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Neesima’s Letters in English

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# “Notwithstanding the Broken English and Imperfect Grammar” : A Short Analysis of Joseph Hardy Neesima’s Letters in English

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## 「片言の英語と不完全な文法にもかかわらず」： 新島襄の英語で書かれた手紙の分析

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### Abstract

Joseph Neesima spent the vast majority of his life in the pursuit of improving himself. As a boy and an adolescent in Edo, his early education focused on Japanese and Chinese teachings and then broadened to include Western knowledge that he gained from reading Dutch texts. Budding interest in Christianity motivated the desire to translate the Bible into his native tongue, so he spent ten years abroad immersing himself in American culture, understanding Western education methods, and developing his Christian faith, all the while improving his linguistic aptitude. Unquestionably, he made great strides. The documents that Neesima left behind offer insight into his overall English language competence, and this paper is a brief analysis of some of the letters that he wrote in English while abroad. Exploring these letters reveals many of the profound experiences, friendships, and motivating factors that influenced his English language ability, but ultimately, all of these were superseded by his charismatic character and commitment to personal and spiritual improvement.

### 要 旨

新島襄は自己改善のためその人生の大半を過ごした。江戸で過ごした少年期そして青年期における彼の初期の教育は、日本および中国の学問に焦点を当てるものであったが、その後はオランダの書籍にふれることにより得られた西洋の知識の探求へと拡大した。キリスト教に興味を抱いた彼は、聖書を日本語に翻訳するため10年間アメリカに留学することになる。そこでアメリカ文化に身に浸し、西洋の教育方法を理解し、キリスト教の信仰をはぐくみ、自らの英語能力を高めていった。新島が残した文書は、彼の全体的な英語能力への洞察を提供する資料であり、本論文は彼が海外にいる間英語で書いた手紙の一部を分析するものである。これらの手紙を分析することにより、彼の英語力に影響を与えた深い経験、友情、そして彼の英語力に影響を与えた学習動機となる要因などを明らかにする。しかし、最終的には、これらのすべては、彼のカリスマ的な性格と個人的、精神的な自己改善へのコミットメントに取って代わられたのだ。

## I. “We Must Learn Foreign Knowledge”

Joseph Neesima spent the vast majority of his life in the pursuit of improving himself.<sup>1</sup> As a boy and an adolescent in Edo (modern day Tokyo), his early education focused on Japanese and Chinese teachings and then broadened to include Western knowledge that the Dutch had been sharing with the Japanese for more than a century. With the reopening of Japan to Western trade in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his window to the world was opened even wider. As his mind expanded, so did a longing to go abroad. Budding interest in Christianity motivated the desire to translate the Bible into his native tongue, but to do so he needed to learn English, something he found difficult to achieve domestically. Neesima spent ten years abroad, the vast majority of it in New England, immersing himself in American culture, understanding Western education methods, and developing his Christian faith, all the while improving his linguistic aptitude. Although it is almost impossible to track the development of his oral ability, the documents that he left behind offer some insight into his overall English language competence. Certainly, Neesima made great strides communicating in English and acquired skills that were more than sufficient to translate documents into Japanese. His English language proficiency was achieved by ambitious drive, tireless hard work, and the undying support of his benefactors and friends. This paper is a brief attempt to analyze some of the letters that he wrote in English while he was abroad. Exploring these letters reveals many of the profound experiences, friendships, and motivating factors that influenced his English language ability, but ultimately, all of these were superseded by his charismatic character and commitment to personal and spiritual improvement.

Born the son of a scribe to an Annaka (an area in present-day Gunma Prefecture) nobleman living in Edo, Niijima Shimeta was raised in an environment of relative affluence near the end of the Edo era. From the age of six he was educated in calligraphy, the Chinese classics, and etiquette, yet he yearned to become an accomplished samurai, and therefore supplemented his studies by taking up fencing and horseback riding when he was eleven years old. As his curiosity about the world beyond Japan’s shores deepened, these martial pursuits became less important. Although he yearned to study English, Neesima was ordered to study Dutch by Katsuaki Itakura, the nobleman under whom his family served, enabling him to learn

not only the language, but the culture and wisdom that the Dutch had brought to Japan as well.

Having an insatiable thirst for knowledge, Neesima attended school to study mathematics, and one day after seeing the huge Dutch ships moored in the port of Edo he was inspired to build upon the knowledge of navigation that he acquired from studying Dutch texts. Incrementally, Neesima came to realize the value of multicultural understanding, and his dissatisfaction with the shogunate increased.

We must go to foreign countries, we must know to do trade [*sic*], and we must learn foreign knowledge. But the government's law neglected all my thoughts, and I cried out myself: Why government? Why not let us be freely? Why let us be as a bird in a cage or a rat in a bag? (*Essays and Diaries* 5)

Reasoning that since Japan was an island nation it should have a navy, he studied navigation and mathematics for two years at the government's naval academy. This training came in handy when he was presented with an opportunity to sail to Western Japan. A nobleman from Matsuyama, who was a close friend of Neesima's master, offered him passage on a roundtrip voyage. It was the furthest he had ever been from home, broadening his mind and giving him the first taste of freedom. Yet another seed of discontent was sown regarding the status quo of serving his master.

