

MOTOORI'S VIEW OF PHONETICS AND
LINGUISTICS IN HIS
MOJIGOE NO KANAZUKAI AND KANJI SAN ON KŌ¹

by J. R. McEWAN

In his philological studies Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) continued the tradition of Keichū (1640-1701) to whom is ascribed the foundation of scientific methods of linguistic study in Japan. Keichū's great achievement lay in breaking away from the obscurantist and esoteric tendencies which had characterised his predecessors, and interpreting the ancient texts on the basis of internal evidence and not in accordance with the preconceived ideas held by a particular school of thought.

It would, however, be unreasonable to expect that Motoori should have attained the degree of scientific detachment associated with modern philology. He was inevitably influenced by the intellectual climate of his time, and it is natural that his beliefs and prejudices, as well as certain inadequacies in his materials and methods, should have imposed some limitations on his scientific study of language.

Motoori was an untiring exponent of the doctrine of the universal superiority of Japan, which he had taken over from his master, Mabuchi. For this reason he was violently opposed to the Japanese Confucian scholars and their often uncritical admiration of China, and by extension, to all things Chinese. A corollary of his belief in the universal superiority of Japan was that of the universal superiority of the Japanese language, and this was made the ground for a number of *a priori* pronouncements on the nature of language, based on the assumption that Japanese is the perfect language and that all features not present in Japanese are "incorrect". Another ideological notion which had a marked effect on Motoori's philological studies was his reverence for antiquity, the immediate source of which may again be traced to Mabuchi, but which may be regarded in a wider sense as an unacknowledged legacy of Chinese thought. It was this reverence for the ancients which prompted Motoori to choose the earliest known forms of Japanese as the perfect language, which served as his standard of criticism

¹ Numerals in brackets are pages of Motoori *Norinaga Zenshū*, Tōkyōdo, 1927, Vol. 9.

in matters of "correctness" and "incorrectness". A further result of this belief was an attitude of extreme conservatism which was inimical to all innovations. Thus the exposition of his thoroughly scientific classification of "light" and "heavy" vowels is apologetically introduced with the remark that it is "an unnecessary argument, there being no precedent for such a classification in Japanese" (425), while his introduction of the sign ㄨ to to represent the "glottal stop" is excused on the ground of necessity, and care is taken to repudiate any suggestion that the author has been motivated by a love of novelty (366). But the most serious obstacle to Motoori in his linguistic studies lay in the inadequacy of his terminology, and in his complete but misplaced confidence in the accuracy of the *kana* transcriptions of sounds which he used. Yet when it is remembered that the only phonetic transcription other than *kana*, with which he was familiar, was the extremely clumsy Chinese system (such as that employed in the transliteration of Sanskrit words), his admiration for the *kana* syllabary is easily understandable, as is his condescending remark that it would do Chinese philologists good to learn *kana*. However, the small number of sounds represented by the *kana* inevitably led to several sounds being represented by the same symbol, with resulting confusion such as that which occurs in his treatment of the Chinese final nasals. Another instance is his identification of Japanese *h-* with both *f-* (406) and *x-* (393) in Chinese.

In spite of the vigorous contempt with which Motoori treated the Chinese language, he was deeply indebted to it for his philological terminology, which consisted of Chinese terms supplemented by terms based on the *kana* system. In spite of the great need for extending the range of sounds beyond that covered by the *kana* Motoori took no steps in this direction, not only because of his conservatism but because of his conviction that *kana* could represent all the sounds which were worth representing (406).

A great deficiency in both Chinese and Japanese philological terminology was the lack of any phonetic unit smaller than the syllable. As a result, sounds had to be specified by descriptive phrases or by reference to exemplifying words—a system which made any analytical study of sounds almost impossible.

In Chinese philological works words were divided into two parts, the consonant initial (音) and the vocalic part (including final consonants) (韻). Both parts of the syllable were specified by words exemplifying the initials (字母) and the finals (韻字). Though the former represented individual sounds, the latter, almost without exception, represented more than one sound and some as many as four. A similar system was applied to Japanese, where the smaller number of initials and the existence of only five vowels made the scheme more practical. Motoori specified Japanese initials by reference to the columns of the table of fifty sounds, and used the Chinese term 韻, with the reading *hibiki*, to mean the vowel in a Japanese syllable.

