



## Article

# Script and Language as Semiotic Media in Japanese Storytelling: A Theoretical Approach through Haruki Murakami's *Noruei no mori*

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**Abstract:** In contrast to the writing practices of many modern languages, Japanese routinely employs four denotative systems that operate in conjunction, but which are actively recognized as distinct from one another: *kanji*, *hiragana*, *katakana*, and the Roman alphabet. Simultaneously, English, as well as English-derived language usages have been noted for their significant intralinguistic roles in Japanese, going far beyond straightforward loan borrowing functionality. Convention informs the implementations of both script choice and language, and yet neither subjective phenomenon is perfectly uniform. Approaching these issues from a perspective of semiotic theory, this article identifies the flexibility and creative syncretism that is made available by virtue of written Japanese's systemic open-endedness in terms of script and linguistic multiplicity. It assesses the emblematic functionality that is achievable through deliberate variation or shift in these semiotic media of print, and it demonstrates how auxiliary associative, ideological, and emotive meanings are ascribed to specific language instances. Finally, as an applied literary analysis, it evaluates Haruki Murakami's 1987 novel 『ノルウェイの森』 (*Noruei no mori*; *Norwegian Wood*) in order to clarify prominent semiotic possibilities and to emphasize the easily taken for granted creative aesthetic potential of Japanese's media-based multiplicity.



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## 1. Introduction

Modern Japanese notably diverges from the writing practices of many contemporary languages in that it concurrently and routinely employs four denotative systems that operate in conjunction, but which are actively perceived as distinct from one another (on the phenomenon of multiple script usage by different linguistic communities, see first: [Bunčić et al. 2016](#)). Simultaneously, English and English-derived language usages exert considerable influence and have been noted for the significant “intralinguistic” roles that they play within Japanese ([Honma 1995](#), p. 60). Convention and norms of practice largely dictate individual writers' implementations of both script choice and pseudo-codeswitching, and yet as [Ezaki \(2010\)](#) highlights with particular regard to the usage of *kanji*, there is a great deal more arbitrariness and personal choice involved than is generally acknowledged. In this article, I apply a theoretical semiotic approach to the printed media-dependent issues of script and language differentiation in order to assess written Japanese's systemic multiplicity on literary terms. First, I identify the emblematic functionality of script selection and demonstrate how auxiliary associative, ideological, and emotive values come to be ascribed to specific transcribed utterances. I then extend this consideration by unpacking the highly relevant and interconnected semiotic functions of language differentiation, i.e., between English and other language borrowings, ‘native’ Japanese words, and items of Sinitic origin, etc. Finally, I apply these deductions and observations to a specific literary investigation of Haruki Murakami's 1987 novel 『ノルウェイの森』 (*Noruei no mori*; *Norwegian Wood*) ([Murakami \[1987\] 1991b; 2000](#)). This exercise

not only revealingly clarifies the prominent semiotic possibilities of written Japanese's media-based multiplicity, it also helps to foreground the aesthetic and creative potentials of script differentiation and linguistic syncretism.

## 2. Scripts, Associations, and Emblematic Values

Four scripts are commonly employed in Modern Japanese—*kanji* (Chinese characters), *hiragana* and *katakana* (phonemic syllabaries), and the Roman alphabet<sup>1</sup>—and the usages of each are largely governed by patterns of convention. In typical practice, *kanji* are consistently used for the majority of semantically important words and morphemes in texts produced for literate adult readers. *Hiragana* is used otherwise as more or less a default script for words and grammatically important elements that are not expressed by *kanji*. *Katakana* is used primarily for loanwords and proper names that are not of Sino-Japanese origin. Thus, an example from everyday writing illustrates the three scripts operating concurrently in unison:

私はドイツでをいました。

**watashi** wa *doitsu* de **kuruma** o kaimashita.

**watashi**—‘I’

[first-person pronoun]

wa—

[topic-marking particle]

*doitsu*—‘Germany’

[proper noun]

de—

[locative particle]

**kuruma**—‘car’

[noun]

o—

[accusative particle]

kaimashita—‘bought’

[past tense verb, tense denoted by

*hiragana*]

= I bought [a] car in Germany.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to fulfilling their respective roles of linguistic transcription, the multiplicity of the system means also that the scripts themselves take on supplementary emblematic values. Wes Robertson (2015, p. 207), for example, observes and catalogues an array of the common associations that are ascribed to each script, represented in the following Table 1.

**Table 1.** Common Associations Ascribed to Japanese Scripts (Robertson 2015).

<i>Hiragana</i>	<i>Katakana</i>	<i>Kanji</i>	<i>Rōmaji</i>
feminine, soft, smooth, round, tender, simple, childish, lovely, unmarked, intimate, private, nice, elegant, poetic, Japanese	novel, foreign, imitative, emphasizing, hard, simple, inorganic, fake, marked, young, male, futuristic, neutral, sharp, fresh, jarring, precise, angular	scientific, rigid, elite, masculine, formal, hard, difficult, intellectual, conspicuous, learned, visual, adult, Chinese, substantial, Japanese	prestigious, global, decorative, international, eye-catching, symbolic, cool, sophisticated

Note especially how many of the associations ascribed to each script not only tie in with their conventionally determined functions, but also appear to contradict one another, to overlap with those of another script, and to stem from historical awarenesses.

