

# The Interpretation of the English Language that Determines History

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## Introduction

The essential function of language is to communicate matters, and it is critical that in so doing ambiguity or equivocation in meaning should not be produced. See the following sentence as an example;

I won't marry her because she comes of a wealthy family.

It is possible to understand the meaning of the sentence in terms of two directly opposite interpretations: either "It is not the case that I will marry her because she comes from a wealthy family," (I will marry her) or "I don't intend to marry her. The reason is that she comes from a wealthy family" (I will not marry her). In this case, considering the scope of operation of the word "not," it is common to interpret the sentence in terms of the former interpretation, and when wishing to communicate the latter interpretation a comma (,) would be added before "because" in writing, and a pause would come before "because" in speech.

However, while the above English sentence example may be treated as a joke, in the case of our country, where diplomacy is conducted in a foreign language (mainly English), the interpretation of the foreign language or the Japanese translation can sometimes prescribe the political conditions of the country in the future and can even invite a situation that determines "war and peace." To put it differently, if no clear problem in the writing style can be found, there may occur an interpretation that is vague or arbitrary in terms of national conditions

or from a strategic point of view.

In this essay, I would like to introduce three cases of such occurrences in the modern Japanese diplomacy. The first is what happened under the occupation of Japan by the Allies immediately after its defeat in World War II; specifically, the Japanese version of Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan will be taken up, which still remains an obstacle to a clear and unified understanding of the article among the Japanese people due to the fact that it was hastily put into Japanese from English in the extreme situation where Japan had no national sovereignty. Secondly, discussed is the issue of the Japanese government's interpretation of the English language in the Potsdam Declaration. Finally, focused upon is what I believe is a case of the Japanese government having made an arbitrary interpretation of English from its strategic viewpoint in making the decision to enter World War I.

### **1. The Ambiguity of Clause 1, Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan —“war as a sovereign right” and “the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes”**

On August 10, 1945, Japan communicated its acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration to the Allied Powers. One of the subjects about the declaration discussed within the Japanese government was that it demanded that the Imperial Japanese Constitution promulgated during the Meiji era be revised. In October of the same year, Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), indicated to Konoe Fumimaro, the then Minister of State in the Higashikuni Cabinet, that the Imperial Constitution would be revised. The constitutional revision began officially in February 1946, however, when MacArthur commanded Brigadier General Courtney Whitney, General Headquarters' (GHQ) Chief of the Government Section, to draft the new Japanese constitution (the so-called “MacArthur Notes”). Wasting no time, the GHQ draft, based on MacArthur's wishes, was handed to the Japanese government and in March of that year, a Japanese draft was

produced and publically released. Immediately thereafter, GHQ worked through the night doing final work on the draft. It was promulgated as the Constitution of Japan on November 3, after having passed through deliberations and partial revisions in the Imperial Diet. <sup>(1)</sup>

Above, I have outlined the process by which the Japanese Constitution was born. As a result of this process, there has been confusion amongst Japanese people since then and lasting until the present time about the interpretation of the linguistic context of Article 9, which prescribes the renunciation of war. There are multiple places in Article 9 where the meaning is either unclear or ambiguous, but here I will focus on the following two points.

- ① The discrepancy between “war as a sovereign right of the nation” and “the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes” in the Japanese version

In the original MacArthur Notes, it says that

War as a sovereign right of the nation is abolished. Japan renounces it as instrumentality for settling its disputes and even for preserving its own security. It relies upon the higher ideals which are now stirring the world for its defense and its protection. No Japanese army, navy, or air force will ever be authorized and no rights of belligerency will ever be conferred upon any Japanese force.

In response, the GHQ draft states that

War as a sovereign right of the nation is abolished. The threat or use of force is forever renounced as a means of settling disputes with any other nation.

No army, navy, air force or other war potential will ever be authorized and no rights of belligerency will ever be conferred upon the State.

And in the final wording of Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan that was drafted based on the GHQ draft and promulgated, it says that

Article 9 : Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes.