I. MOTOORI'S VIEW OF LANGUAGE

The main content of the *San On Kō* is, as its title indicates, a study of the Japanese *On* readings and their relation to their Chinese originals. The earlier part of the work, however, contains an exposition of Motoori's view of language and, in particular, his views on the nature of Japanese as opposed to other languages.

Motoori's working principle in this matter was that the only sounds which were to be considered "correct" were those of ancient Japanese, which were defined as the fifty sounds of the *kana* syllabary. All other sounds were to be considered barbarous. "You must know that all sounds other than these fifty are not far removed from the noises emitted by birds, beasts and inanimate objects; they are confused and incorrect" (364). At this point we are warned not to be dismayed by certain "foreigners" who may think that "because Japan lies to the eastward", her language is of a primitive sort. These persons, we are assured, have become so inured to the sound of their own barbarous tongues that they do not recognise the "correct" sounds when they hear them.

It is perhaps a sign of Motoori's confidence in the general application of his theory that he seldom refers directly to the Chinese, but prefers the more general term "foreigners". It is clear, however, that when he mentions "foreigners", the Chinese are uppermost in his mind. Motoori himself declares that he has no knowledge of any languages other than Chinese and Sanskrit (367), though he makes a passing reference to the Korean readings of the Chinese characters (377). His account of Sanskrit, however, is by no means exhaustive. It consists of a short description of certain orthographical devices and a few of the laws of phonetic combination peculiar to that language. The section is brought to a close with the regret that there are many other complicated matters of this kind which it would be difficult to treat exhaustively, and the interested reader is advised to apply to a master of the art for further instruction. The question of Sanskrit is raised merely in order to show "the radical differences which exist between Japanese and foreign languages", and thus give support to the contention of the "incorrectness" of foreign speech. A fact which may indicate that Motoori had not studied Sanskrit very deeply is his sweeping statement that not only in Chinese, but in all foreign languages (including, presumably, Sanskrit) there is a complete absence of grammatical inflections such as are found in Japanese and that the meaning of words is entirely dependent on context and word order (370).

Motoori goes on to list the phonetic features of "foreign languages" (*i.e.*, Chinese) which, being alien to primitive Japanese are to be held particularly barbarous. He first rejects all syllables which do not conform to the Japanese pattern of one of the vowels *a*, *i*, *u*, *e*, or *o*, preceded or not

by one consonant. This means that consonant initials such as *kw-*, *sw-*, etc., and diphthongs such as *ao*, together with all final consonants, are regarded as "incorrect". The lengthening of open syllables is also "incorrect", as is the "glottal stop" which, Motoori held, is the nearest "foreigners" can approach to a Japanese-type short vowel. Initial *p-* and *ng-* are "incorrect". Motoori regarded the latter as a particularly obnoxious sound, for it is the only one which can be produced without opening the mouth. He notes that it occurs in Japanese only at a comparatively late period in the development of the language, and then only in the final position, but it is widely used by foreigners who use not only their mouths as organs of speech, but their noses also; from which the incorrectness of their speech is made quite clear.

In a section entitled "The Sounds of Birds, Beasts and Inanimate Objects", Motoori produces proof of the barbarity of the un-Japanese sounds by setting forth damning evidence of their popularity among the brute creation. Beginning with the birds and beasts, he first observes how horses say *ni* and cows *moo*, lengthening their syllables in Chinese fashion. He notes how cats delight in involved vowel sounds as in *niau*, and the glottal stops used by quacking ducks and croaking frogs. The inanimate objects are mostly musical instruments. Examples of their versatility in producing Chinese sounds are *ping* and *pong*, given forth by plucked strings, bells which emit the sounds *ching*, *chang*, *chong*, *gwang*, and *bong*, and drums which produce *deng*, *dong*, *kang*, and *pong*. On the other hand, no bird, beast, or inanimate object is capable of producing any of the fifty original sounds of Japanese. The conclusion is obvious.

It is not without interest that Motoori's view of language was not received without objection by his contemporaries. The objections of Ueda Akinari to Motoori's theories expressed in the *San On Kō*, together with Motoori's replies are given in dialogue form in the work named *Ashikariyoshi* (*Zenshū*, Vol. 6).

