The Language of Otaku
- Analyzing the Japanese Internet Story "Train Man"

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In the past few years, the term *otaku* (Japanese geek) has attracted more and more public attention. There are several academic writings about the phenomenon, but interestingly there is only very few information about the language of *otaku* from a linguistic point of view.

In this article, I wish to investigate three different points in order to achieve a better understanding of the particularities of the language: First I want to discuss the history of the term *otaku*; the second step will be the examination of the story called "The Trainman" (*densha otoko*, 電車男), together with some information about the internet forum "2channel", where the story was written. With this background information we will finally be able to analyze the particularities of the language.

1.   The term *otaku*

The original word derives from the honorific prefix *o* (お) and the noun *taku* (宅) which means another's house or family, written in a mixture of Kanji and Kana: お宅 (*otaku*). Nowadays it is often written in Katakana as オタク (*otaku*). In comparison to the past, the word is used presently as a term to refer to people with obsessive interests, particularly anime, manga, and video games; therefore it might be translated into English as *nerd* or *geek*.

This modern usage of the term started in the beginning of the 1980's when young collectors of anime pictures used *otaku* as an honorific second-person pronoun when asking other collectors to show them their (オタクの, *otaku no*) collection.[1]

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[1]Grassmuck, 1999

The coinage of this term began when the essayist Akio Nakamori 1983 wrote "An investigation of 'Otaku' in the magazine "Manga Burikko"[2], giving a definition of the people he called *otaku* in a very negative and rejecting way.

But this negative view soon changed during the 1990's when Hachirō Taku published a column about *otaku* that showed a very positive view. He also used television shows to spread his ideas about *otaku*.

Even more famous is Toshio Okada, who calls himself "OTAKING." He lectured at different universities such as University of Tokyo or Rikkyo University concerning the *otaku* phenomena and what he calls "*otakuology*". He is also one of the founders of the Otaku-Anime-Studio *Gainax*. In his seminars he emphasizes that *otakus* are not disgusting nerds but should instead be considered as great specialists in their own field. *Otakus* have respective wisdom and know-how which is according to Okada applaudable and admirable.

2.   The story "The Trainman"

The story "The Trainman" (電車男, *densha otoko*) was written at exactly this time, when the negative view on *otaku geeks* began to change to a positive view on *otaku specialists*. The story began on March 14, 2004 when an anonymous user posted a remark on a thread of 2channel (2 ちゃんねる, *ni channeru*).

2.1. 2channel (2 ちゃんねる, *ni channeru*)

2channel[3] is the biggest Japanese Internet forum, some say, it is even the biggest one in the world. It was created by a Japanese named Hiroyuki Nishimura, but launched 1999 in Arkansas, USA[4].

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[2] http://www.burikko.net/people/otaku01.html
[3] http://2ch.net/

At present time 2channel has more than 600 active boards (板, *ita*), such as social news, education, life style, etc., and each board has again numerous specific threads. One thread is limited to 1000 postings at maximum. When one thread reaches this number, it will be removed to an archive which requires users to pay for access, and then eventually be deleted.

The original thread of our story "Trainman" has also been deleted, however there is one early compilation presented by the website Milkyway-Aquarius[5]:

> 731 名前：Mr.名無しさん 投稿日：04/03/14 21:25
> すまん。俺も裏ぐった。
> 文才が無いから、過程は書けないけど。
> このスレまじで魔力ありすぎ…
> おまいらにも光あれ…
> *731 namae: Mr. nanashi-san tōkōbi : 04/03/14 21:25*
> *Suman. Ore mo uragutta.*
> *Bunsai ga nai kara, katei wa kakenai kedo.*
> *Kono sure maji de maryoku arisugi...*
> *Omaira mo hikari are...*
> 731 Name: Mr. No Name Date: 04/03/14 21:25
> Sorry. I've betrayed you all, too...
> I'm not good with words, so I can't lay it all out well, but...
> This thread has WAY too much magical power...
> Glory to you all... [6]

According to the website Milkyway-Aquarius, this is the very first posting made by an anonymous poster, later to be called "Trainman". The posting has the number 731 and it was posted at 21:52 o'clock on 14 March 2004. Since the poster wanted to remain anonymous, he used the

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[4] Therefore 2channel is not under the jurisdiction of the Japanese government.