His dissatisfaction continued to grow, but as before, Neesima took refuge in his studies. A Japanese translation of *Robinson Crusoe* deepened the desire to have his own adventure overseas. Moreover, the hero's personal relationship with God exposed Neesima to Christianity. He was fascinated by the book's spiritual tone and impressed by Crusoe's conversion. Reading additional texts in Dutch and Chinese translations of foreign books increased his exposure to Western knowledge. A friend loaned him a missionary pamphlet called *A Brief Account of the United States* by E. C. Bridgman that introduced him to the ideas of democracy and a citizen-elected government, as well as the country's basic social structures and institutions. He also read a Chinese translation of *A Brief History of the World* by a missionary that was working in China. Gradually, Neesima began to set his sights abroad.

The books that had the most profound impact, however, were those about the Bible and Christianity. In particular, the Creation Story touched him deeply. Because Christianity was outlawed in Japan, Neesima was obliged to cultivate his interest in secret, but his curiosity only grew. At some point very early after his discoveries, echoing Crusoe's transformation, Neesima accepted God into his heart. Until that

time, filial duty had prohibited him from acting on his desires, but the realization came, “I am no more my parents’, but my God’s” (*Essays and Diaries* 20). This was the impetus he needed to break free from his family and his master. He would do everything in his power to learn more about Christianity, and like Robinson Crusoe, he prayed that God would help him.

## II. “I Wish to Go to Amerika”

With his faith growing stronger, Neesima hungered to read the Bible in English, and for that purpose he began studying English at the Kawakutsu *Juku* (a privately-owned cram school) circa 1863. This proved to be a short-lived experience. He longed for more, and made up his mind to go to Hakodate to study with a native speaker. His parents and master rejected his pleas, but Neesima would not give up, resorting to prayer as Crusoe did, “Please! let me reach my aim!” (*Essays and Diaries* 6). His prayers were answered when he learned that the nobleman with whom he had sailed before was soon leaving for Hakodate. Within days, on March 12, 1864, Neesima was en route to Japan’s northernmost island to study English. For about two months he tutored Japanese to Rev. Nikolai, the chaplain of the Russian consulate, in exchange for English lessons. But having difficulty finding a foreign English teacher and recoiling in horror at the moral decadence of the people, Neesima resolved to flee the country. Because Neesima could not speak English he enlisted the help of Fukushi Unokichi, an employee of an English merchant, to act as an interpreter to find safe passage out of Japan. Unokichi also tutored him in English. After hearing Neesima’s story and the reason he wished to flee, Unokichi secured passage for him on an American vessel bound for Shanghai: the *Berlin*.

Captained by William T. Savory, the Berlin departed from the port of Hakodate on July 17, 1864. Years later Captain Savory recalled, “I shall never forget the first interview I had with him, or how happy he felt when he saw the shores of his country fading from his view, knowing that he was safe from all harm. His sole aim then was to learn the English language, that he might be able to translate the Bible into his own tongue for the benefit of his countrymen” (Hardy 2). Indeed, reflecting about his escape years later, Neesima confirmed his inability to communicate in English, “I could speak no word of English” (*Essays and Diaries* 25). Captain Savory gave Neesima rudimentary vocabulary lessons by pointing out objects and naming them

over and over. Although he dutifully kept volumes of notebooks with the names of various things on the ship, he could not string the words together into comprehensible conversation. This inability to communicate almost led to his downfall. One day an American passenger who taught English to the young Japanese became frustrated with his lack of understanding and assaulted him. Neesima grabbed his sword in rage, but a cooler head prevailed as he realized that this was only one of the many challenges that he would face. The incident inspired Neesima to improve his communication ability and increased his resolve to study English in the United States.

Once in Shanghai Neesima learned that it would be impossible to stay aboard the *Berlin* as it was returning to Japan before heading west, therefore Captain Savory found a different ship whose captain agreed to take him aboard. It is from this time that the first surviving example of Neesima's English prose exists: a letter to Unokishi dated August 9, 1864.

The captain come to day with another captain in the board and he talk to me it  
"The captain wants to take you, I think he will go to Amerika before I do, and I think it would be dangerous for you to go Nagasaki, and it would be better for you go to Amerika with him, and he will want you to act as servant to him, and he will teach you." I answered it "I come from Hakodadi with you, therefore I wish go to Amerika with you, but if I with you go to Nagasaki, I shall be very dangerous, thereby I must belong to him."

I thank you, ..... , how do you do? Pray! Be good health, I shall see you again. Please make my compliment (Guard your health) to Mr. Sawabe, and Suganuma, alzo tell to Sawabe it "combu one piece = 1 dollor. (*Letters* 3)

The existing text in the Doshisha University archives is probably a draft, but it clearly informs us about Neesima's writing ability. Numerous spelling mistakes are apparent: "talk," "Amerika," "Hakodadi," "alzo," and "dollor." While it may look strange, "to day" is the contemporary 19th century spelling. Unsurprisingly, grammar errors persist as well. Inaccuracies of tense ("The captain come," "better for you go," and "I wish go"), omissions of prepositions ("go Nagasaki"), incorrect prepositions ("in the board"), and missing articles are evident throughout the composition. There are usage errors ("if I with you go," "I shall be very dangerous," "Be good health," and "how do you do?") as well as the inappropriate "it" in the context of reported speech ("talk to me it," "I answered it," and "tell to Sawabe it") that can be found in some of Neesima's other

early letters. Finally, the paragraph is a series of run-on sentences with an overabundance of commas. Despite the legion of errors, however, Neesima's writing is perfectly comprehensible to native speakers of English, both then and now.

After meeting Captain Horace S. Taylor of the *Wild Rover*, Neesima writes to Unokishi again the very next day, August 10.

