Creating a Philosophical Language
—Lessons from the Japanese Experience

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Several years ago, a book titled The Time When the Japanese Language Becomes Extinct1 made a stir among Japanese intellectuals. Its author, Mizumura Minae, is a female novelist who grew up in the United States. She is concerned about the future of Japanese literature in a world in which English is increasingly becoming the only language that is commonly used by the people from different countries, as the subtitle of her book In the Century of English indicates. She is particularly worried that literary works written in Japanese will find only a negligible number of readers internationally and, as a result, have little significance for world literature.

This worry is not groundless, because it is already a reality in almost all branches of natural science. It is generally admitted that, if you do not publish your results in English, then nobody will know them. In other words, a paper written in a language other than English does not count at all in the world of natural science.

According to Mizumura, this development is all the more frustrating, because modern Japanese literature started at the end of the 19th century not just by tackling new subjects but also by creating a suitable language for these new subjects. The same thing can be said about natural science. Western science established itself in Japan around the same time as the beginning of modern Japanese literature2. The first task facing Japanese scholars in this time was to create a whole new vocabulary and scientific terminology.

Natural science was, however, already an international enterprise in the 19th century, contrary to literature, which had been pursued as part of a national

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2 Earlier, some ideas of Western science, medicine especially, entered Japan through “Rangaku”, but the wider social and intellectual impact thereof was relatively small.
culture having essential ties with its own language. Thus, it was natural that Japanese at the turn of the last century wished to create a national literature written in Japanese, even though the lack of an appropriate language for the subjects they wished to explore presented them with a big obstacle. After a period of trial and error this obstacle was mostly overcome and now we have a reasonably flexible language for literary purposes.

Until recently, Japanese modern literature was a fairly closed affair, and I suspect that most Japanese, including both writers and readers, were satisfied with this situation. However, the inevitable trend of globalization and the decrease of the readership of literature within Japan is now forcing some people to think about the future of new works written in Japanese. This must be one of the main reasons why Mizumura’s book made quite a stir in literary circles in Japan.

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The young men and women in the beginning of the Meiji-era who came to know the novels and dramas of the contemporary West must have realized that these works were completely different from the stories and plays of Edo-era Japan they were familiar with. Similarly, the contemporary works in philosophy from the West must have struck the Japanese who had a chance to read them as revealing a new world of ideas that was totally different from that suggested by Confucian or Buddhist writings.

Compared to modern Japanese literature, philosophy had much more difficulty rooting in modern Japanese society. Some might even say that it still has not succeeded in doing this. There must be several reasons for this, but undoubtedly, one of them is the difficulty of creating an adequate language for doing philosophy.

For philosophy it is essential to have a number of fairly general and abstract concepts. It is not true that Japanese did not have any words for such concepts before the import of Western philosophy. There were such words and concepts in the Buddhist or Confucian traditions. These were mostly imported words expressed by means of a combination of Chinese characters, and that, for that reason, formed a set of special terms separate from the ordinary vocabulary of common people. When Western philosophy entered Japan just before the Meiji Restoration, another set of special terms was created in a very short time, sometimes borrowing older Buddhist or Confucian words.

3Of course, there were exceptions like Latin literature in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In Japan, there was a long tradition of writing literary works in Chinese, which persisted until the end of the Meiji-era.

4This is not the first time Western philosophy came to Japan; in the 16th century the Japanese had some contact with Western philosophy as part of Christian theology, which missionaries brought to Japan. As is well known, however, this first contact did not bear any fruit, because Christianity was forbidden at the beginning of 17th century and Japan closed its borders to the outside world soon after that.
Having a philosophical vocabulary made it possible for us to have philosophical discussion in our own language. It became also possible to discuss, for example, the philosophy of Kant in our own language instead of some European language.

It was not all beneficial, however. The vocabulary we have inherited from our predecessors has been the source of much trouble and confusion. There are at least three reasons for this.

