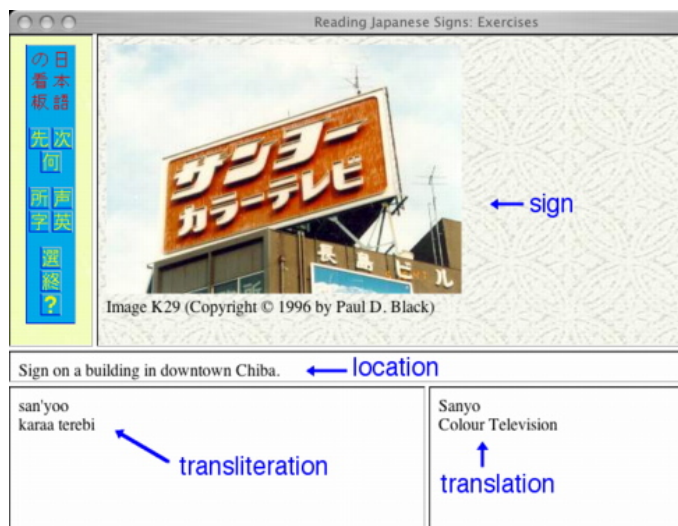


Fig. 3: Sample screen from Black's (1997b) lesson materials.

As for how such software might work, we will begin by considering the rudimentary, Web-based attempt by Black (1997b).³ This includes exercises of two types. One is a so-called 'display' exercise that is little more than an electronic 'flash card' system. This allows the learner to choose whether to deal with all types of signs or to restrict them according to whether ones containing only *katakana*, only *hiragana*, or ones containing relatively basic, medium level, or more difficult *kanji*. The learner can then call up pictures of signs in either a set sequence or in random order, and while or after attempting to read each sign, they can call up three types of additional information, namely the location of the sign, a transliteration of the text of the sign into roman letters (*roomaji*), and a translation of the text into English; Figure 3 shows an example of all the information that is eventually provided on the screen, with the arrows and words in blue having been added here to distinguish the parts. Just as with flash cards, learners can thus test their memory and check to see whether it is correct. (In terms of the pedagogy of Multiliteracies referred to in the introduction, this would constitute a type of Situated Practice.)

Whereas there is nothing new about flash cards, their popularity with learners presumably relates to how these learners have found them helpful. In recent research on computerised self-instructional material, Dunkel, Brill and Kohl (2002) found that a type of electronic flash cards was considered the second most popular and effective of the five types of exercises they used, with about a quarter of the 32 students nominating them as the type of exercise they used most regularly and the one that helped them most with the final exam and for the development of speaking and comprehension skills. (The same paper cites Noijons, 1993 in pointing out the great difficulty of determining the effectiveness of language learning technology.) Electronic flash cards have the advantage of allowing a range of relevant information to be accessed; for example, in addition to the location, transliteration, and translation seen in Figure 3, it could be possible (if perhaps not easy) to allow learners to look up dictionary entries for particular *kanji* simply by clicking on the *kanji* in the picture of a sign. (In terms of the pedagogy of Multiliteracies, the provision of such information could be regarded as Overt Instruction.)

At the same time, an electronic database of such flash cards can allow learners to access signs not only in terms of their relative difficulty, as allowed by the material by Black (1997b), but also in terms of type (e.g. street signs, shop signs, signs found in subway or railway stations, and so on) and perhaps other characteristics. To better appreciate the range of possibilities you might consider

the Indonesian language teaching software described by Black and Goebel (2001) and Goebel and Black (2003).

In the second type of exercise in Black (1997b), learners again call up pictures of signs, but this time only in random order and accompanied by a multiple choice question that would require at least partial comprehension of the sign. For example, the question accompanying the sign in Figure 3 begins with ‘This sign advertises’ and then gives four possible answers: ‘cars’, ‘computers’, ‘television’, or ‘video players’. If the learner selects the wrong answer, the program indicates this and asks for another answer. As soon as the correct answer is selected (here ‘television’), the program continues on to another sign. The questions could, of course, be designed to address either a surface level understanding of what the sign says, as in the above example, or an interpretative level of why the sign might say what it does. As an example of the latter, learners might be asked whether the sign in Figure 3 constitutes ‘a warning’, ‘a request’, ‘advertising’, or ‘an apology’. (In terms of the pedagogy of Multiliteracies, there is thus some scope for Critical Framing.)



Fig. 4: ‘Don’t go under’ the boom blocking the path across the tracks.