I think new captain is much better than old captain. I tell to new captain it 'As you see me, I am very block, but I wish to go to Amerika, and I wish to read much books. Please! Let me reach my *aim* he answered yes, and he had laughed with good face. I first understood duty of servant, but I have to day more time to read a book after made any thing in this new ship, and captain coll cloatsboy, and commend to him to make my cloats and trausers. (*Letters* 3)

As in the previous day's correspondence, there are an abundance of spelling mistakes, as well as missing articles, omitted prepositions, verb tense problems, as well as the overuse of "and" resulting in run-on sentences. Still, the letter is basically understandable with the exception of the phrase, "I am very block." The contemporary reader may wonder if "block" is akin to the more familiar "blockhead." This may be Neesima's intention as in both Middle English and Middle Dutch the word referred to a log or a tree trunk (*Wiktionary*). These letters indicate that while the young Neesima struggled with spoken English, he possessed rudimentary writing skills, which he had been practicing on the journey to Shanghai. Aboard the *Wild Rover*, the studious Neesima continued to fill his diary and notebooks with pictures and diagrams labeled in English. He wrote, "I will write the figure of everything in this ship if my eyes does get better" (Hardy 45-46). Moreover, he tried writing longer compositions too. During the four-month voyage to the U.S. the young Japanese would need to increase his vocabulary and improve his ability to string words and thoughts into comprehensible oral communication.

Aboard the *Wild Rover*, Neesima "paid" for his passage to Boston by assuming the duties of the captain's servant. Because Captain Taylor was uncomfortable with the name Shimeta, he gave Neesima a name in English, "I shall call you Joe" (Hardy 2). Having knowledge of the New Testament, it is highly doubtful that the significance of the name went unnoticed by Neesima, who kept the name for the remainder of his life, and even adopted the Chinese character "jou" (襄). Captain Taylor built upon the navigation skills that Neesima had acquired in Japan and taught him vocabulary, both maritime and mundane, that was necessary for daily duties.

Perhaps more significantly, Captain Taylor gave him his very own English version of the Bible. While aboard the *Berlin*, he had borrowed a Bible written in English, and although it proved difficult, Neesima was very pleased to be reading it with complete freedom. Not only did it deepen his blossoming Christian faith, it became a primer in the English language. He read it from cover to cover several times, meticulously comparing it with a Chinese translation of the New Testament that he had bought in Shanghai, picking up archaic vocabulary – for example, “thither” – and expressions that would appear in his own writing for the rest of his life. Not much more is known about Neesima’s English skills while he journeyed to Boston, but it is clear that when he arrived he was not prepared linguistically to make it on his own.

### III. “Why I Departed from Japan”

The letters and journals written in English comprise volumes six and seven of the ten set *The Complete Works of Joseph Hardy Neesima*. The journal entries cover the period from March 26, 1872 – when Neesima began traveling the East Coast with the Japanese Commissioner of Education, Fujimaro Tanaka – through the year and a half he traversed Europe with a Japanese delegation from the Education Ministry, to his return to Japan. However, this paper focuses on the personal letters written during his ten years away from Japan. Between August 1864 and November 1874 there are 146 known letters penned in English. They come from the seven sources listed in the table below.

No. of Letters	% of Letters	Source of Letters
75	52%	<i>Life and Letters of Joseph Hardy Neesima</i> , Arthur Sherburne Hardy (1891)
40	27.5%	Andover Newton Theological Seminary Archives
11	7.5%	Amherst College Archives
10	7 %	Western Pennsylvania Historical Society
5	3%	Doshisha University Archives
4	2.5%	American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Archives (Harvard University)
1	0.5%	<i>The Life, Letters, and Journals of the Rev. and Hon. Peter Parker M.D.</i> , George B. Stevens (1896)

Unfortunately, most of the original material that comprises *Life and Letters of Joseph Hardy Neesima* by Arthur Sherburne Hardy, Alpheus’s son, has been lost.



Moreover, in order to present his subject in the best light, and for the sake of clarity, Cary notes that Hardy “closely edited and somewhat revised” the numerous errors (i). For the most part, spelling, capitalization, tense, agreement, gender, and other mechanical mistakes were corrected. Letters from other sources were edited in a similar manner in an effort to maintain consistency and readability (Cary ii). Taking these modifications into consideration, it becomes quite difficult to fairly and accurately evaluate Neesima’s English ability, however, it is the role of scholars to work with and draw conclusions from the materials at hand. This paper is one such attempt.

During the year that Neesima spent at sea, most of his needs were taken care of, but that changed upon his arrival in Boston. For the first time since he was in Hakodate he faced the prospect of having to fend for himself. Penniless, unable to communicate, and with nowhere to go, Neesima despaired at the idea of returning to sea. Aboard the *Wild Rover* Captain Taylor had told Neesima about the generosity of the vessel’s owner, Alpheus Hardy, but the two had never met and nothing had been decided about the Japanese immigrant’s future. Neesima became discouraged; he had traveled halfway around the world, but felt no closer to reaching his “aim”: in-depth study about Christianity.

Having come to genuinely admire the extraordinary Japanese with whom he had spent the last year, Captain Taylor convinced the ship’s owner to meet with Neesima. Being curious about the young immigrant and wishing to know more about him, Alpheus Hardy arranged for an interview. Also present that day was his wife. Still fumbling linguistically, it is doubtful that Neesima made a strong impression on the elder Hardy. Arthur Sherburne Hardy described the meeting like this, “During the voyage he had acquired the ship’s vocabulary, but was still unable to make known his wishes in intelligible English. To every question asked by Mrs. Hardy he replied only in monosyllables” (2). Still, Hardy’s curiosity had been piqued, and he requested Neesima to write a detailed account about why he left Japan. The young Japanese saw the opportunity as his final chance to make a good impression, and in a last-ditch attempt, he wrote a letter to Hardy stating his case and appealing for assistance.

On October 11, 1865 Hardy received the explanation, entitled “Why I Departed from Japan,” summarizing the young immigrant’s life. What is noticeable at first glance is the length — about five pages in a contemporary book — quite long for someone who had only been studying English for about a year. Moreover, it demonstrates

significant improvement since the letters to Unokishi a year earlier. Containing only six paragraphs, it is replete with a plethora of commas and run-on sentences, yet Hardy retains a good deal of the grammatical and usage mistakes, thereby allowing some idea of Neesima's writing ability. A closer look reveals some interesting points.

The opening paragraph focuses on his first sixteen years. Neesima's lack of vocabulary is apparent. Explaining what appears to be the study of languages, country names are used, rather than proper nouns indicating the languages: Japan and China instead of Japanese and Chinese. Moreover, unlikely to have known the words fencing and horseback riding, a simpler, though entirely communicative, approach is taken, "I began to learn Japan, and China too, from six years age, but at eleven years age my mind had changed quite to learn sword-exercise and riding horse" (*Essays and Diaries* 3). A few lines later Chinese characters are referred to as "China letter." Regarding daily expressions, "one another day" is written instead of the correct phrase "every other day." His prose about the study of U.S. geography and society is much more humorous. Neesima writes colloquially, implying that a lot of language learning aboard the *Wild Rover* came via oral communication, "I was wondered so much as my brain would melted out from my head" (*Essays and Diaries* 3). Although the past unreal conditional tense is more suitable here — "would have melted" instead of "would melted" — Neesima's attempt to use a more difficult grammatical structure indicates rigorous study and the desire to push himself beyond his current language ability. Such a hardworking ethic and ambition to excel would motivate him throughout his endeavors. While unrelated to language learning, we also see the man's dissatisfaction with the Japanese political situation and class system. Undoubtedly, these factors motivated his foreign language studies and deepened his desire to go abroad.

The longest of the six, the second paragraph covers his mid to late teens. Some of the archaic language merits mention. Writing about why he ran away from his job in order to study, use of the Biblical word "thither" is striking, "though I know I must stay here, reverence your law, my soul went to my master's house to learn it, and my body was obliged to go thither" (*Essays and Diaries* 3-4). Neesima likely picked up the word from reading the Scriptures, perhaps the King James Version, but it also was used colloquially at the time. In a similar vein, he uses the word "thrice." It too appears in the King James Bible, and it was still spoken regularly in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century before experiencing a steep decline in usage after the turn of the century

(*Google books*). The contemporary reader's attention is also drawn to the word "alas," an archaism that has been largely replaced by "unfortunately." Expressions and words such as these can be found throughout Neesima's letters, especially the early ones, indicating that regular Bible reading contributed significantly to his language learning.

The longest paragraph is followed by the letter's shortest. It summarizes the event that profoundly influenced Neesima's thinking about the state of his country, its people, and his place in a world that was becoming more interconnected. Considering the use of "Holland" at the beginning of the letter, a peculiarity found in the third paragraph is the "man-of-war of Dutch" that Neesima saw anchored in the Edo harbor while out walking one day. Since the original manuscripts have been lost it is unknown if he employed the word Dutch or if Hardy edited it into the text. Nonetheless, it is a mentionable inconsistency. We also see an example of transferring Japanese language techniques to English: the conspicuous "do trade." Because Japanese verbs are often formed by adding the word *suru* to a noun, not knowing the verb form of "trade," Neesima employs the Japanese technique by adding "do" — a rough equivalent of *suru* — before the noun "trade." While grammatically incorrect, it is entirely communicative, and it demonstrates the ability to make himself understood despite linguistic shortcomings. Another noteworthy aspect of this paragraph, though unrelated to language, is Neesima's belief that, contrary to the law of the time, travel abroad was essential to improve Japan's military, international trade, and the overall quality of life for citizens. Along with a desire to learn about Christianity and English, a global mindset was another factor that propelled him to flee his native land.

The fourth paragraph in his first letter to Hardy explains the young man's discovery of and budding interest in Christianity. When explaining how reading the Creation Story ignited interest in the Christian faith, he writes, "I lend it from [a friend] and read it at night" (*Essays and Diaries* 5). Here, we see the classic confusion about "lend" and "borrow" that plagues a great deal of English language learners. The letter continues, "I understood that Jesus Christ was Son of Holy Ghost, and he was crossed for the sins of all the world" (*Essays and Diaries* 6). "Crucified" was likely beyond his linguistic aptitude, yet "crossed" suffices. He notes that it was this realization that truly motivated him to go to Hokkaido to study English in order to more fully understand the Bible. The paragraph ends with Neesima praying to God, "Please! let me reach my aim" (*Essays and Diaries* 6). Undoubtedly, this plea made a

strong impact on Hardy, who was a devout Christian and a proponent of overseas missionary work. It is unknown whether or not the young Neesima knew much about Hardy's faith, but the petition demonstrates direct honesty that must have appealed to the ship owner's Christian sensibilities.

The last two paragraphs cover his final days in Edo, the few months he spent in Hakodate, and his year-long voyage to America. Instead of fleeing Japan, Neesima insists that he was running toward something greater than himself, "I belong indeed to Heavenly Father; therefore I must believe him, I must be thankful to him, and I must run into his ways" (*Essays and Diaries* 6). After the *Wild Rover's* arrival in Boston, the immigrant confesses his fears: being scared of the locals on the docks, having to set sail again, and being forced to return to Japan. He despairs, "every night after I went to bed I prayed to the God: Please! Don't cast away me into miserable condition" (*Essays and Diaries* 7). For some strange reason, perhaps an editing error by the younger Hardy, "the" is retained before "God." The choice of the phrasal verb "cast away" is more interesting, and its employment by the young Neesima likely has two reasons. The combination of the verb "cast" and the adverb "away," meaning "one who is rejected," became commonplace in the 15th century, but the origins can be traced back more than one hundred years before that. In the maritime sense, that is, "one adrift at sea," the usage can be traced to 1799 (*Etymology Dictionary*). The second source of the phrase derives from the noun "castaway," meaning rejected or unworthy, that was plausibly picked up from the Bible.<sup>2</sup> The Japanese immigrant equated failure in the U.S. with being rejected by God. In a sense, the appeal to Hardy was a personal crusade necessary for his salvation. Once again, we see how significantly the Bible and the year at sea influenced Neesima's language acquisition.

While this paper focuses on many of the linguistic mistakes of the young Neesima, it is certain that despite the letter's warts the young immigrant was sufficiently able to convey his wishes and determination to succeed. The letter's final sentences reverberate with the passion, moral imperative, and perseverance that helped him escape from Japan, survive the year-long journey, and eventually, function linguistically in America. "Now I know the ship's owner, Mr. Hardy, may send me to a school, and he will pay all my expenses. When I heard first these things from my captain my eyes were fulfilled with many tears because I was very thankful to him, and I thought too: God will not forsake me" (*Essays and Diaries* 7). Notwithstanding tortured grammar, spelling, and other errors, the young immigrant found his way into

the hearts of the Hardys via the conviction of his plea. They would provide for him, agreeing to send him to Phillips Academy, where Mr. Hardy was on the Board of Trustees. There, Neesima focused on his English skills – reading, grammar, and spelling – and was educated in a Western manner.

#### IV. Linguistic Ingenuity

The contents of the 146 letters are for the most part quite mundane and detail Neesima's current state of affairs: personal, academic, spiritual, and professional. While more than half of the trove was edited by the younger Hardy, it is peppered with gems of language that pique the contemporary reader's curiosity. Among these is Neesima's choice of vocabulary. A brief analysis of five terms follows.

Having fallen out of favor, the noun "chum" sounds especially antiquated, yet it is one that has a nostalgic ring. Neesima penned it more than ten times when referring to friends from school at all three institutions at which he studied. These days it carries the meaning of "buddy" or "pal," but its meaning in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century may have been a little different, specifically referring to a college roommate or close companion. Etymology suggests that its origins in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century can be traced back to a shortened form of "chamber-mate" or "chamber fellow" (*Word Detective*). Clearly, this applies to the relationship with William Holland, Neesima's roommate at Amherst College. In the October 1, 1868 letter thanking Mrs. Hardy for some clothes she had sent, the term explicitly refers to Holland, "You must excuse me, because my chum laughed at me when I put on that tail-coat" (*Letters* 43). However, the word was not only used as a general reference to a roommate, but as a direct form of address as well. In letters to Holland there are several instances where chum is used in salutations and closings. A December 1868 letter opens with "Dear Chum" and closes with "Your chum and sincere friend" (*Essays and Diaries* 369-70). Over time the term's meaning widened into the more familiar "buddy" or "pal" that we equate it with today.

Neesima employs this usage when referring to friends from school with whom he did not share a room. In the August 18, 1871 letter to Mrs. Hardy listing his travel adventures during summer vacation he writes, "I spent two weeks with my college chum, Mr. George Sutherland" (*Letters* 89). Employing the colloquialism in a correspondence, albeit a personal one, demonstrates the young language learner's

tendency to use casual language even in the somewhat more formal format of letter-writing. Just as maritime language acquired aboard the *Berlin* and the *Wild Rover* was part of his lexicon, we see Neesima's dexterity when incorporating spoken language with what he learned in the classroom. Arguably, it is this flexibility and unique use of language that helped endear him to his friends and acquaintances.

Creative discourse abounds in the correspondences, extending from the colloquial to the spiritual realm. Because the desire to deepen his faith was the major motivating factor behind Neesima's defection from Japan, Christianity and his developing relationship with God feature prominently. Writing to Mary Hidden, the woman who took him in while he attended Phillips Academy, while vacationing on Cape Cod with Captain Taylor's family in the summer of 1869, he pens the phrase "Invisible Person" to describe the Almighty. "Though I do not find here much Christian company, yet I enjoy my sweet communion with the *Invisible Person*, who is my great strength and comfort" (*Letters* 56). He uses a similar construct later that year, "I am constantly cheered by the invisible present [sic] of my Heavenly Father" (*Letters* 60). Despite its unconventional nature, the moniker is strikingly powerful and conveys the mystery that shrouds religious belief. It is very possible that the use of the word invisible was influenced by the Bible.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not the term is borrowed from the Scriptures, its use displays the maturation of his linguistic faculties. Its profundity may be lost in its deceptive simplicity. Moreover, it makes a strong impact on the contemporary reader.

Faith also influenced the way he interacted with his Japanese compatriots. While traveling in Europe he told Commissioner Tanaka that he would not work nor travel on Sundays, and on more than one occasion Tanaka went ahead while Neesima stayed behind to go to church or read the Scriptures. Tanaka respected these wishes, and there were no major problems. After Tanaka returned to Japan, Neesima stayed in the small town of Friedrichsdorf, Germany for a few months to recuperate from Rheumatism, and he expressed surprise at what he deemed to be a lack of faith on the part of most Germans. "The large part of Germany is taking the Sabbath as a holiday instead of a holy-day" (*Letters* 132). Although the word holiday had acquired a secular meaning by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Neesima clung to the sanctity of the Sabbath and the origin of the word. Not only does the comment attest to his faith, it also demonstrates shrewd knowledge of etymology.

Another term worthy of mention is Yankee. Upon asking a group of contemporary

Japanese college students to explain what comes to mind when hearing the word, there are two common responses. The first is the professional baseball team, the New York Yankees. The second refers to a derogatory term popularized in the 1980s and 1990s to describe juvenile delinquents, who were characterized by dyed hair, shaved eyebrows, and bad behavior in public. More generally, outside of the United States “Yank” is used informally to refer to any American, including those hailing from the South and the West. Within the United States, however, it usually refers to people north of the Mason Dixon Line, that is, to people in areas that fought for the Union in the American Civil War. More specifically, it often refers to those with cultural ties to New England. A further distinction is that in the American South the term unequivocally pertains to Northerners (*Wikipedia*).

Predictably, Neesima employs it as a synonym for the U.S.A., and especially to distinguish the country from his native land and the Japanese themselves. Writing to Mrs. Hardy about a visit to a patent office he notes, “I did not take much pains to examine it, but simply went around and got some idea of wonderful Yankee ingenuity” (*Letters* 101). Even without the word “wonderful” the sentence has a complimentary ring. He also uses the word to differentiate his newfound American sensibilities from those of the Japanese government officials whom he was accompanying. Writing to Mr. Hardy about Commissioner Tanaka and the rather staid government officials, he reveals his distrust. “They may keep good terms with me; they may invite me with a word like honey, and treat me as a hired servant at first, and then they may gradually lay hold of me. ... What I have said above is my Yankee speculation” (*Letters* 104). Here, the usage implies that Neesima views himself as quite distinct from the Japanese delegation. Once again, the words portray that Western education and his experiences in the U.S.A. have helped him to become more mature and have enabled him to think more critically. Neesima fell in love with Americans and the country itself, and his usage of Yankee embodies that fondness.

The distance that Neesima wished to put between himself and the Japanese government officials is further emphasized by his unconventional use of “behind” and “corner-stander.” In a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Hardy describing the first meeting with Commissioner Tanaka he writes, “he bowed himself 60° from the perpendicular. So I made like bow in return. I could not help laughing within my heart that a behind or corner-stander was so honored by him in the room” (*Letters* 96). Accompanying Neesima that day were twelve Japanese students who were studying in the States,

however he physically distanced himself from them when the group was introduced to the commissioner, standing behind them in a corner of the room. While ungrammatical, the use of "behind" as a noun and the somewhat awkward "corner-stander" are linguistically crafty. Upon a first reading, they are even somewhat puzzling, but the letter contains an explicit explanation later in the paragraph. By the spring of 1872 Neesima had been studying in the States for almost seven years, therefore the unique usage here may well have been intentional to show the Hardys just how much he had matured since they had taken him under their wings. It is concrete evidence of his own Yankee ingenuity with regard to the English language, and he was unafraid to employ this kind of creative language liberally.

In addition to vocabulary, Neesima also makes some interesting word choices within expressions. In a correspondence with his roommate at Amherst, William Holland, he closes, "Dear sir, I must shut up my eyes now. Please let me have the pleasure of hearing from you again" (*Essays and Diaries* 372). It should be noted that Neesima had suffered from weak eyes since his teens to the extent that at times he had to seriously curtail reading and writing. Therefore, the sentiment is not out of place. Considering the contemporary usage and meaning of "shut up," however, it is especially humorous because he did not intend any of the incivility that the expression now conveys. Most likely it was a simple mistake as there is no compelling etymological evidence of its use to mean "close the eyes." Usage here is irregular, but it does not interfere with meaning, though it does make for interesting reading.

Two other intriguing expressions revolve around the word "pen." As he made his way across the American continent for a Yokohama-bound ship, being Sunday he got off the train in the small town of Green River, Wyoming. There he found a number of Chinese who could not speak English. Able to write Chinese characters and having studied the Chinese classics, Neesima "talked with them through [his] pen" (*Letters* 145). While a different word — communicated or corresponded — would have been more apt, he makes himself entirely understandable with the word "talked." The second expression, "stop my pen," is much more practical. Near the end of his letters Neesima frequently used the expression in closing. "As my time is so limited now I am obliged to stop my pen" (*Letters* 144). While the expression may have been common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is a lack of evidence to prove it. Whatever the case may have been at the time, it is somewhat jarring to the contemporary reader, albeit perfectly comprehensible. Neesima did not let shortcomings stand in his way. Instead, he used



the linguistic knowledge that he possessed to make himself understood. Such perseverance is noteworthy, and likely served him well when he encountered trouble with the language. Despite hard work and more than nine years in the U.S.A., Neesima proved that linguistic proficiency is quite different — and much more elusive — than language acquisition. While he had a solid grasp of English, he had not yet mastered it.

## V. An Inspired Mind

As mentioned earlier, due to the vast amount of time invested in Bible reading, studying at Andover Theological Seminary, and attending religious services, at times Neesima's prose sounds very biblical and prayer-like. About a year and a half after last writing Fukushi Unokichi, the man who helped secure his passage on the *Berlin*, in February 1866 Neesima updates him about Alpheus Hardy's kindness, his current fate, and most importantly, God's Providence. Details of the past eighteen months are eclipsed by references to Scripture and fiery preaching that clearly foreshadow the young man's career as a missionary and a Christian educator.