On the subject of the "correctness" of sounds Ueda holds that it is most unreasonable to stigmatize the sounds produced by inanimate objects as "incorrect", for if this were so it would be sacrilegious to use musical instruments in the worship of the deities. He further alleges that the idea that lengthened syllables are "incorrect" is entirely a product of Motoori's imagination, and concludes by saying that since all languages consist of sounds naturally produced by the voice there is no basis for argument about their "correctness" or "incorrectness".

Ueda's reasoning appears very cogent, but Motoori was not easily overborne. He replied that what was correct for an inanimate object could not be correct for Man, and if men behaved like inanimate objects they were plainly incorrect. Conversely, "If the strings of a lute on being plucked gave forth a sound like that of the human voice, could that be considered correct? Not only would it be incorrect, it would be witchcraft." Ueda's

criticisms are finally disposed of by a reaffirmation of Japanese superiority, from which the inferiority of other countries and their languages (and also the shame of Ueda's lack of patriotic fervour) are logically deduced.

2. JAPANESE PHONETICS

According to Motoori, early Japanese was written with forty-seven *kana* syllables. These were the syllables of the table of fifty sounds without *ye*, *yi* or *wu*. Though the sounds *ye* and *yi* are not represented by *kana*, Motoori found evidence of their existence in such forms as 𪛗 𪛘 (*oyi*) from *oyu* (老ユ) and 𪛗 𪛘 (*aye*) from *ayu* (背ユ). These two examples are also illustrative of the fact that in pure Japanese words none of the simple vowels *a*, *i*, *u*, *e*, *o*, occur together (425).

As has been noted above, Motoori held that the sounds of ancient Japanese were restricted to those of the table of fifty sounds and, consequently, he did not regard the voiced (*nigori*) syllables as part of the original scheme of Japanese sounds. He observed that these sounds are not found in the initial position in pure Japanese words, and concluded that their appearance in the medial position was due to a process of coalescence similar to that which he detected in words which appeared to have been formed from two elements in prehistoric times (e.g., *oji* from *oho-chi*), or to the euphonic change which took place in certain uncontracted compounds (e.g. *tanigawa*) (364).

It is interesting to note that although Motoori recorded in the *Kojikiden* that certain *kana* syllables, falling within the same columns of the table of fifty sounds, were written with two sets of *Man-yō-gana* which were not interchangeable, he appears to have been too firmly attached to the system of fifty sounds to infer, as his successors did, that there were more vowel sounds in early Japanese than are represented in the modern *kana* syllabary.

Motoori believed that Japanese remained in a state of "correctness" until the Heian period, when various forms of euphonic change (*ombin*) made their appearance. The cause of this fall from phonetic grace is characteristically ascribed to the corrupting influence of the study of the Chinese language (408).

Motoori held that all syllables and words in Japanese were pronounced in one of three "tones", level, rising, or falling (364). The question of "tone" in Japanese had already been raised by Motoori in the *Kojikiden* where he quotes Keichū's views on the subject. His account of "tone" in the *San On Kō* is essentially the same as that of Keichū. The idea appears to be directly derived from the study of the Chinese tones, and the Japanese "tones" are described throughout in the terms of Chinese philology.

Motoori first remarks that variations in the intonation of sounds are common to all languages, but that it is only in Chinese that they are of sufficient importance to be studied and classified. Of the four Chinese tones,

p'ing, sheng, shang sheng, ch'ü sheng and *ju sheng*, Motoori considered that the first three were the basic tones and postulated a scheme of six Chinese tones consisting of two sets of level, rising and falling tones, one with long vowels (the existing *p'ing sheng, shang sheng* and *ch'ü sheng*), and the others with short vowels (ending in a glottal stop) which, according to Motoori, were all classified under the single head of *ju sheng* by the Chinese because their tonal differences were not distinguishable (401).

Motoori's examples of the "tones" in Japanese are as follows:

日 *hi* level
 樋 *hi* rising
 火 *hi* falling

These "tones" are subject to changes in composition.

In 日影 *hinata hi* becomes rising.

In 掛樋 *kakehi hi* becomes falling.

In 火箸 *hibashi hi* becomes rising.

In speaking of the "tone" of a word, Motoori refers to the intonation of the word as a whole, even when the word is made up of several syllables as in the following examples. *Yama* (山) is in the level tone when in isolation, but in the falling tone in compounds such as *yamakaze* (山風) and *yamamatsu* (山松), and in the rising tone in compounds such as *higashiyama* (東山) and *nishiyama* (西山). *Uji* (宇治) is in the falling tone when in isolation, but in the rising tone in *Ujigawa* (宇治川) and in the level tone in *Ujibashi* (宇治橋).

Sino-Japanese words are fitted into the framework of the Japanese "tone" system.

In 上國 *yōkoku koku* is level.

In 他國 *Takoku koku* is rising.

In 異國 *Ikoku koku* is falling.

If the constituent parts of a compound are pronounced with the "tones" used when in isolation, the meaning is altered. Thus, in the example above, if *yama* in *yamakaze* is pronounced in the level tone, the meaning is altered from "a mountain wind" to "a mountain and/or a wind", as if the two words had not been compounded. Again the same rule applies to Sino-Japanese words. The word *Hyakuman* (百萬) means "1,000,000" when *Hyaku* is pronounced in the rising tone, but "100 and/or 10,000" when *Hyaku* is pronounced in the level tone (404).

Although Motoori regarded tone as attaching to the word and not to the syllable, he recognised that tonal differences existed between individual syllables within a word. He gives two examples.

yama (山) *ya* rising, *ma* level.

kawa (川) *ka* rising, *wa* level.

The complete words *yama, kawa*, however, were regarded by Motoori as being in the level tone. He maintains that although there are tonal

variations in the syllables of three- and four-syllable words, these are not sufficiently differentiated to be distinguishable.

In the *Mojigoe no Kanazukai* Motoori devotes some space to the subject of the Japanese vowels and the semi-vowels *y-* and *w-*. Motoori considered that the sounds *ya, yu, yo* and *wa, wi, we, wo* were originally formed from combinations of the simple vowels *a, i, u, e, o*. Thus *ya* is *ia*, *yu=iu*, *yo=io*, and *wa* is *ua*, *wi=ui*, *we=ue*, and *wo=uo*. The sounds *ia, iu, io, ua, ui, ue, uo* are technically 拗音, *i.e.*, combinations of two vowels, which Motoori had decided *a priori* did not exist in Japanese. Nevertheless, though he did not have at his command the terminology necessary to express the fact, Motoori was clearly aware of the difference between consonantal and vocalic *i* and *u*, for he declares that these are unlike other 拗音 in that they are so soft and smooth that they do not sound like a combination of two vowels (424).

An instance in which Motoori applied scientific principles with notable success was in his classification of the five vowels. Motoori found himself in grudging agreement with the Sanskrit scholars on the point that the sound *a* is the original vowel from which the other vowels evolved (426). Thus *a* is assigned a central position between the two front vowels *i* and *e* (called "light" by Motoori) and the back vowels *o* and *u* (the "heavy" vowels). In this way Motoori arrived at a scientific rearrangement of the vowels in which were arranged in the order *i, e, a, o, u*, and he was able to represent their relations diagrammatically by placing them around the circumference of a circle.

The idea of the "light" and "heavy" vowels appears to have been suggested to Motoori by the Chinese classification of words in the two categories *k'ai k'ou* (開口) and *ho k'ou* (合口), the exact meaning of which does not appear to have been clear to him, for he thought that the Chinese distinction between *k'ai k'ou* and *ho k'ou* corresponded to his "light" and "heavy" classification in Japanese (432).

In Chinese the term *ho k'ou* was used of words which possessed the medial vowel *u* (*e.g.*, *kuan*), while *k'ai k'ou* was used of words which did not have the medial *u* (*e.g.*, *kan*). In the absence of an analytic phonetic script this distinction could be conveyed only by means of very imperfect verbal descriptions. A description which Motoori quotes, and on which he appears to base his reasoning, describes *k'ai k'ou* words as "simple and clear" (單而明), and *ho k'ou* words as "double and obscured" (駢而渾) (432). But evidence of the nature of *ho k'ou* words survived in certain Japanese *On* readings of the Chinese characters (*e.g.*, 官 Chinese *kuan*: *Kan On kuwan*), and Motoori was able to see that the presence of the vowel *u* was a sign of *ho k'ou*. He was also aware that the *ho k'ou* element in a Chinese word belonged to the initial part of the word (音) and not to the final (韻) (406). Here again the lack of an adequate phonetic transcription proved a great