First, as most of philosophicall terms are very abstract, their meanings should be clarified by explaining how they are to be used in various contexts. Many of the scientific terms in Japanese were created around at the same time as the philosophical terms, and some of those are very general and abstract terms as well. However, it is not difficult to make precise what these abstract terms mean. Unfortunately, the matter has been very different with philosophical terms. Many of them were introduced into Japanese in order to be used as translations of words in European languages without detailed and clear explanations.

Secondly, as I remarked above, some of the newly created philosophical vocabulary were borrowed from the Buddhist or Confucian traditions, and new meanings were imposed on pre-existing words. This situation could easily lead to confusion, and it did. For example, a Japanese word “shizen (自然)” was adopted as a translation of Western words such as “nature” and “Natur”, but it is also a Chinese word with a Taoist background. Consequently, it was almost impossible to keep the two meanings apart, and, in many cases this has resulted in obscurities or nonsenses.

Thirdly, at least until quite recently most philosophical terms have been foreign compared to ordinary words used in everyday conversation. They are foreign in two senses; they were conceived as translations of foreign words, and they stand out awkwardly if they are used in an everyday conversation. Inevitably this gives an impression that philosophy is a subject that is far removed from everyday concerns, and hence, has only academic interest.

However foreign they are to everyday speech, philosophical terms are now part of Japanese, and for that reason, people do not worry about their exact meaning; it might happen that they have an illusion of understanding. This is true even for people who should know better, namely, students of philosophy, including those who teach philosophy courses in colleges and universities. They are even more susceptible to illusion than ordinary people, because they come across such terms almost every day and the resulting familiarity inevitably produces a feeling of understanding.

The illusion could go further; they may read Kant in original German, but substitute for the German words Kant used the Japanese words that are supposed to be their translations, and, as a result, have an illusion of understanding, because they think they have succeeded in forming a thought that is expressed

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5 Many philosophical terms cannot be adequately defined, and a definition will be of little help in the case of basic terms.
6 For a study of the history of this word in the modern Japan, see Yanabu Akira, Hon-yaku no Shisou. “Shizen” to NATURE. 1977, Tokyo: Heibonsha.
by a Japanese sentence. However, it only looks like a Japanese sentence; in reality, it is nothing but a number of German words glued together by Japanese grammatical particles. It is no wonder that a person who produces such a sentence cannot explain what it means.

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In retrospect, we can say that philosophical language in Japan began to mature in the 1960's. It was almost 100 years after Japanese started assimilating Western philosophy. Although the majority of Japanese philosophers went on talking and writing philosophy just as before, some philosophers started to change their attitudes to philosophical terminology.

As I said, most of the philosophical vocabulary had its origins as the translations of European words. It is easy for someone who knows the original European word to believe that she is using the Japanese term as meaning the same as the original. Such a person may not feel a necessity to define or characterize what the Japanese term means, because she may think that pointing to the original is enough to specify its meaning. However, she might only have a vague idea about what the original means. Then, naturally she will only have a vague idea about what the Japanese philosophical term means. Thus, it frequently happened that a person talked and wrote fluently about some philosophical subjects, and yet did not understand what she was talking or writing about. This happened also within groups of people; seemingly, philosophical discussions were going on among people that appeared to understand each other perfectly well, but in reality, they were just exchanging certain words without understanding anything.

In contrast to this, some younger philosophers started to use philosophical terms on their own responsibility; they made a conscious effort to characterize how they were going to use a term without recourse to some Western original. At the same time, they tried to conduct philosophical discussions in a language that is not far removed from everyday speech. In this way, they wanted to dispel the esoteric style of pre-war Japanese philosophy, represented by the Kyoto School around Nishida Kitaro (1870–1945)7.

