

Society for Linguistic Anthropology

JAMES STANLAW AND MARK PETERSON,
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Japanese Girls' Orthographic Rebellion

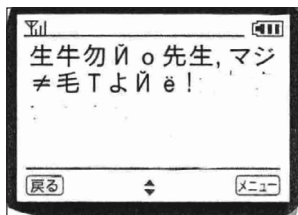
By Laura Miller (Loyola U)

A Japanese schoolgirl has written something odd on her "print club" photo. The text is a combination of Japanese characters mixed with other symbols to create a mashed up collection of script that is not readable as normal Japanese. It is called *gyaru moji* ("Girl Characters"), and is a writing practice originating in cell phone text messaging and email, but now found in other girls' media. By February 2004, news items about this strange new writing began appearing in weekly magazines and on TV shows. It is a mixture of normal orthography from the Japanese syllabary combined with numbers, mathematical symbols, deconstructed characters, and Cyrillic and Greek letters that some claim resembles hieroglyphics.

Most pundits argue that a desire for secrecy is the primary reason for their use, yet there are many other factors that I believe are equally important. Japanese girls are awash in script overabundance afforded by computer font menus, yet rather than being overwhelmed by it, it is technological bounty that they exploit and embrace. Some critics suggest that because of American dominance in electronic communication technology, a type of "graphic imperialism" forces non-English languages into its orthographic conventions. I believe, however, that for these Japanese teenagers, appropriation of script elements from other writing systems and typographic symbol menus reflects their own imperialistic stance that everything in the world is available for their personal use and enjoyment.

Teenagers in Japan are the primary consumers of cell phones, so it isn't surprising that schoolgirls have combined their interest in orthographic innovation with cell phone technology. By 2003, 95% of women under the age of 20 had a cell phone or a pager. Japanese cell phones have access to email, and can display and send the Japanese syllabary, Sino-Japanese characters, Roman letters, and many sets of special symbols and icons. It

is estimated that text messages may make up 40% of all cell phone transmissions. Users of cell phones can thumb messages at fast rates, a behavior that led older Japanese to label them the *oya*



Seibutsu no sensei, maji kimoi yo ne! or, "The biology teacher is seriously disgusting you know!"

yubi sodai or "thumb generation." A typical text message in Girl Characters might look like the above text, a message that says *Seibutsu no sensei*,



The Japanese magazine *Tokyo Graffiti* asked people on the street to write something on a white board then have their photograph published. Some participants chose to express themselves with Girl Characters. Photo courtesy of Laura Miller

maji kimoi yo ne! ("The biology teacher is seriously disgusting you know!")

Ever since the invention of writing people have tried to hide what they wanted to say from the uninitiated. But for Girl Characters, their use may be more than an attempt at secrecy. Scripts from other languages are borrowed for symbolic, aesthetic, indexical, decorative, iconographic and satirical purposes. In Girl Characters the medium of writing is not just a carrier of content but is itself embodying a metamessage.

Writing messages and receiving messages in Girl Characters is a form of group identity marking and a verification of difference. Recently, in 2005 the trendy magazine *Tokyo Graffiti* asked people on the street to write something on a white marker board that they should hold up in front of themselves before getting their photo taken for publication. A few participants wrote their messages using some Girl Characters, clearly denoting their difference and uniqueness.

Writing in Girl Characters might also be seen as a form of resistance to the parent culture and to establishment thinking. It reflects girls' opposition to the world of male-dominated print-media, with its emphasis on typeset uniformity, orderliness and perfection. Girl Characters are clunky, unstandardized and often idiosyncratic. The use of Girl Characters also extends the boundary of what is considered the written Japanese language, thereby challenging the notion of language as a unified shared system. By redefining the borders of linguistic possibility, girls are also demonstrat-

ing resistance to the uniformity and predictability of standardized print media.



Girl Characters unnerve adult readers' expectations for written Japanese. Girls are rejecting the beautiful, orderly handwriting that is supposed to characterize female sensibility and refinement. For middle-class Japanese girls, one type of achievement is thought to reside in the discipline and meticulousness required for mastering calligraphy. The warped and deviant shapes of Girl Characters reveal opposition to expectations of standardized writing and its reification of aesthetic calligraphic styles. There is a widespread belief that good penmanship is an index of the proper background and character of the writer, so girls' use of unsanctioned script symbolically undermines gender socialization.

A question to consider is, under what conditions are borrowings of other writing systems into Japanese seen as language pollution or creative expression? This is not easily answered. But while they are often dismissed as mere ephemera, Girl Characters once again demonstrate that important meanings of difference, nostalgia and globalism can be found in even the most mundane behavior.

Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA contributing editors Jim Stanlaw at stanlaw@ilstu.edu or Mark Peterson at petersm2@muohio.edu.

Society for Medical Anthropology

JANELLE S TAYLOR, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Thoughts from the New SMA President

By Marcia C Inhorn

It is a great honor and privilege to be assuming the SMA presidency. Over the past decade, I have



SMA President Marcia C Inhorn

been fortunate to interact with a series of terrific SMA presidents, including Carole Browner, Bill Dressler, Mark Nichter and Craig Janes. I have watched each of them contribute to the strength and vitality of SMA through important new initiatives. Furthermore, I am indebted to Craig Janes for ensuring a smooth presidential transition and for his skillful planning of the upcoming SfAA/SMA meeting in Vancouver. There, Craig will join me and four other senior scholars in the SMA plenary session on "Reproductive Disruptions: Gender, Technology and Ethics in the New Millennium."

I hope to continue the good work of all of my predecessors, as well as forge ahead in the following new directions: