

Differences in the logic and textual organization of French and Japanese: Implications for academic writing education

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This article presents some textual differences of French and Japanese writing that could be obstacles for Japanese learners in learning French as a foreign language. The difficulties originate from different literary traditions, expectations of the two cultures, and school education. In particular, the following three French rhetorical conventions constitute problems for Japanese learners: less personal quality, less spontaneity, and importance of text planning. We also identified some aspects of Japanese writing education through a questionnaire. The results reveal that in Japanese education, writing has relatively minor importance and that the French norm is not the most widely applied model in Japan.

日本人学習者にとって仏語学習において障害となりうる日本語と仏語の間の文章の違いを述べる。この困難は、文学的伝統の違い、文化的な期待、学校教育に起因する。特に、個人的でない、自発的ではない、よく構想を練るという仏語の三つの修辭的慣習は日本人学習者にとって問題となる。さらにアンケートを通して、日本の教育では作文は比較的重要性が低く、フランス的な規範は日本では最も奨励されている型ではないという、日本の作文教育の側面を明らかにする。

1. Introduction

This article presents some textual differences between French and Japanese writing that could be obstacles for Japanese learners in learning French as a foreign language.

Regarding the cultural differences of logic in writing, we may think first of all of contrastive rhetoric, as conceived by Kaplan (1966). After examining about 600 English compositions written by nonnative students, Kaplan reports that they employ textual organization that violates the expectations of the native reader. He argues that this phenomenon shows negative transfer from the nonnative writers' L1 language and culture.

But perhaps because contrastive rhetoric was created in the United States, there have not been many studies of French texts using this approach. To our knowledge, Hidden (2014) is the first French researcher to carry out systematic studies of cultural differences in writing between French and other languages. According to her, the following are the rhetorical conventions of French:

- 1) French texts are less personal.
- 2) French texts are less spontaneous.
- 3) In French composition, text planning is important.

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Nonnative writers often violate these implicit conventions, thereby producing strange French texts. Hidden's study analyzes compositions written by students of various nationalities, but it is not centered on Japanese learners. However, in our opinion, these conventions constitute obstacles, especially for Japanese learners.

Based on Hidden's observations, the following sections will present some examples illustrating Japanese features: first, personal quality; second, spontaneity; and third, text planning. These could annoy native French teachers and might even create cultural conflict between French teachers and Japanese learners. We will argue that the differences originate from different literary traditions, expectations of the two cultures, and school education. Concerning text planning, we will point out, in the fourth section, a peculiar phenomenon of paragraph writing by Japanese learners. Last, we will show some aspects of Japanese writing education through a questionnaire.

2. Personal quality of texts

The less personal quality of French writing is obvious compared to English and even more so compared to Japanese. Fløttum (2003) reports that even in scientific discourse, there are some cultural identities, and among other findings, that the occurrence of the singular first person pronoun is more frequent in English than in French, regardless of the discipline concerned. According to Takagaki (2011), this tendency is apparent between French and Japanese critical essays as well: French writers are expected to disappear behind their reasoning and to adopt a neutral style, while in Japanese argumentation the author's presence is prominent, as seen in frequent occurrences of first person pronouns.

The less personal quality of French can also be observed in the interpretation of assignments. If a teacher gives Japanese students the assignment "What do you think of X?", they will take the question literally to mean that they should express their personal opinion freely on the subject. On the other hand, according to Donahue (2008), in France, this assignment should be reinterpreted as something like "What *must one* think of X?" This difference of interpretation comes mainly from the influence of secondary education. Japanese high school students are encouraged to write about their own experiences and to express their personal opinions about subjects. They are expected to think through their own experiences. This is not the case for French high school students, who are expected to learn to create generalizations from their personal experience and to express their opinion on the basis of objective reasoning.

3. Spontaneity

Many native French teachers are embarrassed by the typical Japanese attitude towards writing. In Japanese texts, there are sometimes traces suggesting that the author has just noted down ideas as they came to mind. That is because a show of spontaneity has been deeply rooted in the Japanese literary tradition. A typical expression can be found in the famous essay of the 14th century in the *Tsurezuregusa*, cited in Example (1).

- (1) つれづれなるまゝに、日ぐらし硯に向かひて、心にうつりゆくよしなしごとを
そこはかとなく書き付くれば、あやうこそ物狂ほしけれ。

(『徒然草』序段)

What a strange, demented feeling it gives me when I realize I have spent whole days before this inkstone, with nothing better to do, jotting down at random whatever nonsensical thoughts have entered my head.

(Yoshida Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness. The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, translated by Donald Keene)

In reading the underlined passage, we have the impression that the entire work is the direct outcome of immediate personal reflection.

We can also find similar expressions in contemporary texts. Example (2) is taken from an essay by Kobayashi Hideo, one of the most important Japanese literary critics of the 20th century. The sentence in Example (2) appears about one-third of the way from the beginning of the text “*Mujō to iu koto* (On Transience).” This entire work has been included in many Japanese textbooks designed for third-year high school students. This fact demonstrates that it has become an important norm of the Japanese critical essay.

- (2) 実は、何を書くのか判然としないままに書き始めているのである。
(小林秀雄「無常ということ」)

As a matter of fact, I have started this text without any precise idea about what I am going to write.

(Kobayashi Hideo, “*Mujō to iu koto*”, qtd. in Ninomiya 1995)

We are not sure if the author really started the text without thinking about what he was going to write. We can say at least that he wanted to give the appearance of writing spontaneously.

This spontaneous attitude to writing, dating as far back as the medieval period, has been valued in Japanese culture. Therefore, it is possible that even if a writer has an elaborate plan, he or she sometimes makes a pretense of improvisation, and Japanese readers do not take this kind of expression literally. While spontaneity is often expressed in Japanese texts, it is not common in the Western tradition. As a consequence, if Japanese students adopt a spontaneous attitude in their French writing, it disturbs French teachers.

4. Text planning

Notice that with example (2), the author assumes not only an air of spontaneity, but also indifference to reflecting upon the structure of the text. This concerns our third French convention.

In France, a good writer is supposed to begin by making an elaborate draft before starting to write. This is especially true in academic writing. This attitude about writing comes from the fact that modern French rhetoric is almost exclusively a rhetoric of textual organization (cf. Genette 1969). For French teachers, the Japanese style of writing gives the impression of having no structure at all, while for Japanese students, who tend to give their text a spontaneous appearance, the French style of rigorous organization seems very artificial. They are not willing to adopt a French style in which there seems to be no freedom of expression (cf. Takagaki 2013). As a consequence, the natural appearance given by Japanese learners to their French compositions is often systematically devalued by

native French teachers.

It is true that there is a similar tradition in French literature, too: one of the most influential figures of the Renaissance, Michel de Montaigne, wrote *The Essays*, which is filled with his stream of consciousness, written in a “wandering” style. But it is well known that Montaigne’s prose is not a university model of textual organization in France (cf. Robrieux 2000).

5. Paragraph organization

In the French academic tradition, textual organization is closely related to paragraph organization. In this respect, we would like to point out a phenomenon often observed in the classroom, but as far as we know, never reported in the field: many Japanese learners of French add a line break after every sentence. The following examples (3) to (6) show this odd writing style.

Examples (3) and (4) were written as comments on a blog in order to describe the picture cited as Figure 1.²



Figure 1 Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France – Photographic Service

(3)	Bonjour!	<i>(English translation)</i> Hello!
	Je ne connais pas Astérix.	I don’t know Asterix.
	Astérix est plus grand que cet petit enfant. Il est moin gros que Astérix.	Asterix is taller than this little child. He is less big than Asterix.
	Astérix a de longs cheveux rouges et de grandes orwilles	Asterix has long red hair and big ears.
	Mais Astérix est aussi jolis que cet petit enfant!	But Asterix is as pretty as this little child!

² <http://www.las.osakafu-u.ac.jp/podcast-lang/cgi-bin/fr/log/eid30.html#comments> (accessed May 1, 2015).

(4)

Bonjour à tous.	<i>(English translation)</i> Hello, everybody.
Moi non plus, je ne connais pas Astérix.	I don't know Asterix either.
Cette photo, il y a deux personnes à park Astérix au nord de France.	This picture, there are two persons at Park Asterix in the North of France.
À gauche, c'est un enfant. Et à droite, c'est Astérix.	On the left, this is a child. And on the right, this is Asterix.
Ce enfant, il est plus petit que Astérix. Astérix, il est plus grand et gros que ce enfant.	This child is smaller than Asterix. Asterix is taller and bigger than this child.
Astérix a les cheveux longs, mais les cheveux de enfant est moïn longs que lui.	Asterix has long hair, but the child's hair is less long than he.
Astérix a les oreilles grosse, mais les oreilles de enfant est moïn grosse que lui.	Asterix has big ears, but the child's ears are less big than he.
Ce enfan a donné un baiser à le nez gros de Astérix.	This child gave a kiss to the big nose of Asterix.

This strange presentation cannot be attributed to the fact that the texts are in the form of a blog; the same style can be found frequently in compositions written on paper. Examples (5) and (6) were written by third-year university students.³ These students have a higher level of French proficiency than the learners who wrote (3) and (4). But we still can observe here the same fault of making arbitrary line breaks.