Although it is not possible to avoid using some expressions for abstract concepts if you want to do philosophy, these younger philosophers made efforts to explain such expressions by giving concrete examples. It was also important to stop concentrating on the abstract nouns that were mostly created as translations of Western abstract nouns with some help of Buddhist or Confucian terminology, and try to express what you want to discuss. A good strategy is to avoid abstract nouns and instead use verbs or adjectives related to the topic

7Ohmori Shōzō (1921–1997), who was one of the leading younger philosophers at the time, proposed a “philosophy in prose” against a “philosophy in verse”. It is likely that the latter referred to a philosophy in the style of the Kyoto School. Ohmori was also one of the philosophers who introduced analytic philosophy in post-war Japan, and this was not unrelated with his conscious efforts to make his philosophical style much closer to everyday speech.
you want to discuss. For example, instead of speculating on the Japanese word “genshō (現象)”, which is supposed to correspond to “phenomenon” or “phenomena”, it is much more profitable to think in terms of the relevant Japanese verbs that correspond to English “appear” and “occur”, when you are considering some problem in the philosophy of mind.

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It is about fifty years since Japanese philosophers consciously started to remake the philosophical language they had inherited from their predecessors. Although there are still some quarters in philosophy where obscurity is taken as a sign for profundity, there is now a general consensus among philosophers that clarity of expression is necessary for good philosophical writing. And, if you take sufficient care, the language we have now is adequate for that purpose. It is ironic that this happened while the internationalization of learning and English’s monopolizing its place of the common language were in progress.

The recent internationalization of philosophy is closely related to its specialization. Philosophy has become international, not because it has extended its efforts to solve the general problems raised by globalization in many areas outside philosophy; or at least, this is not the main reason. Philosophy has become international because many of its fields are now highly specialized subjects pursued by specialists.

Such a development might be understandable in case of the philosophy of science or the philosophy of logic and mathematics, because those have been technical subjects for some time. The same might apply to many parts of the history of philosophy, because the researchers in these areas should have the specialist training in matters relating to their chosen subjects of study. The present state of the specialization in philosophy, however, goes much further; even core fields of philosophy such as ontology, epistemology, and ethics have become fields for specialists. If you want to be a researcher in any of them, you have to master a fairly large literature some of which might be very technical with lots of specialist terminology.

Specialization in philosophy has been accompanied by the adoption of English as the common language for international exchange among specialists. In this, philosophy has only followed many branches of natural science. Thus, even in philosophy, we now have a situation in which, if you wish to make an original contribution to some special subject, you have to make it in English.

The current tendency of specialization might not be entirely a bad thing; there are many problems of philosophy that need the concentrated efforts of people who are devoted to them in order to make progress, and such problems

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8 Similar efforts in literature had begun much earlier and were almost complete by the first decade of the 20th century when Mori Ōgai’s Gan (The Wild Geese, 1913) and Natsume Sōseki’s Kokoro (1914) appeared. In this respect, Japanese philosophy was behind literature more than 50 years.
are not necessarily limited to seemingly specialist fields like the philosophy of
science or philosophical logic.

However, they do not exhaust the whole of philosophy. Philosophy is not
always a specialist’s concern; in an important sense, it is a concern for everybody.
The most important problems in philosophy are also the most difficult ones that
have resisted a satisfactory solution through many centuries, and yet these are
matters of concern for anybody who has reflected on her place in the world.

Are we free in our choices and actions?
Is time real?
Is there any meaning to life, if everything will pass away someday?

These are the questions that frequently captivate a person with no formal
training in philosophy. They cannot be dismissed as pseudo-problems as the
logical positivists once did. Even if some misunderstandings or oversights lie
behind such questions, just uncovering those has not made the questions them-
selves go away.

It is a philosopher’s task to address these questions by explaining, in a plain
language that is easily understandable to an ordinary person, what they involve
and why it is so difficult to answer them.

There are now in Japan a number of philosophers who have gained a wide
readership that goes beyond teachers and students of philosophy. Their writings
are not aimed at specialists in some field of philosophy. They constitute a
small, but not negligible part of the contemporary scene of Japanese literature.
If Mizumra’s worry about the future of Japanese literature should prove true,
then such philosophical writings would share the same fate. It would be again
ironic that, just when philosophical language in Japan gained enough maturity
to make it possible to produce some excellent philosophical writings for a general
audience, it may not have a future.