In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

What first deserves our attention here is that the wording in the MacArthur Notes “even for preserving its own security” is entirely deleted in the GHQ draft. The fact behind this deletion is that Colonel Kades (Charles Louis Kades), who had been involved in the drafting of the constitution at the GHQ deleted this section and that MacArthur tacitly allowed the deletion. Originally, MacArthur had intended to take from Japan even the right to fight for its self-defense; in other words, it may be inferred that he intended to make Japan’s continued existence permanently dependent upon America. To go as far as to take a nation’s right to self-defense, however, must have been considered unrealistic. In light of this background to the establishment of the present constitution, the will of the legislators of Clause 1 of Article 9 would seem to acknowledge war of self-defense, but the Japanese version of this part of the article has been a barrier to this interpretation.

This obstruction lies in the fact that whereas the part that reads “the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right” in English is rendered as “forever renounces war as an exercise of a sovereign right” in Japanese, the part that reads in English “the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes” as “(forever renounces) the threat made by force or the use of force in terms of their being a means of resolving international disputes” in Japanese. In other words,

because “as a sovereign right of the nation” is taken as an adjective phrase, and the directly preceding word “war” seem to suggest the identical situation (apposition) of “war as an exercise of sovereignty,” this makes possible an interpretation in which even war of self-defense is prohibited. This is because war of self-defense is precisely the basis of a nation’s sovereign rights. However, the part directly following that says “as a means of settling international disputes” is taken as an adverbial phrase and is rendered as “*in terms of its being (toshite wa)* a means of settling international disputes.” What deserves our attention here is the word “dispute.” This word is typically used to designate the stage in which “the use of physical force” is not employed, meaning the stage where “the use of physical force” is not used in an international forum. Therefore, the correct understanding of the English version is “threatening the use of force or using force against another party at the stage of a dispute where force has not been used,” in other words, “Japan forever renounces invasive war.” Interpreted conversely, it is natural to understand this as meaning that Japan does not renounce other uses of force, namely, war of self-defense. This precisely means not “as a means of resolving international disputes,” but “*in terms of its being (toshite wa)* a means of resolving international disputes.” Typically, the Japanese phrase “*toshite wa*” is used when comparing one thing to another. For example, this can be seen in a usage such as “it makes a good snack, but it is not enough *in terms of its being* a supper meal.” (2)

What complicates the issue even further is that the Japanese word for “dispute” (*funso*) includes both simple verbal debate and armed military conflict. This is clear from the phrase “armed disputes.” (*buryoku funso*) As previously stated, however, given that “dispute” in English cannot be interpreted along these lines, the placement of the phrase “the threat or use of force” directly before “international disputes” becomes “the threat or use of force as a means of resolving *armed conflict* between nations,” a meaningless and redundant repetition. (3)

In this way, It can be pointed out that the political conditions surrounding Article 9 and the Self-Defense Forces have been prescribed

by the fact that everything after the preposition “as” in the first half is translated as an adjective phrase, giving the Japanese version the meaning that resorting to armed force for self-defense, which is naturally included in the exercise of sovereign rights, should be renounced, and by the fact that, in the latter half, everything after “as” is taken as an adverbial phrase, giving it the interpretation that it is possible to wage war for self-defense.

- ② The consistency between “renounce war” and “the right of belligerency will not be recognized”

It is not a mistake to translate “the right of belligerency” into Japanese as “*kosenken*” (the right to engage in war). However, insofar as Clause 1 already declares the “renunciation of war,” there would be no reason for such a nation to have a right to wage war, and Clause 2 does nothing to add a negation of the right to make war. Therefore, this was understood by the Japanese government at the time to mean “the rights of belligerents” to conduct inspections and seizures in policing contraband during wartime. As corroboration of this point, it may be observed that the MacArthur Notes and the GHQ draft use the plural form of “rights.” Moreover, from the viewpoint of English expression as well, typically “the rights of belligerents” would be a countable noun that has concrete rights in mind, so that the aggregate of these rights would be expressed in terms of the plural form “rights.” For whatever reason, however, in the final original version created by GHQ with the participation of the Japanese government, this was altered to become the singular form of “right.”