(5)

Il y a "Chiti-go-san" au Japon. C'est la cérémonie pour remercier de la croissance d'enfants et souhaiter le bonheur futur. "Chiti-go-san" est célébré au 15 novembre pour des enfants âgé de	<i>(English translation)</i> There is "Chiti-go-san" in Japan. This is the ceremony in order to thank for the growth of children and to pray for the future well-being. "Chiti-go-san" is celebrated on November 15 for three-, five- and seven-
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³ These examples were presented on March 31, 2006, by Laurence Chevalier at the XX^{es} *Rencontres Pédagogiques du Kansai*, held at the Centre Franco-Japonais - Alliance Française d'Osaka.

3 ans, 5 ans et 7 ans. Ils se habillent en kimono et ils vont prier au temple avec leur famille.

Au Japon, il y a du temps pour s'habiller en kimono.

“kimono” est un costume traditionnel japonais. Nous nous habillent en kimono, à “Seijin no hi” et cérémonie de mariage aussi.

“Seijin no hi” est le deuxième lundi de janvier. La fête est célébré pour des gens âgé de 20 ans. C'est la cérémonie pour se rendre indépendant et prendre conscience de le membre de la société. Je pense que “Chiti-go-san” et “Seijin no hi” sommes la cérémonie analogue.

Des enfants de “Chiti-go-san” ont “titose amé”. “titose” veut dire “mille ans”, et “amé” veut dire “un bonbon”. Il y a la tradition. Si des enfants mangent “titosé amé”, ils vivent longtemps. Alors, “titosé amé” est de bon augure.

Je pense que “Chiti-go-san” est la bon culture traditionnelle au Japon.

year-old children. They wear kimono and they go to a shrine to pray with their family.

In Japan, there is a time for wearing kimono.

“Kimono” is a Japanese traditional costume. We wear kimono on “Seijin no hi” and during the wedding ceremony, too.

“Seijin no hi” (Coming-of-Age Day) is the second Monday of January. The rite is celebrated for those who have reached the age of 20. This is the ceremony in order to help them realize that they have become independent and the member of the society. I think that “Chiti-go-san” and “Seijin no hi” are similar ceremonies.

On “Chiti-go-san” children receive “titose ame”. Literally “titose” means “thousand years”, and “ame” means “a candy”. There is that tradition. If children eat “titose ame”, they have a long life. Then “titose ame” is a good omen.

I think that “Chiti-go-san” is the good traditional culture in Japan.

(6)

Portrait

Elle a des yeux de lynx comme serpent. Si on est regardé une fois, on deviant dur.

Elle a des sourcils mince, et mauvaise mine. En outré, elle se peind le visage. Son visage est pale. Elle abouche grand. Elle se mettre abondamment rouge.

S'elle rit, c'est très sinister. Elle pousse une voix criarde.

Elle a les joues comme la squelette.

Elle a les cheveux sèches. Elle a des pellicules.

Les mains et pieds sont mince.

Sa échine est courbe et elle est posture incline en avnt.

Ses ongles sont longs qu'est peint en noir. Elle sent des aisselles.

(English translation)

Portrait

She has eyes of lynx like a snake. If once one is looked at, one becomes hard.

She has thin eyebrows and a poor complexion. Besides, she puts some colors on the face. Her face is pale. She puts on a lot of makeup.

If she laughs, it is very sinister. She has a shrill voice.

She has cheeks like a skeleton.

She has a dry hair. She has bad dandruff.

Her hands and her feet are thin.

She has a curved spine and she bends forward.

She has long nails colored in black.

She suffers from strong body odor.

It should be noted that such presentation of writing would be very strange in a Japanese text, too. Even the lowest level students would not start a new line for every sentence in their Japanese writing. But in their French compositions, quite a number of them, even at an intermediate level, begin almost every sentence on a new line. These examples suggest that the notion of paragraphs is only weakly recognized by Japanese learners.

In French academic writing, there is a rule that “one should write only one idea per paragraph” (cf. Chassang and Senninger 1992). This concept of paragraphs is not at all shared by the Japanese. Most Japanese students and French teachers are not aware that paragraphs function differently in the two languages. In Japanese school education, two kinds of paragraphs are traditionally distinguished: semantic paragraphs (*imi-danraku*) and formal paragraphs (*keishiki-danraku*). The semantic paragraph is a group of sentences with one topic. In general, one semantic paragraph consists of a series of formal paragraphs, which are indicated by merely indenting the first line. In other words, in Japanese texts, a typographical division does not necessarily correspond to a topic unit. In addition, though paragraph writing exercises are more or less known in English education, this is not the case for French education in Japan; in their French class, students learn how to make sentences, but not paragraphs.