But, is it true? In the future, whether it is for a specialist or for a general
audience, is philosophy going to be done only in English?

Although there are some exceptions, most of the philosophers now active in
the world make their living by teaching in colleges or universities. And, it
usually happens that, even if they are specialists in some particular fields in
philosophy, they have to teach courses in fields that are not their own subjects.
The gap between research and teaching may sometimes be very large; I know
a philosopher of science who has to teach a course in ethics regularly. It is like
leading a double life; when you are in your study, you do your own research in
your field and write your paper in English, while in the classroom, you teach
an introductory course in philosophy, which is almost always done in Japanese
if you are working in a Japanese college or university.
Such is the dilemma which many philosophers all over the world who teach in colleges and universities are facing. They frequently ask themselves: how can we manage both research and teaching, when their objects are totally different?

One might argue that they are not incompatible, but rather complement each other. The philosophy pursued in any of its specialized fields should not be unrelated to those perennial questions which are everyone’s concern. It might sometimes be very difficult to see the relation between them, but there should be some connection, however indirect it might be; if there is none, then it is no longer a part of philosophy.

This is all true, but it only assures us that there must exist some connection between research and teaching and does not tell us what this connection could be. We must find it ourselves.

Whether you like it or not, if you are a philosopher teaching in a college or university, you also have to be an educator. What should an educator who is a philosopher do? Her most important function is to help people to think on their own and express their thought in their own words. Of course, it is not always the case that their language is English. This is at least one reason for having your own language in which you can do philosophy besides English, if the language you and your audience have in common is not English. It is particularly important that people express themselves in words that are not borrowed from other people, including the educator herself.

A philosopher can help people to think by supplying them with some concepts and expressions. If they are to be a real help, they should be capable of becoming part of their conceptual repertoire and language without too much difficulty. This means that having a mature language for doing philosophy is very important for philosophy if it is to be not just a specialist’s concern but also as a concern for everyone.

150 years ago, Japanese scholars encountered in Western philosophy a new and different way of thinking philosophical problems. This gave rise to the efforts to create a new language for philosophy. In the beginning, a whole vocabulary of newly introduced concepts was created, in some cases by borrowing from pre-existing traditions, and in other cases by inventing new words. Each word in this vocabulary was supposed to correspond to some Western word that expressed the concept in question. However, even if an expression comes from a foreign language, once it is inserted into Japanese, its meaning will be determined by the language as a whole, and as a result, it cannot retain the original meaning in the new environment.

As modern Japanese evolved, some of the newly introduced words entered into the common vocabulary of educated people, while others remained outside

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9 There is also another reason for retaining a philosophical language that is not an English one. Many fields of philosophy which are now pursued internationally are “normal sciences”. It is unlikely that the important breakthrough in philosophy will come from them. New ideas may come from outside of “normal philosophy” and this may happen more easily from the thinking rooted in one’s own language.

10 This is a point Yanabu Akira has emphasized in many of his writings. Besides the works cited above, see Yanabu Akira, Hon'yaku Gakumon Hihan, 1983, Tokyo: Nihon Hon'yaku-ka Yousei Sentā.
and used only by specialists. At the same time, Japanese scholars came to have a much better understanding of the Western concepts that were supposed to have been expressed by those words, and they became conscious of the differences between the original concepts and the meanings that the corresponding Japanese words came to have through the process of becoming a part of Japanese. This made it possible for a Japanese philosopher to use a philosophical term on her own responsibility. In order to do so, she should be clear about what she wanted her term to mean, which is possible only when she no longer depends on the vague understanding that used to be characteristic of philosophical terminology in Japan.

It took about 100 years for the Japanese language to evolve so that it may serve as a language for doing philosophy, although there are still many problems. For one thing, in several cases of classical texts in philosophy, there are long established ways of translating particular words, which might not be ideal outside specialist discussions. There is much room for improvement. Another problem concerns another area of specialization in fields like philosophy of mind; because of the internationalization, Japanese philosophers in such fields tend to transliterate the English terms instead of translating them. This is also a way of incorporating new philosophical terms into Japanese, but it may result in the same old problem of the gap between the understanding of a specialist and that of a general public.