However, if the meaning is “belligerent(s),” then writing “belligerent(s),” which recognizes the concrete existence of “belligerent(s),” would be more appropriate than the uncountable noun “belligerency,” which expresses an abstract concept, and the MacArthur Notes, the GHQ draft and the final wording in the Constitution of Japan all use the abstract, uncountable noun of “belligerency.”

Thus, the Japanese version of “the right of belligerency of the state, though perhaps not a mistranslation, together with the words “renounces was as an act of national sovereignty” and “as a means of resolving international conflict,” has been a factor causing confusion in terms of how Article 9 ought to be interpreted right up to the present day.

## 2. Interpretations of the Potsdam Declaration

The Potsdam Declaration was issued by the three countries of the United States, Britain, and China as the ultimatum to Japan during the end of the Pacific War (July 1945). Simply stated, in any war, it is the victor that imposes its conditions upon the defeated, and this declaration as well presented these conditions.

It is well-known regarding this declaration that Suzuki Kantaro, the then Prime Minister, stated in a press conference that “the Japanese government will ‘disregard’ (*mokusatsusuru*) the Potsdam Declaration.” Prime Minister Suzuki himself likely intended to say that he had no comment on the declaration, but this exchange with the Prime Minister was reported abroad by the Associated Press with the word *mokusatsusuru* translated as “ignore.”<sup>(4)</sup> If this translation may be considered one of the factors leading to the dropping of the atomic bombs, it is truly no overstatement to say that it was a case where the interpretations of Japanese and English determined the fate of Japan and its people. Why, then, was the Japanese government not able to make a clear response to this declaration? One reason is that it was anticipated that accepting the declaration would lead to a military revolt, but there is also a related premise here pertaining to the interpretation of the declaration, which was issued in English.

The issue that Japan concerned itself with most concerning how to end the war was the position of the emperor. In the Potsdam Declaration issued by the three nations of the United States, Britain, and China, there was no clear statement of how the emperor would be treated. The following articles may be cited as having some bearing

upon the Japanese political regime after being defeated.

#### Proclamation Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender

10. We do not intend that the Japanese shall be enslaved as a race or destroyed as a nation, but stern justice shall be meted out to all war criminals, including those who have visited cruelties upon our prisoners. The Japanese Government shall remove all obstacles to the revival and strengthening of democratic tendencies among the Japanese people. Freedom of speech, of religion, and of thought, as well as respect for the fundamental human rights shall be established.
12. The occupying forces of Allies shall be withdrawn from Japan as soon as these objectives have been accomplished and there has been established in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people a peacefully inclined and responsible government.
13. We call upon the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.

(Underlines added by author)

It is stated in Article 10 of the declaration that “stern justice will be meted out to all war criminals,” but whether or not the emperor would be a war criminal or the emperor system would be viewed as an “obstacle” to the revival and strengthening of democratic tendencies cannot be determined by an unequivocal interpretation. Moreover, in the section of Article 12 that discusses the establishment of “a peacefully inclined and responsible government,” both interpretations of maintaining or abolishing the emperor system are possible as options, as long as “the freely expressed will of the Japanese people” can be found.



Furthermore, Article 13 says “unconditional surrender,” and the word “unconditional” certainly implied that Japan had to be prepared for the abolition of the emperor system by the Allied Powers, but at the same time, this word “unconditional” also leaves room for the possibility that the system would be allowed to survive. Therefore, the path tread by the Japanese leadership after coming into contact with the Potsdam Declaration may be taken as an example of how all their interpretations of English were decided in the political landscape of that time.