The extent to which learners may benefit from such material may depend on how they approach it, whether simply as material to be memorised or as problems to be solved. The latter way is how the first author approached the signs he encountered in daily life in Japan in 1991-93. When he saw a sign whose text was familiar, it provided him with an opportunity to practice and thus reinforce what he already knew, but when he encountered an unfamiliar sign he would typically react by wondering what it said and by trying to make sense of it. Not all learners might be inclined to do this of their own accord, of course, but they could be asked to do this through the design of the instruction or the instructional materials. In attempts to make sense of signs, the settings often provide valuable clues. For example, upon seeing a sign くぐるな in *hiragana* on a boom lowered to block a path across railway tracks, the first author was able to guess that the sign must be some sort of warning not to cross the tracks (Fig. 4). It is thus useful to provide learners with information, visual or otherwise, on the context of signs, not merely the text of the sign as in such earlier works as De Mente (1978).

To the extent the sign was in *kanji* the first author was often unable to pronounce the words, and sometimes he could make no sense at all of the sign without looking the *kanji* up in a dictionary. Occasionally, however, partial knowledge and the context would provide enough clues to enable him to understand much or all of the sign, whether or not he could pronounce the words on it. For example, upon seeing 高電圧 on a cage enclosing electrical equipment he was able to recognise the *kanji* for ‘high’ and ‘electricity’, and it reminded him that he had also seen the third *kanji* in 高血圧 ‘high blood pressure’. The context suggested that the sign should surely mean ‘high voltage’, and from this he realised that ‘voltage’ was being expressed in an understandable way as ‘electricity pressure’.

This is valuable as a learning process because it is engaged and reflective and makes links (inferencing) between pieces of learning, an activity in learning whose importance has been clear

since the work of Ausubel (e.g. 1963). The same principle would apply to language learning software to the extent that learners engage with the materials in such a way as to integrate the learning of new material with what they already know, as discussed above. In any case it means that learners should be given opportunities to try to make meaning out of the signs, as well as access to any resources they might need to help them do this, such as information on location and context that can be provided by the software, and ultimately transcriptions and/or translations that will enable them to check their conclusions. Sometimes they would find that they could read all or most of a sign easily before confirming the meaning, while for others they would need to consult the accessible information more extensively.

Would a study of Japanese signs be interesting enough to learners to motivate them to undertake the study? This will surely depend on the learners and their background. Certainly the first author found the authentic nature of Japanese signs motivating, even when he first encountered them in a textbook by Alfonso, Noguchi, & Wells (1982), before he had ever been to Japan. Other learners may well be less interested. Even so, instructional material can be designed to suit those who will be interested in pursuing the study of Japanese signs, even though that may not include everyone.

4.2 Sequencing sign material

This section considers how Japanese sign materials might be sequenced. As the preceding section should suggest, we believe that such materials should be flexible enough to allow learners to make choices about such things as sequencing to the extent that they have particular preferences, such as whether to start with the *katakana* or *hiragana* syllabary or even *kanji*. Some - perhaps many - learners will not have a basis for making such decisions, however, and thus for their benefit the software should provide a default sequencing that they can follow without having to consider the issues involved.

With regard to sequencing, reading signs involves different considerations than studying written conversational Japanese. In connection with the latter, learners are normally first introduced to the *hiragana* syllabary and then move on to *katakana* and then *kanji*, the same sequencing used for teaching literacy to Japanese school children. This makes sense because writing may help to reinforce the spoken language, in which case it makes sense to use *hiragana* as the most general writing system, whether alone or in part as *furigana* to show the pronunciation of any *kanji* used. (The most consistent use of the latter approach we are aware of was in an old textbook by Mizutani and Mizutani, 1977.) From the second author's experience, learners who are allowed to depend instead on a romanised transcription (*roomaji*) tend to pronounce Japanese with a strong foreign (e.g. Australian) accent.

While using *hiragana* helps avoid such 'spelling-based pronunciations', it is difficult to delay getting into *katakana* at the same stage, since the latter is needed for writing Western students' names. For reading signs, furthermore, *katakana* can be far more useful than *hiragana* for English speakers, since it is used for writing the many words borrowed from English. With a knowledge of *katakana* and how it is used to render English words, even an English speaker with very little understanding of Japanese vocabulary or grammar can make sense of much print in the Japanese environment. Accordingly, occasional writers (e.g. Ashworth & Hitosugi 1993; Black, 1997a) have suggested that Japanese language learners begin reading with *katakana*. Jordan and Chaplin (1976) and Jordan and Noda (2005) have similarly begun Japanese reading instruction with *katakana*, without any explicit statement of reasons for this choice. Here we similarly advocate beginning with *katakana* because of how it quickly makes many Japanese signs accessible to English speakers, as detailed below.