Even though philosophy as a specialist subject might not need any language other than English, we need our own language for philosophy. For, philosophy is also a concern for everyone. Therefore, it is our duty and responsibility to preserve and further develop our own philosophical language.

Finally I would like to say something about “Asian values”, which is supposed to be the primary subject of this discussion.

In the first place, what is an Asian value? It might mean the conception of value that has developed from a number of traditions in Asia; most importantly, the Buddhist tradition and various schools of thought that go back to ancient China.

This can be the subject of philosophy in two different ways. First, it can be studied as a historical product. As it has a long history and covers a broad area, it is a large subject for research. Consequently, its many aspects must be fascinating subjects for a variety of specialist researchers in fields like the history of Buddhist or Confucian philosophy.

Secondly, it can be studied as a possible part of a living tradition. Although we might not realize it, our lives may be still very much influenced by such a conception of value. We have to find out whether this is true or not. Even when it may turn out that we are no longer living with such a conception, we might ask why it is not so and try to see whether it is because this conception of value is no longer valid. As these questions concern our daily lives, they are subjects
not only for specialists but also for people who are living in societies with an Asian tradition.

Come to think of it, there is no reason to talk only about the conception of value. There also are metaphysical and epistemological conceptions that come from various Asian traditions, and exactly the same things can be said about those; they can be both the fruitful subjects for specialist research and important concerns for everybody who inherits an Asian tradition.

The Japanese of 150 years ago, who introduced Western philosophy into Japan, had had the education of traditional style, which emphasized the memorization and explication of Chinese classical texts, sometimes supplemented by the study of neo-Confucianist and/or Nativist (“kokugaku”) writings. Although some of them wished to make a clean break with tradition, it cannot be denied that what they learned in their earlier years left indelible marks on them. Traditional learning was still very much alive for them, and, if they wished, they could make use of it.

Present-day Japanese philosophers in general have no such background, however. In my case, my education in philosophy has been entirely in Western philosophy. I know a young philosopher who came from the Netherlands and has a lively interest in Eastern philosophy. He knows lots about Japanese Confucian schools in Edo-era and the philosophy of Dharmakirti, both of which I knew nothing of.

Of course, this is nothing to be proud of. We should rediscover what philosophical tradition we had before Western philosophy arrived. I dare say that this is the right time to do so, because we have now a serviceable philosophical language with the necessary analytical tools. The Japanese who encountered Western philosophy 150 years ago might have known an Asian tradition in philosophy as a living one, but unfortunately they had yet to master the analytical tools that were necessary to make a fair assessment of it.

Moreover, some of the problems that arise in our daily lives may have their roots in the fact that our society is still under the influence of some elements of Asian tradition. Having our own language of philosophy helps us to consider such problems from a philosophical point of view. It is almost certain that English is not adequate to express many aspects of Asian values. We need our own language to express and analyze those before we will be able to communicate the results to the people of different cultures. On the other hand, we must be aware of the possibility that some of our philosophical terminology does not, in reality, contain the concepts which we think correspond to Western ones.

Because of our present philosophical language’s indebtedness to the Western philosophical tradition, however, if we express what we find philosophically significant in our everyday reality, it will usually be possible to translate that into other languages, including English.

There must be another kind of internationalization of philosophy. It should be an attempt to bring together the results of philosophical activities that have been rooted in the reality of one’s own culture and life within it.

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11I owe this point to Lajos Brons.
If “Asian values” are to have a philosophical significance, it should not consist in something that should be put back again, but in something that comes from everyday reality of our living cultures.\footnote{12}{I thank Lajos Brons for going through my paper carefully and removing many mistakes and infelicities in my English. I also thank him for several suggestions as to the content of my paper.}