The situation of the time was that, following the defeats on the war fronts and the intensification of indiscriminate aerial bombings, diplomacy toward ending the war was developing. Japanese diplomacy was seeking the favor of the Soviet Union in the hope of attracting it into a mediating role, while the communist power kept secret its already strengthened determination to enter the war. Amidst this context, in February 1945, Konoe made a direct appeal to the throne, stating that,

I believe that the defeat in the war is unfortunately already inevitable...the greatest cause for concern from the standpoint of preserving the national polity is...the communist revolution that would occur with the defeat...from the viewpoint of preserving the national polity, a path toward concluding the war should be made without a single day's delay...I believe the greatest obstacle lying in the path is the presence of a group within the military...conducting a reform of the military is a precondition for saving Japan from a communist revolution... (5)

Not only is this appeal noteworthy for being an opinion to the throne regarding plans to end the war, but it is also fascinating that what Konoe and the leadership around him feared most was the destruction of the Imperial Household through a communist revolution occurring in the army as a result of continuing the war. However, what deserves even greater attention is that Konoe, who at the time of the Versailles Peace Conference published his essay “Overcoming Anglo-American-

Centered Peace,” and had thereafter held that Japan’s national policies since the Manchurian Incident were the inevitable destiny that Japan had to follow, and actively defined the Pacific War as “emancipation from the bonds of Europe and America,” placed all the responsibility for this war, which was supposed to have been an act of emancipation, on a faction within the military and the purpose of ending the war early by fanning the fear of a communist revolution was to “protect the national polity.” (6)

Togo Shigenori, who was the Foreign Minister at the beginning of the Pacific War and was reappointed to this position in the Suzuki Kantaro Cabinet, which replaced the Koiso Cabinet in April 1945, had already said to Japan’s senior statesmen in 1943, “It may be concluded that if the tide of the war keeps getting worse in this way, our defeat will be inevitable...it is clear that we will be defeated if we do not make a great reform now.” The great reform of which Togo was speaking meant taking back the helm of politics and diplomacy, which had been under the control of the military, and seizing the initiative to end the war, yet his purpose in so doing was not the “emancipation of Asia,” but to prevent the conservative stratum of Japanese society from being overthrown through a social revolution and to protect the Imperial Household that was the symbol of the ruling class.

When the tide of the war finally turns toward our defeat, unless we manage the situation well; the result might be not only a political revolution, but could go so far as to trigger a social revolution...it is also clear that the forces of the laboring masses are growing, but the Imperial Household must be protected no matter what may happen. That the defeat in the war would lead to our suffering some punishment will be unavoidable, but the question is to what extent. It is indispensable not to have fatal conditions placed upon us, and therefore I thought that to end the war would be definitely required before our national power entirely wasted away... (7)

Like Konoe's appeal examined above, these words express the fear that the disasters accompanying the continuation of the war would become a fuse leading to the collapse of the traditional ruling order that was centered around the Imperial Household and that inside and outside the country the Emperor would be implicated as a war criminal. In light of these intentions among the ruling class, it is quite natural that the tracks traced by the Japanese leaders from the announcement of the Potsdam Declaration to Japan's acceptance of its terms converged upon "upholding the national polity." This can be said to have been precisely an example of arbitrary interpretations made by those who feared that their own base of power might be overturned.

### 3. Japan's Entry into World War I based upon an Arbitrary Interpretation

The issue of an arbitrary interpretation of English leading to Japan's entry into World War I is discussed in detail in Hirama Yoichi's "Language And Diplomacy: Interpretations That Change according to National Interests—the Example of World War I." (8) On August 7, 1914, British Ambassador to Japan Conygham Greene handed Foreign Minister Kato Takaaki a telegram from Britain, then engaged in war with Germany, requesting Japan to hunt out and sink German armed merchant cruisers that were blocking British trade routes in Chinese waters. There are some works arguing that a mistranslation of this telegram resulted in Japan's entry into World War I, (9) but Hirama concludes that it was an arbitrary interpretation based on the deliberate intent of Foreign Minister Kato that led to Japan's entry into the war. (10) The telegram reads;

#### Most Urgent

As some time will be needed in order that our ships of war may find and destroy German ships in Chinese waters, it is most important that the Japanese fleet should, if possible, hunt out and destroy the armed

German merchant cruisers who are now attacking our commerce.