Of the some 4200 signs we photographed in 2003-04, we have classified 1705, and these include a majority of the signs that do not use *kanji*. Of those classified, 209 are in *katakana* alone. Examples that a beginner might easily be able to interpret that might also be worth their while

knowing as they are likely to be of use include エレベーター ‘elevator, lift’, サウナ ‘sauna’, フレグランス ‘fragrance’, カーテン ‘curtains’, コインランドリー ‘coin laundry’, コインロッカー ‘coin lockers’, コピーサービス ‘copy service’, レンタカー ‘rentacar’, リサイクルセンター ‘recycle centre’, パーキングチケット ‘parking ticket’, メンズサンダル ‘men's sandals’, ペットフードコーナー ‘pet food corner’, and マクドナルド ハンバーガー ‘MacDonalds hamburger’.

Others are less straightforward. Some require understanding of how some English words get truncated in Japanese (e.g. ゲームソフト ‘game software’) or modified in meaning (e.g. ノンステップバス ‘non-step [i.e. flat fare] bus’), or they may require understanding of aspects of Japanese culture, such as its common reliance on the 24-hour clock (as in the potentially cryptic チケット 9-19 in the sign in Fig. 5). Some involve special combinations of *kana* to represent English syllables not found in native Japanese words, such as *fa* (as in ファミリーレストラン ‘family restaurant’), *fo* (インフォメーション ‘information’) and *di* (e.g. ボディマッサージ ‘body massage’). Sometimes the *katakana* is used as if to italicise native Japanese (or Sino-Japanese) words: e.g. クスリ ‘medicine’, ラーメン ‘noodles’, カサ ‘umbrellas’, メガネ ‘glasses’, and カバン ‘bags’. Naturally, there should be no reason why the knowledge of *katakana* gained from studying such signs could not help learners read other, non-sign material in *katakana* as well.



Fig. 5: ‘[Parking] ticket [needed]
9 [a.m.] - 7 [p.m.]’



Fig. 6: ‘All 100 yen’

After *katakana* it may make sense for learners to move on to *hiragana* if they have not studied it already. For signs, however, the utility of *hiragana* is limited until the learner also moves on to *kanji*. The classified signs include only 155 signs readable with *hiragana* alone (if sometimes glossing *kanji*), and another 43 with both *hiragana* and *katakana*. Of the former, nearly half are names, mainly of stations (whose names are usually also found in *roomaji*) and bridges (mostly along the Kanda River in Tokyo). Some others give Japanese words, such as おそば ‘buckwheat noodles’, おでん ‘stew’, おみくじ ‘fortunes’, うなぎ ‘eels’, とまれ ‘stop’, and the borrowed たばこ ‘tobacco’. Occasionally longer expressions are rendered into *hiragana*, such as ぜんぶ100円 ‘all 100 yen’ (Fig. 6). Sometimes this seems to be done for the benefit of children, as with あぶないから はいってはいけません, essentially ‘Danger, don’t enter.’ However, it is far more common to find *hiragana* together with *kanji* on signs, as typical of Japanese writing more generally.



Fig. 7: 'Entrance'

While mastering the *kanji* derived from Chinese characters is a daunting task, the beginner can begin to find this study rewarding even after learning as few as fifty to a hundred *kanji*. Some are quickly learned through frequent encounters: e.g. 円 'yen', 入口 'entrance' (Fig. 7), and 出口 'exit'. Some may be mastered as the learner finds them useful, e.g. to find a 銀行 'bank' or an お手洗 'toilet'. To use railways or subways it is valuable to be able to recognise the *kanji* used in place names, which may be read more quickly than the *hiragana* transcriptions — and fortunately many of the *kanji* used in place names are quite common. In a survey of the names of 46 wards (区), 123 cities (市), 116 towns (町), 38 villages (村) and 466 stations (駅) in the Tokyo area, we found that 37 *kanji* other than those five occurred more than ten times each. With the actual number of occurrences preceding each *kanji*, these included seventeen *kanji* describing the type of place (46 川, 45 田, 33 山, 28 谷 and 島, 25 野, 22 原, 20 井, 17 橋, 16 木, 15 戸, 14 台, 13 坂, 宿 and 園, and 12 京), five general qualifiers (46 大, 37 新, 20 小, 14 高, and 13 本), the four directions (33 東, 24 西, 14 北, and 12 南), three other locationals (23 中, 21 上, and 14 下), a *kanji* meaning 'in front of' (22 前) in some station names, two numbers (15 三 and 13 千), and five other *kanji* (18 目, 17 丁, 12 子 and 日, and 11 代). Twenty-two of these *kanji* are also among the 85 most frequent or important in general usage according to *A new dictionary of kanji usage* (1982).

