

# Classical Japanese as a Vehicle of Philosophical Thought

Rein RAUD

**D**ōgen, the first Japanese thinker to use his mother tongue (and not Chinese) for philosophical expression, is notorious for his manipulations with the sources he quotes. On the other hand, it would have been impossible for him to convey his thought otherwise, since he needed a different medium in order to make his idiosyncratic interpretations of earlier texts explicit. In this sense we can say that in part, Dōgen's thought was born in language, and therefore, if we want to understand his thought in depth, it is necessary to have a closer look at this language.

There are two main features that set Classical Japanese apart from our habitual understanding of language that is based on Indo-European and Semitic languages, with their basic sentence-model of subject and predicate, which correspond naturally to nouns and verbs. As the early European range of linguistic competence was limited to languages that all shared these basic premises, they came to be universalized in the Western understanding of grammar and language. It is characteristic of many Western thinkers to assume that the world

itself has a logical structure, which corresponds to these linguistic categories. In other words, many of them tend to believe that reality consists of distinct objects that have properties and affect each other with their actions as well as are affected themselves. However, neither of these premises is actually valid for Classical Japanese: even though it distinguishes grammatically between nouns and verbs, these categories have a rather different role to play in the construction of linguistic utterances, and neither is it possible to formulate sentences of the subject-predicate type. In that it is the mirror image of Chinese, which allows for a distinction between the subject and object position in a syntagm, while not distinguishing between parts of speech. Needless to say, both Classical Japanese and Chinese are just as functional a linguistic system as Indo-European and Semitic languages are.

One of the most famous prose works of Classical Japanese literature, the “Pillow Book” of Sei Shōnagon, begins with a section that sets the four seasons of the year in correspondence with the moments of the day. Thus, it says:

春はあけぼの。やうやうしろくなり行く、山ぎはすこしあかりて、むらさきだちたる雲のほそくたなびきたる。

*haru wa akebono. yōyō shiroku nariyuku, yamagiwa sukoshi akarite, murasakidachitaru kumo no hosoku tanabikitaru.*

In spring, the dawn – when the slowly paling mountain rim is tinged with red, and wisps of faintly crimson-purple cloud float in the sky (SEI Shōnagon 2006, 3).

“In spring, the dawn.” This is the prototypical linguistic form of any Japanese predication, classical or modern: a correspondence is established between two sub-utterances. We could transcribe this as “As far as A is concerned, x applies.” “As far as *spring* is concerned, *dawn* applies.” Or, more broadly: what *spring* signifies for us contains an area of meaningful overlap with *dawn*. This overlap can be personal and make no sense for anybody but the speaker, but it can also be shared, felt commonly by a group of people.

In linguistics, this kind of structure is called the thematic construction: *spring* is the topic about which something is said, and *dawn*, the predicate, is applied to it. Such a construction functions quite differently from our habitual Western assertive sentence: for example, in contemporary Japanese, exactly the same form is used for saying

私は学生です。  
*watashi wa gakusei desu.*  
 “I am a student.”

and, when ordering food in a restaurant,

私は寿司です。  
*watashi wa sushi desu.*  
 “I want sushi.”

Both of these sentences can equally well be transcribed into the general formula: “as far as *I* am concerned, *student/sushi* applies.”

Western learners of Japanese usually understand the logic of the grammar quite quickly and have no problem using it, but there are also consequences for philosophical reasoning, which need to be explicitly formulated. One important thing is that this construction does not allow the formulation of non-contextual truths. Different *x*s apply to any *A* at different moments, so we always need to know what is the situation we are dealing with. And this indeed corresponds very well to Japanese social reality. In contemporary Japanese, the grammatical markers, the personal pronouns and auxiliaries indicating direction—indeed, some parts of general vocabulary—are all dependent on the social hierarchies that govern the relations between people in a speech act situation. I refer to myself with a different pronoun depending on whether I address an official in a government office, a salesperson in a store or a childhood friend. Grammarians (HINDS 2003; SATO 2014) sometimes design a certain polite style as “neutral,” which is indeed incorrect in the sense that this style, too, cannot be used in any situation. It is customary for the Japanese to make their speech over-polite

if they want to indicate respective distance, which can also be used as a strategy to indicate to other people that one does not wish to interact with them, indeed, “as a kind of armor, to wrap up and protect the nerves which may be lurking underneath, and... to put some deflecting distance between oneself and the threatening world which one may encounter ‘out there’” (HENDRY 1993, 62). In that sense, using language that is too polite may even be perceived as offensive.

