

# The Language of Koizumi Yakumo – From the Standpoint of Japanese Language Education

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Professor Akemi Kanazawa



# THE LANGUAGE OF KOIZUMI YAKUMO – FROM THE STANDPOINT OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Koizumi Yakumo, formerly known as Lafcadio Hearn, spent his final decades in Japan, a country that fascinated and inspired him. As he was unable to fully acquire Japanese language, he coined an interlanguage referred to as ‘Hearn-san Kotoba’.

**Professor Akemi Kanazawa**, a former professor of Meiji University, Tokyo, has carried out studies exploring this language and its peculiarities, particularly in the context of Japanese language education.

## ‘Hearn-san Kotoba’

Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), who later became known as Koizumi Yakumo, was a Greek-Irish writer, renowned for his books, stories and letters. During his life, he settled in various places around the world, including Greece, Ireland, the United States and the West Indies.

Hearn spent his later life in Japan, where he wrote several books about the Japanese culture. His late works, such as *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, introduced folklore and ancient Japanese legends to the Western world. As he was never able to fully acquire Japanese grammar, Hearn communicated with his wife Setsu Koizumi and other locals using an ‘interlanguage’, which he called ‘Hearn-san Kotoba’.

In one of her notes, his wife Setsu wrote: ‘Being fond from my girlhood years of old tales, I began telling him long Japanese old stories, which were not easy for him to understand, but to which he listened with much interest and attention. He called our mutual

Japanese language “Hearn-san Kotoba” (Hearn’s language).’ Initially, Hearn communicated with his wife in broken Japanese, while Setsu tried to adjust her language so that he could understand it. Hearn’s unique ‘interlanguage’ was a product of several years of communication with Setsu.

In linguistics studies, the process through which this language was established is referred to as pidginization. Pidginization occurs when a language is transformed into a simplified form of speech, characterised by a rudimentary grammar and vocabulary. This simplified speech is typically used as a means of communication between individuals with different native languages.

From a linguistic point of view, ‘Hearn san Kotoba’ is an interesting topic of study, as it essentially stems from continuous interactions between two foreign individuals. Fascinated by this language and its peculiarities, Professor Akemi Kanazawa has carried out a series of studies, analysing it from a Japanese language education standpoint.

## Hearn’s Letters and Setsu’s Memoirs

In her studies, Professor Kanazawa analysed extracts from Hearn’s letters and from his wife’s written memoirs. She observed that Hearn’s Japanese was highly influenced by English, his native language. ‘Judging from Hearn’s letters in which written Japanese remains and Setsu’s memoirs *Omoide no ki*, in which spoken Japanese remains, it can be inferred that Hearn’s Japanese is much interfered by his mother tongue English, in both aspects of syntax and expression,’ Professor Kanazawa wrote in one of her papers.

When Hearn taught English to his son, Kazuo, the Japanese he used was often a literal English translation. For instance, he translates the sentence ‘It is a dog’ as ‘*Sore desu ichi-inu*’ (‘*Sore desu*’ → It is; ‘*ichi inu*’ → a dog). However, in standard Japanese, this would be translated as ‘*Sore wa inu desu*’.

‘Hearn-san Kotoba’ also removes redundancies associated with standard Japanese grammar. Professor Kanazawa found that Hearn used a total of approximately 150 verbs without conjugating them, as a Japanese speaker would. In his letters and verbal communication, Hearn used verbs in their ‘dictionary form’, without conjugating them, but instead adding a ‘*desu*’ auxiliary verb to show polite nuance. According to Professor Kanazawa, Hearn’s frequent use of polite expressions could have been an influence of his wife Setsu, as her family had samurai antecedents and would have often communicated using such expressions.