stumbling block, for Motoori, who transcribed everything into *kana*, had no means of separating the initial from the final in Chinese words which were written with one *kana*. Thus he says that the *Kan On* reading of the character 有 *iu* (ㄩ) is *k'ai k'ou* but that the *Go On yu* (ㄩ) is *ho k'ou* (433). Again, when discussing the differences apparent between modern Chinese and the ancient language represented in the rhyme dictionaries, he notes what he considers to be a particularly drastic change in the words with dental initials in the 支 and 脂 rhyme groups which formerly had final *-i* but which are now pronounced ㄓ, etc. (Wade *chih* etc.) which Motoori considers to be a change from *k'ai k'ou* to *ho k'ou*. Here he seems to have been misled by a supposed analogy between ㄓ and readings such as ㄓ ㄓ based on the fact that both initial *kana* (i.e., 音) have the vowel *u*.

Though based on a misconception, Motoori's use of the terms *k'ai k'ou*, *ho k'ou* and "light" and "heavy" to refer to front and back vowels was of great practical utility in providing a basis for the explanation of certain sound changes. By means of his circular diagram Motoori was able to explain monophthongisation changes such as *-au* to *ō* and *ei* to the intermediate vowel (written *ee*) (385) on the basis of the relative affinity of the vowels concerned.

3. CHINESE PHONETICS

Motoori's materials for dealing with Chinese phonetics were the Japanese *Go On* and *Kan On* readings, the Chinese rhyme dictionaries (of which he preferred the 韻鏡 as being the "most detailed and at the same time the most convenient to use" (432)), and the colloquial Chinese of his own times, of which he considered the speech of Nanking and Hangchou to be the standard dialects, though he asserts somewhat surprisingly that there is little difference between the various dialects of the different provinces (395). In common with other scholars of his time, Motoori regarded the written word as the only fitting object of scholarship, and he was extremely sceptical of the value of any study of modern Chinese, except for philological purposes (399). He goes as far as to say that no Japanese can ever learn to speak Chinese like a native, in which he sees an analogy to the fact that no one can learn to imitate the cries of birds sufficiently well to deceive the birds themselves (373). Bearing this in mind, Motoori was quite ready to admit that the Japanese *On* readings were not exact reproductions of the ancient Chinese dialects which, he correctly surmised, possessed all the "barbarous" features of the modern language. With an ironical flourish of Chinese vocabulary he declares that "such barbarous, shriek-tongued, incorrect, and outlandish sounds were, of course, unfit to be adopted in their original forms". The Chinese sounds were therefore "corrected", or, in other words, altered to fit into the Japanese scheme of phonetics. From a study of the two-character-spellings (反切)

of ancient Chinese readings, Motoori was able to demonstrate the manner of the operation of some of these changes, but since the *On* readings which he used for the interpretation of the 反切 characters were themselves very imperfect representations of the original Chinese, he failed to realise that the changes and omissions of Chinese sounds in the *On* readings were much more radical than he supposed. Among the "corrections" of Chinese words which Motoori mentions are the dropping of the Chinese medial vowels, the replacing of nasals by orals, and the addition of parasitic vowels to the Chinese final consonants (373).