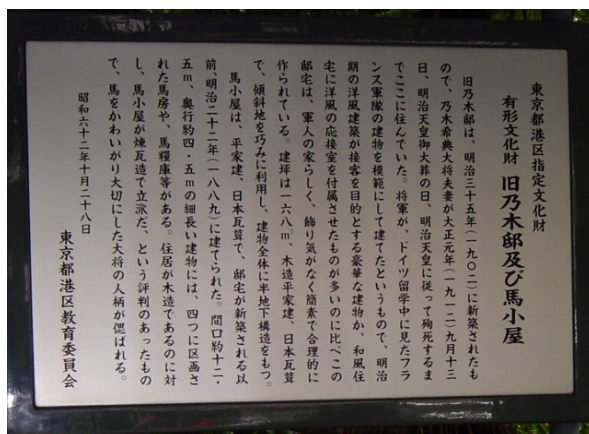


Fig. 8: A sign with longer text, about the residence and stable of General Nogi, in Tokyo.

While some approaches to the study of spoken Japanese may dictate otherwise, the information presented above shows that for practical reading purposes alone it could make sense for learners to begin with *katakana* and to move on to simple *kanji* at about the same time as *hiragana*. From there they can progress into increasingly less frequent *kanji* as they are also extending their mastery of Japanese grammar and vocabulary. They can also move on to signs containing longer texts, which almost always involve *kanji*. While signs can be as short as a single word, and even a single symbol for signs marking stores that sell 本 ‘books’ or 酒 ‘liquor’, they can also contain moderately long descriptions, as in Fig. 8.



Fig. 9: Left: handwritten *katakana* for ‘magic sneakers ¥980’. Middle: stylistic *katakana* for ‘San-raku ladies wear’. Right: handwritten *hiragana* and *kanji* for ‘Udon [noodle] house’.

A second consideration in sequencing is the extent to which the written shapes deviate from common printed forms. In this regard signs can show much greater variation than is typical of books, magazines, and newspapers. Fig. 9 presents handwritten and stylistic *katakana* and a more challenging form of *hiragana* (with *kanji*) on a shop window, while Fig. 10 shows examples of playful and older style *kanji*.



Fig. 10: Left – a tooth appears within the *kanji* for ‘tooth’ in this sign for a dental clinic. Middle – playful *kanji* for ‘rotary Shiretoko sushi’. Right – old style *kanji* at the entrance to ‘Yasukuni Shrine’.

Another challenge for learners are electronic signboards, since they present their message for only a limited amount of time (as in the subway sign in Fig. 11), or even present it moving across

or down the signboard to disappear on the other end. Either effect can be maintained by using video clips in electronic lesson material.

5 Using signs to raise issues of culture



Fig. 11: Electronic signboard on a subway: ‘this door will open’.

Like such scholars as Agar (1994), we view any use of language as simultaneously a cultural act. Whereas Agar (1994, p. 60) went so far as to coin the word *linguagaculture* to avoid distinguishing between language and culture, however, we will continue to make a distinction for practical reasons, in order to be able to relate examples of text to the less linguistic aspects of culture that they relate to.

In this view, any text can provide a basis for discussing aspects of culture, and thus signs are also a source of culture. For example, the sign for Yasukuni Shrine (Fig. 10) could prompt a discussion of its significance in Japanese society and hence why certain Asian countries express anger when the Japanese Prime Minister pays his yearly visit to this shrine, even though its name means ‘Peaceful Country’ (*Yasukuni*). In such cases we would advocate non-essentialist approaches to culture, i.e. ones that do not simplistically assume that cultures are uniform and unchanging (see for example Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2004, pp. 3-5). This is better undertaken through such approaches as open discussion (in Japanese, as learners become able to) of the implications of texts and artefacts in the hope of avoiding the stereotyping characteristic of some older approaches, such as that referred to by Nagata (1998) as *Nihonjijoo* (literally ‘things Japanese’).