But, to return to the problems such a linguistic system poses to philosophy: there are categories that immediately suggest themselves as central to any kind of thought that is formulated in this language. The most important of them is transience, a natural aversion to absolutes or anything at all that is constant and universal. If the formulation of universal truths is a *sine qua non* of philosophical thinking, then indeed it seems to be the case that the Japanese language does not lend itself to it as a vehicle. However, if we take a broader view of philosophy, then such linguistic thinking, on the contrary, opens up a broader horizon and enables us to think of a world without absolutes and constancies, an essentially dynamic world where anything can only make sense in context. This is a fundamental insight, developed by Nishida Kitarō as the “logic of place,”<sup>1</sup> that entities are not self-sufficient objects (or subjects), but they “take place” in the world through mutual determination, they constantly become themselves only in interaction with other entities and their self-identity is “absolutely contradictory” in that it does not and cannot hark back to an immutable essence (NISHIDA 1979). Nishida constantly stresses throughout this work that our direction of thought should move “from the agent to the perceiver” (he also has an essay by that title), meaning that, unlike in the traditional scheme of things where we think of the Cartesian-rooted subject as a fixed point from which the world can be perceived and conceptualized and then entered into, we should conversely realize that, just as Witt-

1. “Place” (*basho*) has also been translated into English as *topos*, locus, matrix, field, etc. See (HEISIG 2001, 299–300) for a brief overview of the reception history of the concept.

gensteinian meanings only exist in linguistic usage, the perceiver does not precede the agent, but is a construction, a derivative of the agent always already embedded and involved in the world, determined by it and determining it at the same time.

The second category that the contextual nature of Classical Japanese imposes on the character of the philosophical thinking it makes possible is precisely the personal level of thought, its relation to the position of embeddedness. Since given currency by WATSUJI Tetsurō (1937), it has become common in speaking of Japanese culture to point out the betweenness, the *aidagara*, of any situation wherein a person might find oneself. Indeed, just as the sociocultural hierarchies that inform any speech act situation, the presence of any subject at any moment and in any point of the culturally inhabitable space is always defined by a multitude of gradients. The *shintō* idea of purity and contamination, neither of which is ever absolute in the world that is accessible to us, and the absence of a strict separation of the sacred and the profane (which are instead the two poles on a gradient), put the individual always into a position where she has to identify her place in relation to these significant opposites. However pure you wouldn't be, there is always more purity, and there is always a place more sacred than where you are. Even the emperor, as William Coaldrake informs us, has to follow a precise trajectory when worshipping at the Ise Shrine (COALDRAKE 1996, 29–30). The same is true for contamination and profanation.

But in addition to the gradients of sanctity and social hierarchy (which is itself produced by different factors, such as position, age, gender, education, length of stay in the group, etc.) there is, for example, the level of spatial familiarity. (One could not call it privacy, because the concept of “private space” is absent from traditional Japanese culture, all spaces are shared by some people, even the sleeping-rooms of nobility were only divided with folding screens.) A Japanese house is territorially divided: from spaces where one interacts with strangers in the front to spaces where more significant others are allowed to

the inner quarters (*oku*) reserved for the immediate family. Thus, the polite designation for someone else's wife is *okusan*, or "the inner quarters' person." Levels of politeness of language correspond to where one is situated, from the coldly polite at the outer door to the intimate of the bedroom.

But there is a further consequence to this spatiality: the truth of an utterance, contextual as it is, should become, if properly articulated, a part of the person who is formed by the governing circumstances at each particular moment. As opposed to the Western absolute truth-claims of philosophical utterances, Japanese thought cannot place itself into a domain completely separate from lived practice, the context of embeddedness. But the emphasis on *praxis* does not make it irrational or less valid philosophically. This only means it problematizes the relationship between the individual self and its reality (material as well as social) in a different way, giving rise to various practices of self-cultivation and self-realization, from meditation exercises to artistic pursuits to a work ethic, that unite the striving for the universal or total with day-to-day life. Truths are not out there, they are real inasmuch they are experienced.