If the Imperial Government would be good enough to employ some of their men of war, thus, it would be of the greatest advantage to His Majesty's Government.

This of course means an act of war against Germany, but this is, in our opinion, unavoidable.

The issue hinges on the last sentence (This is, in our opinion, unavoidable.) As previously stated, Hirama disagrees with the view that the Japanese government decided to enter into the war against Germany based on a mistranslation of this section, arguing instead that Foreign Minister Kato's deliberately arbitrary interpretation is what led Japan to enter the war. To be sure, the "this" in the sentence "This of course means" when immediately followed by "an act of war against Germany, means "To hunt out and destroy the armed German merchant cruisers," but it is possible to interpret the "this" in "this is, in our opinion, unavoidable" in the following two ways.

- ① Hunting out and sinking armed German merchant cruisers means of course an act of war against Germany, but this (an act of war against Germany) is, in our opinion, unavoidable.
- ② Hunting out and sinking armed German merchant cruisers means of course an act of war against Germany, but this (to hunt out and destroy the armed German merchant cruisers) is, in our opinion, unavoidable.

Which of these interpretations, then, matches Britain's intention? I support the view that argues that Britain's request was only for a limited use of force by the Japanese navy in Chinese waters, and that it was not a request for Japan's full entry into the war. The most important reason for supporting this argument is that because regardless of the fact that Britain was the world's strongest power at the time, it would most likely have refrained from making an arrogant

use of pressure such as commanding another country to enter into the war. <sup>(11)</sup>

As the grounds for refuting the argument that holds that Japan decided to declare war on Germany by mistranslating the telegram in terms of ① instead of the correct interpretation ②, Hirama cites the facts that under the international conditions surrounding Japan at that time, Foreign Minister Kato could have confirmed with the British government in advance through Ambassador Greene, but in spite of this, he decided together with Prime Minister Okuma to enter the war within 36 hours of receiving the telegram, and also that upon receiving this request, Kato stated in a meeting with Greene that, "I am uncertain how it would be to limit military activities to armed cruisers, but at any rate, I will study the question and make a reply," indicating his understanding that the request was for a limited use of force. In other words, Hirama argues that the foreign language of the telegram was interpreted arbitrarily in order to have it in concord with Japan's national interests on the stage of international politics. <sup>(12)</sup>

## Conclusion

As shown above, I have introduced such examples as Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan, the wording of the Potsdam Declaration, and the telegram about Japan's entry into World War I. They are all cases where interpretations of a foreign language were made ambiguously or arbitrarily under the (international) political conditions of the time. As the essential function of language of communicating matters is based upon the goal of maintaining and expanding one's own interests, it has been an eternal and immutable truth ever since humanity gained the infinite means of communication of language that linguistic expressions do not faithfully reflect objectivity. Of course, this applies to the forum of modern international politics and is also true of today, which has seen more than a half century since the end of World War II.

The importance of the ability to use foreign languages, particularly

the world language of English, is undeniable, but whether in the case of individuals or nations, in political forums where the authoritative allocation of scarcity value is inevitable, arbitrary interpretation of ambiguous language lying at the periphery of meaning is inescapable. In today's Japan, where the use of Western languages deluges the public, and the common agreement for such vocabulary as "globalization" and "friendship" is vague, it is particularly important not to forget this.