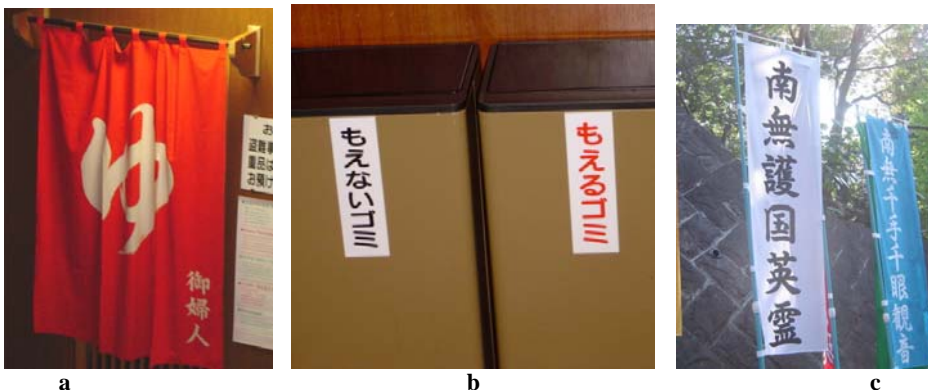


Fig. 12: Aspects of culture: (a) ‘hot water / ladies’, (b) ‘non-burnable rubbish’ and ‘burnable rubbish’, and (c) a Buddhist banner on Mount Takao invoking the spirits of the war dead.

Even signs that might simply be used to teach learners how to decode texts often raise cultural questions if the learners are to be able to proceed to fully understanding them. For example, a sign for a pachinko parlour could prompt questions to be raised about the sort of institution this is and its significance in Japanese society. The sign 湯 ‘hot water’ on a curtain across a door in a hotel (Fig. 12a) offers entry to another aspect of Japanese society. The labeling of dust bins as ‘burnable’ or ‘non-burnable’ (Fig. 12b), as well as ones for ‘cans and bottles’, has implications for daily practices, and could also help prompt discussion about such things as Japanese attitudes toward the environment and the economy, perhaps in connection with signs for the many ‘recycle centres’ that have appeared since the economic downturn. Signs from temples (Fig. 12c), shrines, and Christian-style wedding halls may similarly prompt discussion about religion and Japanese views on it. Signs showing Japanese suburb names and local addresses demand some understanding of how addresses work in Japan, a topic that could also be addressed with the use of city maps.



Fig. 13: English borrowings in (a) ‘all 100 yen’, (b) ‘the flowers’, and (c) ‘Natural Tom’s’, with an apostrophe before the ズ.

Some signs raise questions about language issues, such as the tremendous impact of English. This is firstly obvious from the masses of borrowed vocabulary written in *katakana*, but interestingly these include not only words for western artefacts or technological innovation, but even ones for which Japanese has common equivalents: compare the use of the borrowed word オール ‘all’ in Figure 13a with the use of native Japanese ぜんぶ ‘all’ in Figure 5. Even the English definite article has been borrowed, as Japanese ザ, as in Fig. 13b. The sign in Figure 13c has actually gone so far as to borrow the apostrophe from the English possessive. Such signs offer a pathway into the issue of the current hegemony of English as a world language, whether just in the Japanese context or more generally.

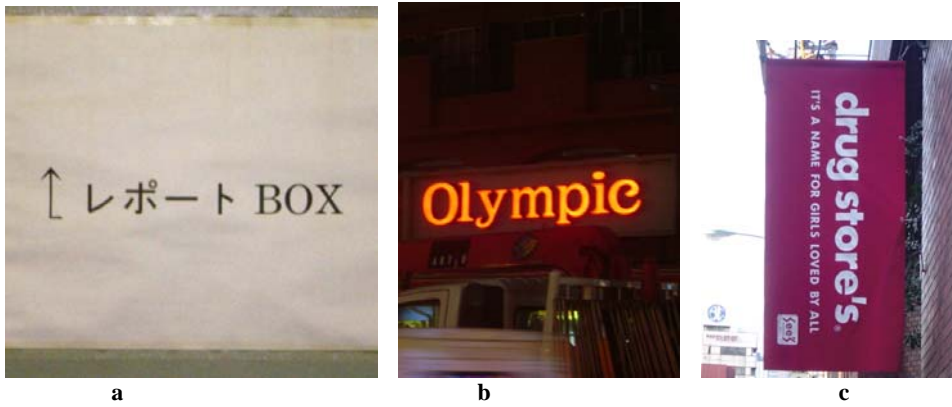


Fig. 14: English in signs for (a) a ‘report box’, (b) as a store name, and (c) in a slogan: ‘drug store’s / it’s a name for girls loved by all’.