[5] http://www.geocities.co.jp/Milkyway-Aquarius/7075/index.html

[6] The translation of all quoted "Trainman-postings" is taken from the following website: http://www.rinji.tv/densha/index.html

automatically inserted placeholder *nanashi* (名無し, no name) in the name field. Anonymous speech is one of the two basic concepts of 2channel. The founder of the site Nishimura believed that people can only discuss and tell their true opinion, or give real information, if there is no risk to be identified:

> *"[…] delivering news without taking any risk is very important to us. There is a lot of information disclosure or secret news gathered on Channel 2. Few people would post that kind of information by taking a risk. Moreover, people can only truly discuss something when they don't know each other."* Japan Media Review, August 2003[7]

The other important concept is the concept of free speech. The only type of postings that are not accepted are mischievous postings and postings that could be classified as slander under Japanese law, as well as postings that contain plans or other information about committing a crime.[8]

Coming back to the story of Trainman: It was written by an anonymous poster using a thread called *doku otoko* (poisonous males, 毒男), a play on words of *dokushin dansei* (single males, 独身男性). The story starts with the description of how a young *otaku*, later called Trainman (*densha otoko*, 電車男), is rescuing a beautiful woman on the train from being harassed by a drunken man. To express her grateful feelings the woman sends Trainman an expensive set of cups made by Hermès – that is why the woman is afterwards referred to as Hermes (*erumesu*, エルメス). The two start dating and on every small occasion Trainman is always seeking help and asking for advice from the other posters of 2channel until the happy end, when the two get together.

As I previously mentioned, the original thread of Trainman was unfortunately deleted, but because the story soon became very popular and many

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[7] Interview of Japan Media Review, 22 August 2003
   (http://www.ojr.org/japan/internet/1061505583.php)

[8] *sakujo gaidorain* (削除ガイドライン, elimination guideline):
   http://www2.2ch.net/2ch.html

people wanted to read it, most of the postings of the thread were collected and rearranged in an easy readable way by the website Milkyway-Aquarius. The increasing popularity of the story led to a further compilation in a book, followed by 4 manga versions, a TV series and even a movie, later released as a DVD.

3. The language style

To analyze the language style of the story, I used the first compilation of Milkyway-Aquarius.

In my analysis I derived three particularities: (1) The style is very close to spoken language, (2) it is influenced by the talk of young people, and (3) it shows some special features based on the use of a computer.

3.1. Spoken language

Talking about the differences between spoken and written language, there are two different approaches. The first approach focuses on the medium[9], it says that spoken language is actually spoken out loud using one's voice – it is phonic, whereas written language is graphical, because one uses the medium of a pen, a type writer or maybe a computer to write it down. So the medium approach assumes a dichotomy between phonic and graphical – there is no in-between.

The second approach on the contrary emphasizes that the difference between spoken and written language is not a matter of medium but rather the matter of conception[10]. If you imagine a personal letter and a paragraph of a law – they are both written down on paper and of course graphical, but the style, the conception of the language is very different. Also a lecture at university and a conversation between neighbors are both phonically spoken out, but again the conception or style is different.

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[9] Crystal is basically following this approach (Crystal 2001: 25ff).
[10] Koch/Oesterreicher (1985, 1994)

Therefore according to the approach of conception, there is no dichotomy, but rather a continuum between oral and written language.

Based on this approach the concept of the internet story "Trainman" has to be classified as oral language. The following examples will demonstrate the closeness to oral language. The first example (posting number 789) shows a phonetic approximation:

> 789 名前：731 投稿日：04/03/14 23:24
> [...] 焦っちまったよぉぉぉぉーーー
> *789 namae:731 tōkōbi：04/03/14 23:24*
> *[...] asetchimatta yōoooo---*
> 789 Name: 731 Date: 04/03/14 23:24
> [...] I totally freaked ouuuuuttttttt~~~~~~

In spontaneous speech vowels are often pronounced in a longer way (よおおおお (*yōoooo*) in Japanese or "ouuuuuttttttt" in the English translation) to express your feelings more strongly. The example quoted above (posting number 789) also includes an assimilation, a phenomenon which is frequently used in spoken language as well as in the thread of "Trainman": 焦っちまった (*asetchimatta*) is an assimilated verb form of the standard grammar version 焦って しまった (*asette shimatta*, "freaked out").

There are also some differences in the lexical point of view. Spoken language is full of interjections like まあ (*mâ*), or ああ (*â*), えと (*eto*), あの (*ano*), and so on. In the second example (posting number 122) the interjection おい (*oi*, "whoa") is used even twice:

> 122 名前：Mr.名無しさん 投稿日：04/03/16 22:36
> おいおいエルメスかよ・・・
> 金持ちだな、彼女。
> *122 namae：Mr. nanashi-san tōkōbi：04/03/16 22:36*

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Oi oi erumesu ka yo...
kanemochi da na, kanojo.
122 Name: Mr. No Name Date: 04/03/16 22:36
Whoa, whoa, Hermes?
The lady has money to burn...

Spoken language also shows many particularities in the field of syntax like the sentence structure of inversion (倒置, *tōchi*). The second part of posting number 122 contains an inversion, since – according to the grammar of the written Japanese language – 彼女 (*kanojo*, "she; the lady") should be placed in the front of the sentence, and not at the end.

3.2.   Youth language

Another particularity of the language used by *otaku* is the strong influence of the youth language. Discussing youth language, there are many different approaches, but due to limited space I will only mention one approach of Androutsopoulos who is doing research on German youth language and gives a definition of the term *youth language*:

> *"Youth language is identified as a secondary variety, which is acquired during the secondary socialization, and is used habitually in daily informal conversation by socially defined young people."* [11] Androutsopoulos, 1998a: 592

The important points of his approach are that he defines youth language as a *secondary variety* and that he speaks about young people in a *socially* defined way. *Secondary variety* should be understood in contrast to a prime-variety like a dialect, e.g. Swabian or Kansai-dialect. If you speak a dialect, one can recognize it in every single word. But youth language can only be recognized in some words, since it is used to supple-

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[11] Translated by the author. The German original is „Jugendsprache ist eine sekundäre Varietät, die in der sekundären Sozialisation erworben, in der alltäglichen informellen Kommunikation im sozialen Alter der Jugend habituell verwendet und als solche identifiziert wird." (Androutsopoulos 1998a: 592).

ment the prime-variety. To use a youth language marker or not, is a matter of choice not a matter of necessity.

The second important aspect pointed out by Androutsopoulos is the definition of youth in a *sociological* way and not in a biological way as some Japanese scholars[12] do. They define youth by the biological age starting with 12 years up to 30 years old. It is much more convincing if you define youth as a social status, because in different cultures the age will be different. If the society believes that a person is no longer a child, but is not yet considered an adult, then he will be defined as an adolescent, no matter how old he is.

Youth language has many different characteristics.[13] Due to the limited space only three examples will be provided:

> 731 名前：Mr.名無しさん 投稿日：04/03/14 21:25
> [...]このスレまじで魔力ありすぎ…
> *731 namae: Mr. nanashi-san tōkōbi : 04/03/14 21:25*
> *[...] Kono sure maji de maryoku arisugi...*
> 731 Name: Mr. No Name Date: 04/03/14 21:25
> [...] This thread has WAY too much magical power...

Young people tend to shorten words or phrases or even whole sentences. スレ (*sure*, "thread") is the shortening of スレッド (*sureddo*, "thread"), a relatively new word which arose with the more common use of the internet.

> 650 名前：731 こと電車男 投稿日：04/03/16 20:03
> マジでどうすりゃい[14]のかわかんねぇよ！
> *650 namae: 731 koto densha otoko tōkōbi : 04/03/16 20:03*
> *Maji de dō surya i no ka wakannē yo!*

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[12] For example Yonekawa (1996; 1998)
[13] See Oberwinkler (2006: 161ff).
[14] The missing い (*i*) can be interpreted as a typing error due to fast writing.

650 Name: 731 AKA Train Man Date: 04/03/16 20:03
I seriously don't know what to do, here!!

Young people tend to exaggerate and to use many intensifiers. In posting number 650 Trainman is using the intensifier マジで (*maji de*, "really; seriously") which emphasizes the content and gives a strong impact.

164 名前：731 こと電車男 投稿日：04/03/16 22:43
おい、おまいらビビらせないで下さい！
164 namae: 731koto densha otoko kōtōbi：04/03/16 22:43
Oi, omaira bibirasenaide kudasai!
164 Name: 731 AKA Train Man Date: 04/03/16 22:43
Hey you guys, don't scare me!

Youth language is also very creative. Young people often build new words, sometimes using already existing words and combining them in a new way. The above quoted posting number 164 shows the neologism び びる (*bibiru*, "to be afraid; to be scared")[15].

3.3.   Computer mediated particularities

It is highly controversial, if there exists a language variety (in a systematic sense) that could be called "netspeak".[16] But it is widely accepted that there are some particularities of the language style caused by the use of a computer.

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[15] For further discussion see Oberwinkler 2006: 220.
[16] See Oberwinkler 2006: 227ff.

3.3.1.   Misspelling and deviation from standard pronunciation

One of these particularities are typing errors: If you type a text, in the majority of cases there will be some unintentional typing errors, but some posters of 2channel will *intentionally* use wrong characters.

> 625 名前：Mr.名無しさん 投稿日：04/03/16 19:45
> >>623
> 卓球瓶ってことは電話番号もゲッツ？
> *625 namae: Mr. nanashi-san tōkōbi：04/03/16 19:45*
> *>>623*
> ***takkyūbin tte koto wa denwa bangō mo gettsu?***
> 625 Name: Mr. No Name Date: 04/03/16 19:45
> >>623
> Hey, if it was delivered by a private delivery service, does that mean you've got her phone number?

For example in posting number 625, the Kanji version of "*takkyūbin*" (卓球瓶), literally "bottle of table tennis", makes no sense (it should be 宅急便, *takkyūbin*, "private delivery service"), and the computer software would never automatically offer you this Kanji version, but rather you have to intentionally change the characters into this unusual way.

> 661 名前：Mr.名無しさん 投稿日：04/03/16 20:11
> [...]電話だ。電話を汁！
> *661 namae: Mr. nanashi-san tōkōbi：04/03/16 20:11*
> *[...]Denwa da. Denwa o shiru!*
> 661 Name: Mr. No Name Date: 04/03/16 20:11
> [...]The phone. CALL HER ZOMG[17].

Another example for intentional misspelling is posting number 661, where the imperative form of the predicate is not spelled with Hiragana

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[17] ZOMG is a variant of the acronym "OMG", meaning "Oh My God".

as it would usually be, but with a Kanji that is even read with a different vowel at the end: The standard imperative form is *shiro* (しろ, "do"), but the poster of 661 uses *shiru* (汁, "broth"). So it is not only a play with Kanji characters, but also a play with pronunciation.

> 228 名前：Mr.名無しさん 投稿日：04/03/18 00:19
> \>\>215
> よし任せろ、元々漏れもそんな感じの服だったから大丈夫
> *228 namae: Mr. nanashi-san tōkōbi：04/03/18 00:19*
> *\>\>215*
> *Yoshi makasero, motomoto more mo sonna kanji no fuku datta kara daijōbu*
> 228 Name: Mr. No Name Date: 04/03/18 00:19
> \>\>215
> Okay, leave it to me, I used to dress like that too, so it'll be fine

The last example for intentional misspelling heads in the same direction: at first sight the masculine first person pronoun *ore* (俺, "I") was just replaced with *more* (漏れ, "leak; omission"), like in the first example (posting number 625). But interestingly, there are many other cases where the syllable *o* (お) is substituted by the syllable *mo* (も).[18] Therefore it seems to be rather a play with pronunciation than only a play with Kanji characters.[19]

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[18] For example: *momaira* (もまいら) instead of *omaira* (おまいら, "you guys"); *mohayō* (もはよう) instead of *ohayō* (おはよう, "good morning") or *mochitsuke* (もちつけ) instead of *ochitsuke* (おちつけ, "calm down").

[19] There are also other cases of deviation from standard pronunciation like *shimasuta* (しますた) instead of *shimashita* (しました, "did") or *osare na* (オサレな) instead of *oshare na* (おしゃれな, "stylish").

3.3.2.   Emoticons and Shift JIS art

Another particularity found in different internet genres is the so-called *emoticon* (顔文字, *kaomoji*). In Europe or America the western smiley made out of a colon and a bracket is very common. It is rotated by 90%, but the Japanese smiley has no rotation, and it has many variations which are used on the internet as well as in mails sent by mobile phones. But some emoticons are mainly used by posters of 2channel and usually not found in other genres:

> 665 名前：731 こと電車男 投稿日：04/03/16 20:13
>
> [...] 一言で言うと＿|￣|○
>
> *665 namae: 731 koto densha otoko tōkōbi : 04/03/16 20:13*
>
> *[...] hitokoto de iu to ＿|￣|○*
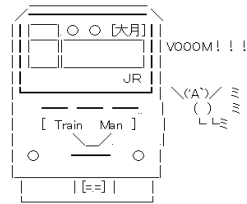>
> 665 Name: 731 AKA Train Man Date: 04/03/16 20:13
>
> [...] In a word: ＿|￣|○

Very common throughout the story of Trainman is the *emoticon* used in posting number 665 showing a crestfallen, frustrated person weighed down with sorrow (from left to right: the first line indicates the legs, then the body, and the ○ shows the head lying on the floor).

If you look at emoticons in a wider sense, they can be contextualized as very simple form of ASCII art (or Shift JIS art in the Japanese version). The story of Trainman contains not only many emoticons, but also numerous ASCII or Shift JIS artworks, which can be very complex in structure and design. Shift JIS art is also very commonly used by 2channel posters.

The example below is the first representative to be found in the story showing a train called Trainman.

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629 Name: Mr. No Name Date: 04/03/16 19:52          629 名前：Mr.名無しさん 投稿日：04/03/16 19:52

    _____                                   _____
   ||  ___ ○ ○ [大月]||                               ||  ___ ○ ○ [大月]||
   ||  |  |        ||  VOOOM！！！                    ||  |  |        ||  ブオーン！！！
   ||  |__|     JR ||                                 ||  |__|     JR ||
   ||            __||  ＼(´A`)／ ≡                     ||            __||  ＼(´A`)／ ≡
   | _____    |    (   )   ≡                     | _____    |    (   )   ≡
   ||[ Train Man ]||    L L≡                          ||[ 電車男 ] ||    L L≡
   |  ○   ____   ○ |                                  |  ○   ____   ○ |
   |_____|    |_____|                                 |_____|    |_____|
        | [==] |                                           | [==] |
```
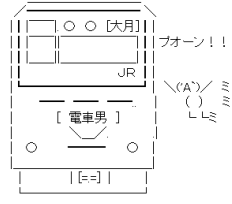
4.   Conclusion

In this article I tried to investigate three different points to get a real understanding of the particularities of the language of *otaku*: First I discussed the term *otaku*; then I examined the story called "The Trainman" (*densha otoko*, 電車男), and I also had a look on the internet forum "2channel", where the story was written. With this background information I finally analyzed the particularities of the language which could be divided into three major phenomena: the closeness to spoken language, the similarities to youth language and the influences caused by the use of a computer. Due to limited space I could only briefly elaborate on these features. Especially the last point, the different types of misspellings respectively intentional deviations from standard spelling, should be discussed more intensively in further work. Also neologism invented by posters of 2channel that I was not able to discuss here will be a task for further investigation.

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