Oh, dear friend, think you well who is Christ. The same is the Light in darkness. It is not the light that comes out from the sun, moon, stars, and candles; but this the true light that shines on the benighted and wicked world and guides unto the way of salvation. The light of the candle is blown away, but this is the true light of eternal life, and we can by no wise blow it out. (*Letters* 6)

The tone is one of overt proselytization; Neesima encourages Unokishi to read the Bible and worship God. Use of the formal "benighted" especially rings Biblical. He noted that in addition to his religion classes and personal Bible-study, he studied about Christianity with Mrs. Flint — who, along with her husband, lived in the Hidden's home — and at church on Sundays. This immersion in the Scriptures no doubt heavily influenced his English language-learning, and manifested itself in his writing.

As time passed he became more and more determined to spread the word of Christ in Japan. Writing about his native land in 1871, he mused, "O, may our merciful Father give us power and grace to bear the blessed standard of Christ on that benighted shore, and proclaim the glad news of salvation to their despondent souls" (*Letters* 89). Employment of "benighted" (again) and "despondent souls" comes across as overly

dogmatic, but these views of Japan shaped his desire to be a missionary there. Interestingly, when he met a couple of Japanese studying at Monson Academy, a prep school near Amherst, in late 1867, he taught them about Christianity in his native tongue. However, he found it difficult to pray in Japanese. "They asked me to make prayers, but I could not make them in Japanese, so I made them in English" (*Letters* 26). By their very nature, formal prayers necessitate religious jargon, and Neesima may have felt anxious about using such lofty Japanese so early into his study of Christianity. Or perhaps he simply did not yet possess language of sufficient weight and reverence in his native tongue. No matter the reason, the fact that he was more comfortable praying in English speaks volumes about the confidence in his linguistic ability and spiritual convictions. Early exposure to the English Bible as well as a Christian education rendered almost entirely in English profoundly influenced not only his thinking, but Neesima's speech and writing as well. His knowledge of the English language was shaped by religion, and he used Biblical words and expressions for the remainder of his life.

While proficient in the fiery language of the Scriptures, Neesima was hardly poetic about the mundane. While vacationing in the Hoosac Mountains of northwestern Massachusetts in the summer of 1871, he climbed a peak to see the sunrise and he penned a poem in his diary about the experience. "Arise, O sleepy sun. Do not tarry, lazy sun! / For on a top of Berkshire hills I am standing, / Standing alone, and for thee I am waiting" (*Letters* 89). For an attempt in one's second language, it is laudable, but clearly it was never in contention for a Nobel Prize. Acknowledging as much in the same diary entry, Neesima calls himself an "un-genious [*sic*] man" and continues, "I have no skill to describe the grand scene with a figurative language. I am like a practical Yankee and my remark is wonderfully plain [*sic*]. I have no inspired mind or pen." The assessment of his lyrical talent is not far off the mark, but one can take issue with the final comment. On the contrary, both his mind and his writing were definitely inspired, especially when it came to impassioned preaching, pious spirituality, and a determined conviction to improve the lives of his compatriots in Japan.

## VI. "My Name is Well Known"

Although it is unrelated to his linguistic ability, the reader of the English volumes

of *The Complete Works* quickly notices several curiosities regarding Neesima's signature. The first is that not all of the correspondences include one. Most of the letters sourced from Hardy's *Life & Letters* do not include signatures, while many, but not all, of those from Amherst and Andover do. The reader also notes that when a signature exists it often changes from letter to letter. Furthermore, it evolves over time. Some of the earliest correspondences — the 1864 letters to Fukushi Unokichi as well as the long appeal to Alpheus Hardy — do not include signatures. The first one appears in the October 14, 1865 correspondence to Mr. Hardy in thanks for agreeing to support the just-arrived immigrant. It is signed "Joseph Nee Sima" (*Letters* 4). While "Joe" was bestowed on him by Captain Taylor, it is uncertain if the more formal Joseph came from the younger Hardy during editing, from Alpheus Hardy — who may have addressed him as Joseph — or if was originally penned by Neesima. Questions such as these may never be answered without the original manuscripts. Another curiosity regards spacing: rather than being one word, his surname is separated into two parts: "Nee Sima." There is no concrete evidence about the reason for signing his name in this manner, but he stuck with it for some time. There is one case in which he signs off with his full Japanese name. Considering that it was sent to his compatriot, Unokichi, the February 23, 1866 letter signed "Nee Sima Shimeta" is understandable (*Letters* 7). However, it is the lone example among the letters written in English. From 1866 on, when signatures exist they are inconsistent, alternating between "Nee Sima" and the hyphenated "Nee-Sima." The January 16, 1869 to Mary Hidden is signed "Nee Sima" while his February 11 letter to her employs "Nee-Sima" (*Letters* 46, 47). Sent only three weeks apart, both letters are from the Andover trove. Curiously, the June 16 letter to Mary Hidden later that year is signed "Joseph Nee-Sima" while the postscript employs "J. Nee Sima" (*Letters* 115). Neesima alternated between using a hyphen and a space for about five years.

During the summer of 1871 he begins to render his surname as one word — "NeeSima" — yet, the inconsistency continues with a random mixture of "NeeSima," "Nee-Sima," and "Nee Sima" (*Letters* 91). In all cases, even when it is rendered as a single word, the "S" is always capitalized. The ever-morphing signature continues until just before he returns to Japan. In the October 13, 1874 farewell to his friends in Andover, Neesima adopts the initial "H." — for Hardy — as a middle name. He would use it for the rest of his life. The final change occurs in late December of that year when he settles on "Neesima" (*Letters* 158). From this point on there is neither a

hyphen nor a space and the "s" is not capitalized.