Though Motoori had, on the basis of the Japanese *On* readings, a rough idea of the values of the finals in ancient Chinese, he was unable to perceive that the Japanese *On* finals *-i* and *-u* stood not only for similar finals in Chinese but also for the Chinese final *-ng*. This appears surprising, for he was aware that certain Chinese finals which were represented in the *On* by *-u* and *-i*, were pronounced with a final nasal (ㄣ) in modern Chinese (386), and he was familiar with the phenomenon of the interchange of nasals and orals in Japanese (e.g., *yukamu yukan yukau*) (414). Motoori was quite aware of the close connection between these sounds, and indeed he states that nasals (ㄣ) are merely varieties of *i* and *u* (387), an opinion to which he may have inclined because of his views of the "incorrect" nature of nasals. He also describes how two varieties of the sound represented by ㄣ (described as 開 and 合) can be produced by the nasalisation of *i* and *u*, respectively (389). In spite of this knowledge Motoori was moved to reject the (correct) theory that the Japanese *-u* and *-i* finals represented an ancient Chinese *-ng*, in favour of the view that *-u* and *-i* were the original sounds which had been corrupted in China to *-ng*. Here again Motoori was led astray by the inadequacy of his transcription. The rival theory, though it arrived at the correct conclusion, did so by a faulty process, a fact which Motoori was quick to point out. It stated that the Japanese used *-u* and *-i* for Chinese *-ng* because at the time of the *On* borrowings the *kana* ㄣ had not yet been introduced. To this Motoori replied that if this were so there would be no *On* readings with final *-n*. The trouble lay in the fact that while Motoori used the *kana* ㄣ to represent the sound *ng* in modern Chinese, it was used in the *Go On* and *Kan On* readings to represent the ancient Chinese finals *-n* and *-m*. In view of this it might be expected that Motoori was ignorant of the distinction between the three Chinese nasal finals *-ng*, *-n*, and *-m* (rendered in the *On* by *-i or -u*, *-n*, *-n*, respectively), but this is not so. From a study of the Chinese phonetic transcriptions of Sanskrit words, Motoori decided that these three finals ought to be represented in *kana* transcription by *-u*, *-nu*, and *-mu*. *-nu* was substituted for *-n* because Motoori regarded the *kana* ㄣ as representing the "pure nasal" (i.e., *ng*) while he was aware that the Chinese final *-n* was a dental (388). It is indeed surprising that he did not go on to substitute for *-u* and *-i* and thus make

the scheme more rational, but here he was no doubt restrained by the "incorrectness" of that sound and by his reverence for the *On* readings. Nor did Motoori appreciate the evidential value of the Chinese characters used to represent early Japanese place names which he later listed in the *Chimei Kana Tenyō Rei* (1798). Among them were a number of instances in which Chinese *-ng* was used to represent a Japanese guttural (e.g., 香美 *kagami*), but Motoori gave no explanation of what appeared to him to be a change from *-u* or *-i* to *g*.

Comparing modern Chinese with the old rhyme dictionaries Motoori was able to note the disappearance of the ancient initials *ng-* and *γ-*, and he remarked that the latter initial was sometimes omitted in *Go On*, where it was normally represented by *g-*. The exact values of these two initials, however, were unknown to Motoori. He also described the modern Chinese sounds *p*, *m*, *f*, and *w*, which had developed from the ancient labials. Chinese *f-* was identified with Japanese *h-*. Motoori noted that the distinction between breathed and voiced sounds made in the rhyme dictionaries had largely disappeared. Yet he was not aware of any difference between the aspirated and unaspirated Chinese initials (407), nor could he understand the guttural nature of Chinese *x*. He identified it with Japanese *h-* and was at a loss to reconcile this identification with the *On* where that initial was represented by *k-*.

In spite of his inability to grasp the larger number of sounds used in the Chinese language, and though he himself had not the materials to take the matter further, Motoori saw with remarkable clarity the lines along which research into Chinese phonology must proceed and which have been successfully followed only within recent times. Besides the comparative study of the *On*, the rhyme dictionaries, and the modern Chinese dialects, he was aware of the importance of the study of Chinese phonetic transcriptions of Sanskrit and other languages (including Japanese) as a means of checking the changes which had taken place in Chinese, and he noted that in many such cases the Japanese *On* appeared to be nearer the ancient language of China than the modern Chinese dialects (397). He also pointed out that Chinese characters with different *On* readings but the same "phonetic" element (e.g., 江, 紅, 缸, 功, 攻, 項, 貢, 空) must have been of similar sound at an early period, and that the same must be true of characters with the same "phonetic", which were classified under different finals in the rhyme dictionaries (e.g., 龍, 籠, 臙, 瀧) (397). Motoori also realised the importance of the *Shih Ching* in any attempt to reconstruct the Chinese of the Chou dynasty, and made some tentative comparisons of the modern Chinese and Japanese *On* readings of onomatopœic words in that work, from which, however, he wisely forbore to draw any conclusions.