6. Writing education in Japan

This last section shows some aspects of Japanese writing education that we identified through a questionnaire. In January 2015, we asked 72 students at our university to fill out a questionnaire about their past education. Their majors are various: natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, technology, and social welfare. The question was, “According to what you have learned during your primary and secondary education, what should you do to write a good (Japanese) essay?” The respondents formulated their answers freely. We will present two results of the survey. Figure 2 shows the first result.

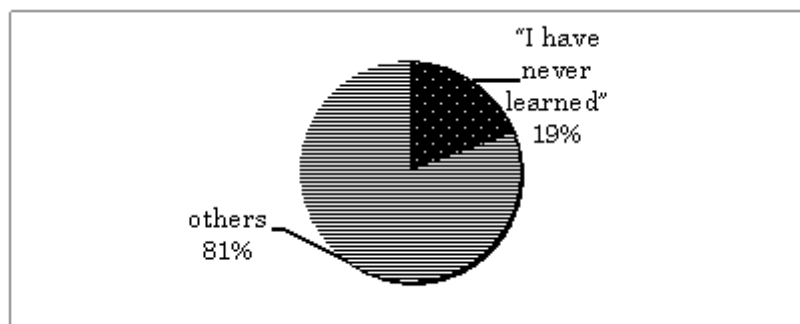


Figure 2 How to write an essay

Among the 72 students, 14 students gave answers like “I have never learned how to write an essay” or “I can’t remember.” This means almost one out of five Japanese students has no memory of receiving essay writing education at the secondary level. This result reveals the relatively minor importance of writing in Japanese education.

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This situation should be compared with that of France, where mastering an argumentative text called *dissertation* has a dominant place in education. (French *dissertation* is a school essay and should not be confused with its English counterpart which means “doctoral thesis”.) In fact, Genette (1969) describes this “sovereignty” in the French intellectual world as follows: “It is difficult to estimate all what our culture and our mental structures owe, for good or ill, to this sovereignty of the *dissertation*. But it is evident that all critical examinations, all historical analyses of our intellectual universe should go through it”. In French secondary and university education, writing an argumentative text like a *dissertation* is primarily an exercise aiming to develop critical thinking skills. However, our survey suggests that this is not always the case in Japan (cf. Takagaki 2011).

The second result, shown in Figure 3, concerns the norm of textual organization.

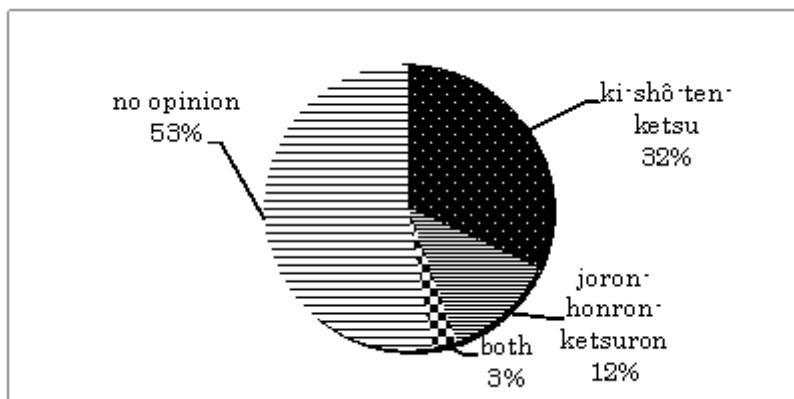


Figure 3 Textual organization to adopt

Among the 72 students, 23 respondents (32%) mentioned the importance of *ki-shô-ten-ketsu*, a Japanese traditional four-part construction; 9 respondents (13%) wrote about *jorôn-honron-ketsuron*, which means “introduction-body-conclusion”; and 2 respondents cited both schemata. Notice that one-third of the students confirmed the importance of the Japanese-style textual organization *ki-shô-ten-ketsu*, instead of the Western tripartite model. This result means that the French norm is not the most widely applied model in Japan. On the other hand, the Japanese model *ki-shô-ten-ketsu* is not known at all in France. According to my experience, many Japanese students are not aware of this fact, and they think that *ki-shô-ten-ketsu* is a universal schema. This misunderstanding leads them to write French essays with this schema, which will be systematically devalued by French teachers (cf. Hinds 1983, Takagaki 2011).

7. Conclusion

We have shown that three French rhetorical conventions can be obstacles for Japanese learners: less personal quality, less spontaneity, and importance of text planning. In particular, we have pointed out the difficulty of paragraph organization, often observed in

Japanese learners' French compositions. These problems originate from different literary traditions, expectations of the two cultures, and school education.

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