A final note about the surname concerns its spelling, which was anglicized from the start; employing "ee" rather than "ii," which is the contemporary Romanization. Certainly, this change helped Americans correctly pronounce the first syllable. However, the use of the letter "s" rather than "j" is puzzling. There is no evidence of the "Nijjima" or the "Neejima" spelling in the English volumes of *The Complete Works*. However, Neesima does mention something in the postscript of his January 25, 1875 letter to Dr. N. G. Clark. "Rev. D. C. Green likes to spell my name Nijjima. I don't quite fancy to change it now. My name is well known among my American friends by Neesima" (*Letters* 163). This implies that while Neesima was aware of the discrepancy, he was unwilling to alter it. With this declaration "Joseph Hardy Neesima" became permanent.

## VII. "His English was Broken and his Vocabulary Small, but his Heart was Full of Love"

Because so many of the letters have been heavily edited, it becomes quite difficult to fairly evaluate Neesima's English ability. Despite the numerous spelling and grammatical mistakes as well as the errors of usage, he was consistently able to convey his needs, thoughts, and feelings. The immigrant was well aware of his less than perfect English writing ability, and noted as much with regularity. In an August 1871 letter to Mrs. Hardy he acknowledged his imperfections, "Oh, I wish I could have eloquence enough to write out all my happy and rich experiences during my trip. Notwithstanding the broken English and imperfect grammar, I will attempt to write you a brief sketch with this unskillful hand" (*Letters* 87). When he penned this he had been corresponding with Mrs. Hardy for five-and-a-half years, therefore the high probability of Japanese modesty cannot be discounted.<sup>4</sup> Minor mistakes aside, it should be stressed that Neesima was always able to make his intentions understood in writing. His English skills reflected the strong personal relationships that were formed with the people with whom he surrounded himself, beginning with the *Wild Rover's* Captain Taylor, and the Hardys, and extending to the families and classmates he lived with, the congregations he prayed with, and the government officials in the USA and Europe with whom he worked.

Ultimately, his English ability was never a major stumbling block due to his

outstanding character as a person. An Amherst classmate recalled, “his English was broken then and his vocabulary small, but his heart was big and full of love. Through every word and act transparent shone the man, winning the respect of all” (Hardy 73). This supports the notion that fluency is not the most important factor when it comes to international communication. Charisma, humility, and effort far supersede raw linguistic competence. The final letter he wrote while still on the East Coast was to the group of friends in Andover that had taken care of him since he first arrived at Phillips Academy in thanks for a gold watch chain they had given him.

I am sure I could not help remembering you always because there lies some unseen chain, which ties us stronger than ever before, and which, I trust, does and will bind us all in our common Master. ... I trust our mutual sympathy and prayers will ever be an unbroken chain between us, although space and sea will separate us quite far off. I hope, your prayers will follow me as I am going back to my dear native land.” (*Letters* 143-44)

Characteristically, the words convey humble gratitude, but they are punctuated with the Biblical fire and ambition of a preacher. This time, Neesima possesses a wonderful command of the English language. Not only does he achieve the figurative language that he could not muster on Hoosac Mountain three years earlier — about the gift itself and its symbolic tie of friendship — but he imbues the chain with a third meaning: the bond that the group shares with Christ. Neesima skillfully expresses his gratitude and simultaneously bids farewell with the dexterity of a native and without undue sentimentality.

Legend has it that the final words of Dr. William Clark, an American educator who spent the 1876-1877 school year in Sapporo, were, “boys, be ambitious.” Certainly, Joseph Hardy Neesima embodied that spirit throughout his days: from his upbringing in Edo, the time spent in America and Europe, through repatriation and his work in Kyoto. Yet, his ambitions were complimented by hard work and dedication. Neesima’s English competence was the result of a combination of things. Undoubtedly, social interaction with classmates, friends, associates, and various religious communities contributed to his success. More importantly, an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, devotion to his studies, and intense Scripture-reading provided the discipline necessary for acquiring the English language. However, copious letter-writing, as was the norm of the time, enabled him to build upon his studies in a format less rigid than schoolwork and stiff social situations. In his letters he was free to write what he

wished and truly be himself. The 146 letters written while he was abroad served as a sturdy foundation in the English language and provided plenty of practice to develop his voice; one that not only changed how New Englanders viewed the Japanese, but one that would help change Japan's attitude toward education, Western thought, and Christianity.

## Notes

- 1 Given the name Niijima Shimeta at birth, he is usually referred to as Niijima Jou in Japan. He is known abroad as Joseph Neesima. Because this paper concentrates on his English language ability, I will use the Romanized name that he employed in his letters.
- 2 In the Bible the word "castaway" means "one regarded as unworthy (R.V., 'rejected'); elsewhere rendered 'reprobate'; 'rejected'" (Easton). In the King James Bible see 1 Corinthians 9:27: "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (*Bible Gateway*).
- 3 In the King James Bible see Romans 1:20: "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse." Also see Colossians 1:15: "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature" (*Bible Gateway*).
- 4 Additional apologies for mechanical errors include the September 8, 1867 letter to Mary Hidden, "you must excuse my hurry writing and improper grammar" (*Letters* 21). Also see the February 6, 1870 correspondence to Henry Albert Stimson in which Neesima relates why he was reluctant to respond to inquiries about Japanese society. "It owes partly to my feeble conception and partly to my deficient command of the language" (*Letters* 66).

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