Returning again to the structural characteristics of the Japanese language: as said in the beginning, the noun-verb distinction that the language makes does not correspond to the subject-predicate or even the agent-action distinction that we would normally find in the syntax of a Western language. As I have argued at length elsewhere (2002), Japanese is an event-oriented language, which means that the topics, the A's of the "as much as A is concerned" are not necessarily nominal. This feature has begun to recede in modern Japanese, but in classical Japanese it is more typical to find nouns as qualifiers and attributes of actions, which themselves, in specific grammatical forms, take up the positions that Western languages reserve for nouns. Modern grammars like to call these forms "nominalizations," reflecting the fact that we are unable to think of such syntactic positions as non-static. However, if we think of them (and try to translate them) as verbal forms, which

they grammatically are, quite a different picture starts to present itself. Let us look at the first sentence of the *Genji monogatari*:

いづれの御時にか、女御更衣あまたさぶらひたまひける中に、いとやむごとなき際にはあらぬが、すぐれて時めきたまふありけり。

*izure no oontoki ni ka, nyōgo-kōi amata saburaitamaikeru uchi ni, ito yamugotonaki kiwa ni wa aranu ga, sugurete tokimekitamau arikeri.*

The Seidensticker translation reads “In a certain reign there was a lady not of the first rank whom the emperor loved more than any of the others.” Basically that is indeed the meaning of this sentence, however the sense is conveyed by a completely different mechanism. Note that there is no subject, no “there was a lady” or “emperor” in this sentence, and the only nouns are part of an adverbial construction (the “others” in Seidensticker’s version). And even *kōi* (“maid,” literally “change-clothes”) is also a noun only metaphorically. So technically we have in the original a sequence of four syntagms that could be translated as follows:

- what reign might it have been
- among the humbly serving the court of lots of ladies and maids
- not-being of overwhelmingly unattainable rank, but
- excelling at humbly catching attention was there

Thus, “among the instances of serving there was an instance of not very high rank, but of catching attention.” Nouns only appear as qualifiers, in subordinate clauses. This logic is not completely alien to Western thought. One can think of examples such as “the coalition of the willing” wherein the first word, though technically a noun, denotes an arrangement rather than a thing, or “the haves and have nots.” However, such expressions are subjugated to the general regime of noun domination, which is why we tend to perceive them as metaphoric designations of tangible entities rather than dynamic instances of being. But in classical Japanese, quite often in passages where one might log-

ically expect nominal expressions, verbs have the scene almost completely to themselves:

わりなくしぶしぶに起きがたげなるを、しひてそそのかし、「明けすぎぬ。あな、見ぐるし」などいはれて、うちなげくけしきも、げにあかず物憂くもあらんかしと見ゆ。指貫なども、ゐながら着もやらず、まづさしよりにて、夜いひつることの名残、女の耳にいひ入れて、なにわぎすともなきやうなれど、帯など結ふやうなり。

*warinaku shibushibu ni okigatage-naru wo, shiite sosonokashi, "ake-suginu; ana, migurushi" nado iwarete, uchinageku keshiki mo, ge ni akazu monouku mo aran kashi to miyu. sashinuki nado mo, inagara ki mo yarazu, mazu sashiyorite, yo iitsuru koto no nagori, onna no mimi ni ii-irete, naniwaza su to mo naki yō naredo, obi nado yuu yō nari.*

In English, this delightful description how a lover should conduct himself in the morning reads as follows:

There *he* lies, reluctant to move, so that *she* has to press *him* to rise. ‘Come on, it’s past dawn,’ *she* urges. ‘How shocking *you* are!’ and *his* sighs reassure *her* that *he* really hasn’t yet had *his* fill of love, and is sunk in gloom at the thought that *he* must leave. *He* sits up, but rather than proceeding to put on *his* gathered trousers *he* instead snuggles up to *her* and whispers a few more words from the night’s intimacies [into the woman’s ear]; then there’s a bit more vague activity, and somehow in the process *his* belt turns out to have been tied (SEI Shōnagon 2006:55–56).

There are altogether fifteen direct references to the two protagonists of the scene in the English translation. In the original, there is one. (Curiously, this one is absent from the translation and is inserted in square brackets into the quotation above.)

For the purposes of technical translation, let us now tentatively expand the notation system of Classical Chinese presented in RAUD 2013 to Classical Japanese as well. “+” will express juxtaposition, “:” the relation of attribution, “→” and “←” a broadly understood relation between an action and its object, and “~” will express a thematic construction (not straightforward predication as in the case of Chinese). It should also be noted that in Classical Japanese objects normally pre-

cede the verbs they are governed by. Because of the grammatical structure of the language, there are several other factors to be taken into account. All grammatical material, both inflected endings and particles as well as other semi-independent words will here be rendered as hashtags, and not necessarily in the same order as they are in the original, but following the logic of the utterance, thus #not #doubt #need means “without doubt, needs to” while #not #need #doubt stands for “does not need to doubt.” After some deliberation, I have resorted, in the majority of cases, to the translation of the grammatical functions, not naming them, (thus “done” and not “perfective”), but in some cases (such as the passive) this has not been possible, because translations such as “undergoing” distort the meaning even more. Some grammatical material, used for emphasis and thus in a qualifying function, is also moved from its original place. Some other words, such as the thematic copula, whose meaning is exhausted by the notation, do not appear at all. For purposes of clarity I have used separate lines for each syntagm, each of which relates to the preceding or the following one as a whole (that is, as if it were in brackets).

As a result, the passage quoted above looks like this:

incomparably+time-takingly:

[(difficult: rising): like] ~being

←effort-making+urging

+“pass sunrise #done; wow, painful to look” +and-so-on

←saying #passive #done

+also: (the sighing: view)

~truly: satiates #not +also: gloomy~is #future #surely

←seems

also:(trousers+and-so-on)←

sitting #while+putting-on←also:doing#not

+first: nearing

+[(night: saying #done): thing]: remainder←

woman: ear ← saying+inserting #done

+[(effort ← making #even #not): like-that] ~being #although

[(belt+and-so-on ← ties): like-that]~ being

Or, in a slightly more conventional (but still very technical) prose:

Effort-makingly urging the incomparably, time-takingly seems-being-difficult to rise, saying: “Sunrise-passing - wow, painful to look” and so on. The sighing view is truly not satiated and will also be gloomy, it seems. Also trousers and so on, while sitting also not putting on, first nearing, saying the remainder of things said at night into the woman’s ear, though there is seemingly not-making-any-effort, belt and so on seem to be tied.

Any reference made to the man is by predominantly verbal constructs, such as “seems-being-difficult to rise” (*okigatage-naru*) or “the sighing view” (*uchinageku keshiki*) or even transitive and agent-presupposing constructions like “seemingly-not-making-any-effort” (*nani-waza su tomo naki yō*). All of these refer to momentary contexts, or more exactly to the woman’s perceptions of him at particular moments. The man as an agent is not much more than the common denominator of these actions, not someone that the text needs to invoke by direct reference. (True, we are told previously that it speaks about men who return after a night’s visit.) The situation is described through a series of actions, with the context making clear which of these are of which protagonist, it is probably as close to a personally perceived flux of experience as language can get.

This mode of expression is not exceptional. It is the standard. We can also note that this passage of high Heian period court prose does not contain a single Chinese loanword, even though those also occasionally found their way into women’s writing. By the beginning of the 13th century the situation is already rather different and Dōgen’s text, in particular, is full of blocks of Chinese origin. And yet the Japanese around these blocks continues to follow the very same conventions of court prose. Let us look at a very typical example of his writing, taken from the “Painted cake” (*Gabyō*) fascicle:

畫餅といふは、しるべし、父母所生の面目あり、父母未生の面目あり。米麴

をもちゐて作法せしむる正當恣麤、かならずしも生不生にあらざれども、現成道成の時節なり。去來の見聞に拘牽せらるると參學すべからず。

*gabyō to iu wa, shirubeshi, fumoshoshō no menmoku ari, fumomishō no menmoku ari. meian wo mochiite sahō seshimuru shōtōimmo, kanarazu shimo shōfushō ni arazaredomo, genjōdōjō no jisetsu nari. kyorai no kenbun ni kuken seraruru to sangaku su bekarazu.*

What is called the painted cake, one should know, is the original face of when father and mother were born, the original face of before father and mother were born. Using rice flower, the immediate suchness of putting the recipe into action—while not necessarily within birth and non-birth—is a moment of the way becoming apparent. One should not internalize this as circumscribed by perceptions of [the cake as] coming and going.

For the time being, I have replaced all Chinese characters in the notation with squares. The indentations here mark that both syntagms are in equal position vis-à-vis the previous unindented one. For the sake of clarity, I have also removed the rhetorical inversion of the first two syntagms in the original. What we get looks like this:

know #need→

□ □ □:called

~(□ □ □ □:□ □)~being-there

~(□ □ □ □:□ □)~being-there

[(□ □←using):□ □:doing #causing]:□ □ □ □

~truly: necessarily □ □ □~being #although #not

~(□ □ □ □:□ □)

+{[(□ □:□ □):□ □]:doing #passive}←□ □:doing #not #need

Quite clearly all references to the outside of the text are performed by the Chinese blocks, while the Japanese only establishes the relations between them and qualifies them if necessary. In so doing, it is able to superimpose some of its verbal domination also on the enclosed Chinese blocks. For example, when we look at the last syntagm, we see that the object of the action is itself a Japanese passive verbal construction, not a nominal one. In other words, Dōgen is here making use of

the resources of Classical Japanese in order to destabilize the semantics of the otherwise a little too stable Chinese.

At the same time, the clusters of characters still maintain a certain autonomy within the text, persisting in their own logic of sense organization. This curious feature has survived into contemporary Japanese and is visible in such phrases as

ただいま、来客中です。

*tadaiima, raikyakuchū des.*

“At the moment, we are entertaining a guest.”

Technically: “As far as the present moment is concerned,  
[(COME: GUEST): WITHIN] applies.”

Or:

来店いただきましてありがとうございます。

*raiten-itadakimashite arigatō gozaimasu.*

“Thank you for coming to our store.”

Technically: “Having humbly received COME → STORE, we are grateful.”

Let us now put the semantic Chinese back into Dōgen’s text.

know #need→

(PAINT→CAKE):called

~{[(FATHER+MOTHER): (THAT-WHICH: BIRTH)]:

(FACE+EYES)}~being-there

~{[(FATHER+MOTHER): (NOT-YET: BIRTH)] : (FACE+EYES)}~being-there

[(RICE: FLOUR←using): (MAKE: LAW): doing #causing]: [(CORRECT: APPLY): (THIS: SUCH)]

~[(truly: necessarily): (BIRTH+NOT: BIRTH)]~being #although #not

~[(APPAARENT: BECOMING): WAY~BECOMING]:(TIME: JUNCTION)

+{[(GO+COME): (SEE+HEAR)]: (DOG←RESTRAIN)}:doing #passive←(PARTICIPANT: STUDY):doing #not #need

Some of these blocks are idiomatic expressions that only occur together, such as the early Chinese vernacular word for “such” (恁麼

*immo*) or “dog-restraining” (拘牽 *kuken*) or “leash” in the meaning of “limitation.” In others, however, such as the variative construction of “when father and mother were born” / “before father and mother were born,” the relations between the characters seem to be actualized during reading. That process will be the topic of the next chapter, whereas for the time being we will only be concerned with how the specifics of Japanese linguistic structures bear on Dōgen’s text.