「平家」の全曲とな  
聞かせよとのご所望  
その女の声が答え  
壇の浦の合戦の段々

女子供という、美しき人、  
か弱き者たちの悲しい最期を語る段にさしかかりますと、

か

よ、り、ま、も、な、が、に、宛、弓、矢、語、つ

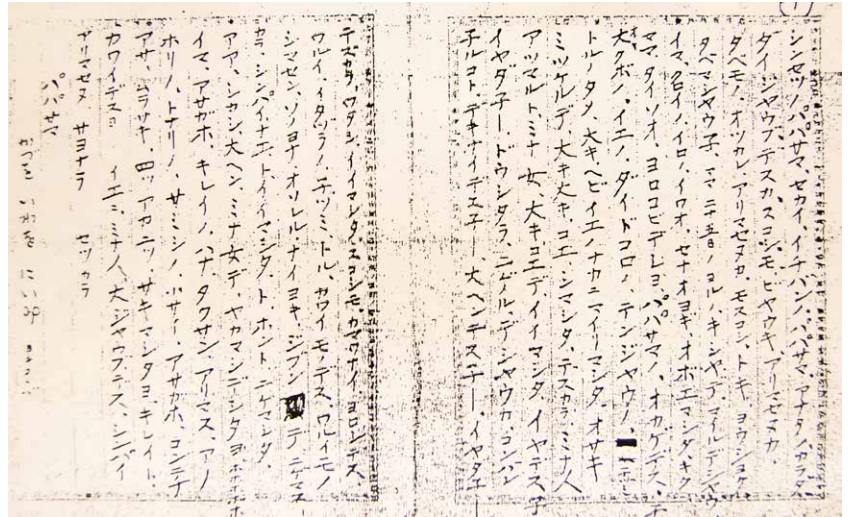


切つ そろ 間か甘 しき 腰 芳一 調子 とき中 芳偉い 部屋を 麻 航ぐと ちえな 方一に の言葉つきかた、この女たちは高貴な屋敷のお女中袋であるところのつかりました。でも、



the structure of her sentences and yet expressed their content in great detail. For instance, she often used onomatopoeia and mimetic words to better convey the details of a given scene.

‘Setsu’s expressions in her letters are full of colour and music, and form her own unique world,’ Professor Kanazawa wrote. ‘In her letter dated August 23, 1904, as an expression to make the reader feel colourful, Setsu wrote about flowers of morning glory. To make the reader feel the sounds, she wrote that all who were there were women and they were all noisy, *hohohohoho*.’



According to Professor Kanazawa, Hearn drew inspiration from Setsu’s use of onomatopoeia and mimetic words. In their writing, they both used mesmerising expression that conveyed rich feelings. As Hearn could not read Japanese books by himself, Setsu would often tell him tales and legends, some of which became the inspiration for his works.

Both Setsu’s foreigner talk and foreigner writing differ greatly from simplified versions of Japanese that are used in today’s education system. In a sense, it appears that she adjusted her language to match Hearn’s own ‘version’ Japanese.

Setsu’s letter to Hearn, August 23rd, 1904. Koizumi Toki ‘Hearn and I’ Kobun-sha 1990.

Japanese verbs fall into three main categories: I-group, II-group and III-group. III-group verbs only include the verbs ‘*suru*’ (to do) and ‘*kuru*’ (to come). Professor Kanazawa observed that Hearn often used these verbs improperly, for instance adding a variety of improper nouns before ‘*suru*’, like in standard Japanese (e.g. ‘*benkyo-suru*’ → to study), and coining entirely new expressions. He also used ‘*aru*’ (there is), which Japanese speakers only use when referring to inanimate objects, to refer to animate things. He also used it as a word with many different meanings.

**Setsu’s Foreigner Talk and Writing**

‘When we, Japanese people, talk to non-native speakers of Japanese, we make effort to simplify the language as much as possible for smoother communication, such as non-conjugation of verbs and adjectives,’ Professor Kanazawa wrote. When Setsu communicated with Hearn in person, she used a simplified version of Japanese, which is linguistically referred to as ‘foreigner talk’. She also used a simplified written version of Japanese, referred to as ‘foreigner writing’. In her studies, Professor Kanazawa observed that Setsu’s foreigner writing had greater peculiarities than her foreigner talk. For example, in her foreigner writing, Setsu often simplified

**Creole Influences**

For two years of his life (1887–1889), Hearn lived on the island of Martinique, in the French West Indies, where he grew fond of the Creole language and culture. As he spoke fluent French, he most likely acquired knowledge of Creole, which is essentially a hybrid version of French. According to Professor Kanazawa, Hearn’s time in the West Indies might have influenced how he later approached the Japanese language.

On the 4th of April 1890, when he had just arrived in Japan, Hearn sent a letter to Basil Hall Chamberlain expressing his wish to learn Japanese and to

は思 語り 老女 りま さえ こえ は大 きの ぬ長 履を これ







## Meet the researcher

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Professor Akemi Kanazawa, a former professor of Japanese Language Education at Mejiro University, Tokyo, studies the relationship between foreign Japanese language learners' interlanguage and its pidginization process. Professor Kanazawa was also involved in establishing the 3-year Japanese diploma course at National North Sumatra University. She has carried out extensive research in the fields of linguistics, comparative teaching methodology and Japanese education history, published books and papers and taught a variety of subjects. Her research has included studies into Koizumi Yakumo's pidgin Japanese, and the 'Yokohama Dialect', a typical pidgin used in Yokohama settlement. Professor Kanazawa has given presentations at various institutions, conferences and symposiums, the latest being at The Matsue International Symposium, commemorating the centennial of the death of Koizumi Yakumo.

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もかれも、おののき震えんばかりに、長い長い苦悶の叫びをあげました。そうして、