(Notes)

- (1) Nonaka Toshihiko, Nakamura Mutsuo, Takahashi Kazuyuki, Takami Katsutoshi, *Kenpo I* (The Constitution, Vol. 1), Yuhikaku, 2001, pp.53-60
- (2) Nishibe Susumu, *Watashi no Kenporon: Nipponkoku Kenpo Kaisei Shian* (My Theory of the Constitution: A Proposal for Revising the Constitution of Japan), Tokuma Shoten, 1991, pp.128-147
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) Yomiuri Shimbun Publishing Co. ed., *Showa-shi no Tenno(3): Potsudamu zenya* (The Emperor in Showa History: The Eve of the Potsdam Declaration), Yomiuri Shimbun Publishing Co., 1980, p.386
- (5) Yabe Teiji, *Konoe Fumimaro*, Yomiuri Shimbun Publishing Co., 1975, pp.702-704
- (6) For a detailed study of Konoe's appeal to the Emperor, see Shoji Junichiro, *Konoe Josobun no Saikento* (A Review of Konoe's Appeal to the Emperor), *International Relations*, the Japan Association of International Relations ed., vol.109, 1995, pp.54-69
- (7) Togo Shigenori Kinenkai (Togo Shigenori Memorial Association) ed., Togo Shigenori, *Jidai no Ichimen* (An Aspect of the Times), Hara Shobo, 1985, p.315
- (8) Hirama Yoichi, *Gogaku to Gaiko: Kokueki niyotte Kawaru Kaishaku: Daiichiji Sekai Taisen no Jitsurei kara* (Language And Diplomacy:

Interpretations That Change according to National Interests—the Example of World WarI), *Gaiko Jiho* (News of Diplomacy), Gaiko Jihosha vol.1239, 1987, pp.60-71

- (9) To cite a case, Maeda Renzan, *Rekidai Naikaku Monogatari Gekan* (The Story of Japan's Successive Cabinets Last Vol.) Jiji Press Ltd., 1971, pp.89-90 and Sugita Kazutsugu, *Kindai Nihon no Seisenryaku* (Political Strategy in Modern Japan), Hara Shobo,1978, p.363
- (10) Hirama, op.cit., p.62
- (11) Even in Maeda, op.cit., pp.80-90, he holds that “the most noteworthy part of the above request is the last sentence, “This of course means an act of war against Germany, but this is, in our opinion, unavoidable,” and this caused a serious problem. Read hastily, there may be some who would understand it to mean that the British government saw Japan's full entry into the war as unavoidable, but the “this” in the statement of the British government “This of course,” needless to say, points to the need to sink armed German merchant cruisers in Chinese waters and the “this” in the last section “but this is, in our opinion, unavoidable” means what Japan should do in Chinese waters. If this had not been the case, there would have been no reason for the British to say, “this is unavoidable.” Had London intended to say that Japan's full entry into the war was unavoidable, it would have been a command for Japan to enter the war, which would not have been so much impertinent as extraordinarily rude. This was a request for help that would limit Japan's scope of action to Chinese waters.
- (12) Hirama argues that “Foreign Minister Kato was confident that no matter how long the war lasted, it would eventually end in Britain's victory and even in the worst case scenario it would be an “advantageous non-victory” on the side of the British, and thus judged there would be “no loss in entering the war.” To put it differently, out of the diplomatic desire to build up Japan's position in the Orient as sturdily as possible,’ Kato requested full entry into the war without being confined to a role of hunting out and sinking armed

German ships based upon a stretched interpretation of Britain's limited request...If he had confirmed with Britain, the scope of Japanese strategy would have, in accordance with Britain's intention, been limited to destroying armed merchant ships around the Chinese sea and the occupation of Micronesia would have been impossible. Had he accurately translated and circulated the telegram, this would have given a basis for the argument of Yamagata Aritomo and other Japanese elder statesmen who were strongly opposed to entering the war. Perhaps for this reason, while it was customary at this time for foreign telegrams to be circulated with their Japanese translations, this telegram was not translated in writing, but was only orally put into Japanese during cabinet meetings, and even in the Foreign Ministry ed., *Nihon no Gaiko Bunsho* (Japan's Diplomatic Documents), vol.3, 1914, there are translations for almost all of the other important telegrams, but no translation for this telegram can be found." (Hirama, op.cit., p.62)