Indeed, we find both of the two characteristic features of Classical Japanese very much at work also at this passage. First, the Japanese apparatus surrounding Chinese blocks has ensured us that the independent members of the sentence are often referred to by verbal rather than by nominal constructions. The first sentence predicates about *gabyō to iu*, “[what] is called painted cake,” and the last one posits as the object “the limiting by perceptions of coming and going.” The grammatical agent of the second sentence, *shōtōimmo* “[instance of] suchness” is not technically a verb, but the logic of the sentence ties it strongly to the preceding “putting the recipe into action,” and similarly is the predicate of this sentence “a moment” a stand-in for what it is the moment of, namely “the becoming apparent of the way.”

As to the character of the predication, the thematic construction of “as to A, X applies” is the only framework that makes them intelligible. “What is called a painting of a cake is the original face of the moment when your father and mother were born” works in the same way as “spring is dawn”: we are not expected to accept their actual sameness, but the statement of a meaningful overlap in the ways how we conceive of them. In this respect it is notable how Dōgen often posits isolated blocks of Chinese characters without connecting them very tightly to surrounding textual material. An example of this tactic in the present passage is the variative repetition 父母所生の面目あり、父母未生の面目あり *fumoshoshō no menmoku ari, fumomishō no menmoku ari* “there is the original face of when father and mother were born, there is the original face of when father and mother were not yet born.” In such clusters, the original Chinese relationships between the characters are

invariably actualized and may become the object of willful manipulation. In other words, this is where the border between the two linguistic logics is drawn: Chinese rules apply within blocks of Chinese characters, where, for example, straightforward predication is also possible, and these blocks can similarly be integrated into the flexible network of Japanese verb-dominated thematic constructions as separate units, the inner dynamic sense of which is now reified and designates an idea of this relationship, not the relationship itself. Let us look at a sentence from the “Challenge of the Apparent” (*Genjōkōan*) fascicle:

これにところあり、みち通達せるによりて、しらるるきはのしるからざるは、このしることの、佛法の究盡と同生し、同參するゆゑにしかあるなり。

*kore ni tokoro ari, michi tsūdatsu-seru ni yorite, shiraruru kiwa no shirukarazaru wa, kono shiru koto no, buppō no kyūjin to dōshō-sbi, dōsan-suru yue ni shika aru nari.*

This is the place, the path has been traversed, and yet the horizon of knowledge is unclear — this is only because such knowledge is born together, practiced together with the full exhaustion of the teaching/existence.<sup>2</sup>

{[(at-this: place)~there-is]+(path~traversed #has-been)}: therefore  
 [(knowing #passive: horizon): (clear~being #not)]  
 ~(this: knowledge):  
 [(BUDDHA: DHARMA)←REACH+EXHAUST]: [(SAME: BIRTH)+(SAME: PRACTICE)]:  
 reason-for~only-is: there-is.

The sentence offers an explanation for an apparent contradiction: the practitioner has reached the imaginary spot at the end of the path, and yet does not know what exactly it is that she knows. The answer offered by Dōgen is that such knowledge can only be coextensional with the totality of existence and the teaching itself, which is why it

2. I have translated 佛法 *buppō*, literally “Buddha-dharma” here as “teaching/existence,” because the Sanskrit word *dharma* means both “teaching” and the minimal unit of existence, and throughout the fascicle these two have been conflated.

cannot be separated from the knower and no horizon could be imagined, because there is no perspective from which it could be viewed. Formally, we see how this explanation, laconic in form and consisting almost completely of characters, differs from the surrounding Japanese discourse. In the bigger structure of the sentence, the topic is “not-being-clear” and the predicate is the final “there-is,” both verbal, and similarly verbal is the first series qualifying “knowledge.” At the same time the Chinese concepts, lacking Japanese-type verbality on their own, behave as static entities (thus 究盡 *kyūjin* “exhaustive reaching” acts in the sentence as a noun). Precisely this is the reason why blocks of Chinese characters function in the Japanese text as ideas of their content, and not that content itself.

Obviously the detailed microanalysis performed on the examples above is in most cases not really necessary for understanding the meaning of Dōgen’s text. However, especially for the reader with no experience of Classical Japanese, these short exercises are primarily meant as a reminder that the language of “The Core Transmission” is quite different from the relatively smooth, even if complicated prose of the translations into Western languages that—just as they should—bend his thoughts to their own internal logic.

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