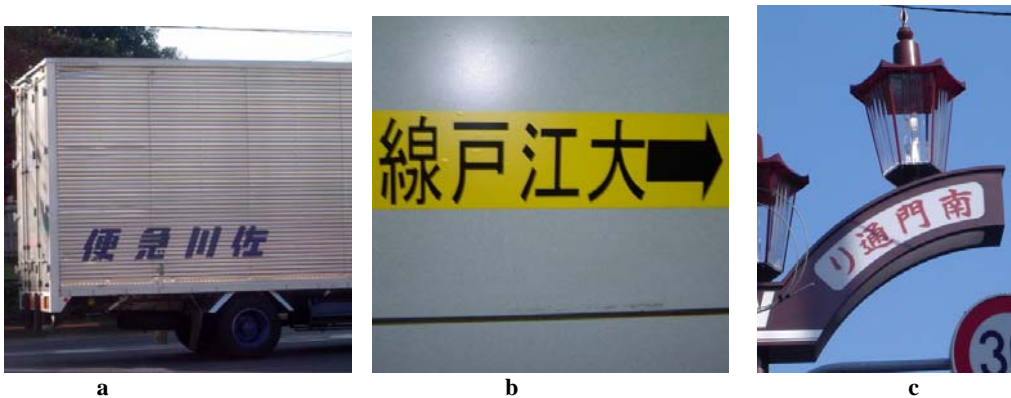


Fig. 15: Writing sometimes goes from right to left on vehicles, when this corresponds to front-to-back, as on the Sagawa Express Delivery truck in (a). Rare examples of writing right to left on other signs include the Oedo Line sign in (b) and the Southgate Street sign in (c).

The same issue is apparent from the fact that many signs in Japan are partly or entirely in English, and these are not just ones to provide information to English speakers (again cf. MacGregor, 2003). Occasionally the English appears within otherwise Japanese signs, as with the word ‘BOX’ in Figure 14a. That this word is capitalised relates to the fact that Japanese has also borrowed just the uppercase Roman letters as its fourth orthographic system, which is indispensable for writing about things like CDs, DVDs, the JR railway lines, and choices between 定食 (‘set meal’) A and B. Figures 14b and 14c also show how some stores have adopted English names or slogans.

Occasional Japanese signs are interesting for how they relate to the normal Japanese conventions of writing either vertically, in columns from right to left across the page, or else horizontally, from left to right in lines down the page as in English. On vehicles, however, writing can alternatively proceed from the front of the vehicle toward the back, and thus horizontally from right to left on one side of the vehicle, as seen on the truck in Figure 15a. Interestingly, in Iidabashi Station in Tokyo one sign was found to have writing proceeding from right to left behind an arrow, as if the arrow represented the front of a vehicle (see Figure 15b). Figure 15c shows a sign that must have been a challenge for its creators, who apparently decided to write anticlockwise along the arc, in the less usual direction of right to left. While to write in a clockwise direction in this case would

have involved moving in the more common direction of left to right, it would also have contradicted the norm by moving in an upwards direction.

6 Conclusion

In summary, we hope this paper demonstrates that pictures of signs can represent a valuable resource for teaching Japanese reading and thus promoting Japanese literacy more generally. They not only represent authentic materials, but ones that are particularly important for visitors to Japan to be able to read. At the same time it is relatively easy for English speakers to make a start with Japanese signs because they often use borrowings from English written in the *katakana* syllabary. While signs involving *kanji* are more challenging, even fifty to a hundred *kanji* are enough to make a significant difference in the learner's ability to cope with such things as place names. Pictures of signs can also be used as authentic materials to prompt discussion about Japanese culture and daily life, including aspects of the Japanese language itself.

Notes

- ¹ This paper combines the perspectives of the first author as an applied linguist and learner of Japanese and that of the second author as a native speaker and teacher of Japanese. They also extend their thanks to the anonymous referees who have contributed heavily to the content and stylistic development of this paper.
- ² The most recent data was gathered while the first author was a visiting lecturer at Waseda University, and we are grateful for Waseda's support for this research.
- ³ If you find that the version of these materials available from the World Wide Web does not work on your computer, you can obtain a corrected copy by contacting Paul Black at <paul.black@cdu.edu.au>.

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