These emblematic values especially come into play by virtue of the fact that selection of script does not depend solely on convention tied to linguistic function, but also upon authorial intent and stylistic decision. Not unlike signaling through font, color, or handwriting, deliberate variation in script can exploit these associative values and “signify” without fundamentally altering the underlying linguistic utterance that is transcribed. The emblematic values “signify” in the sense outlined by Umberto Eco (1979, pp. 9–10): “When—on the basis of an underlying rule—something actually presented to the perception of the addressee *stands* for something else, there is *signification*”. Accordingly, it is possible to discuss meaning production and to consider semiotics of signification independently

from semiotics of communication, but not vice versa. Script selection can also realize interpersonal meanings, and indeed, features such as emotive depiction of perspective, comprehension, and tone have been occasionally recognized (Hudson and Sakakibara 2007). In brief, what I will term ‘multiliteralism’ is the phenomenon that ostensibly the same word or lexical item is liable to be perceived in entirely different manners by readers when it is presented in a different script—e.g., 車 くるま クルマ *kuruma* (car)—or as Michael Seats (2006, pp. 208–9) summarizes, “In Japanese the choice of script (*hiragana*, *kanji* or *katakana*) affects, in a fundamental way, the semantic value and orientation of a word or expression”.

Notably absent from Seats’s observation and much other scholarly commentary, is the positioning of Roman alphabet characters. If taken into consideration at all, the Roman alphabet is usually interpreted in a reductive way. Indeed, Kess and Miyamoto (2000, p. 111) highlight that in comparison with the other scripts, only a limited amount of research has been conducted in terms of literacy and word recognition, in spite of the fact that “the romaji script has made such inroads into popular Japanese printed media that it must at least be noted as a separate system within the totality of the Japanese orthographic inventory”. To a certain degree, the functions and associations of Roman characters overlap with those of *katakana*, in that they also often denote foreign language words or are used for types of emphasis. However, the Roman alphabet also possesses its own distinct usage possibilities and categorizational difficulties. Indeed, it is even possible to distinguish further between *rōmaji* as romanizations of Japanese, *eiji* (lit. ‘English characters’), alphabetic loan borrowings/transplants, and so on (see, e.g., Miyake 2007). I do not hold to those precise distinctions here, however, because of difficulties that I will go on to note in Section 3 related to the subjectivity involved with separating code-switches/transplantations, marked loans (*Fremdwörter*), integrated loans (*Lehnwörter*), and so-called ‘heritage’ words (*Erbwörter*).

By revising the example above slightly to include a common acronym, all four scripts can be glimpsed operating cooperatively: 私はドイツでBMWを買いました。The Roman alphabet letters stand out acutely, and certain commentators that have sought to address literary or aesthetic usage reductively seize upon this quality as encountered in advertising and marketing (e.g., Saint-Jacques 1987). Nicolas Tranter (2008, p. 51) has proposed that regardless of the language which is presented—Japanese or English, etc.—“The choice of script is determined by whether the text primarily communicates (*katakana*) or decorates or draws the eye (Roman)”. Another commentator even goes so far as to argue that “the text itself becomes a visual image” (Bartal 2013, p. 51). These may be reasonable assessments of certain ornamental uses, e.g., alphabetic writing on clothing that is reminiscent of web designers’ use of placeholder *lorem ipsum* dummy text. I would, however, argue that reduction of all Japanese Roman character text to mere imagery or ornamentation is a misconceptualization of the linguistic and semiotic situation.

Roman characters can be and are used in Japanese for their emblematic value to emphasize, convey foreignness or modernity, and so forth (see further: Hyde 2002), but one should not lose sight of the fact that the alphabet is still altogether viable as a script in a discursive sense. *Rōmaji* is taught in schools as a component of Japanese Language Arts (*kokugo*) curricula, and even allowing for generational differences, an ability to work with Roman characters penetrates nearly all levels of society, especially following the development and widespread use of word processors, computers, and mobile phones which often rely on the Roman alphabet as an efficient means of initial character input (cf. Unger 2001).<sup>3</sup> Thus, while the script displays a high degree of emblematic value, it nevertheless retains expressive functionality and conveys semantic information. It is not, for example, akin to instances of purely ornamental characters, such as *kanji* that decorate Japanese restaurant menus abroad and which are hardly intended for linguistic processing by the majority of clientele.

Nanette Gottlieb (2010, p. 76) offers the following appraisal:

Romanisation in Japan complements rather than replaces existing orthography, adding to the prized diversity and multiplicity of options afforded by the multi-

script writing system. Playing with the accepted conventions of the orthography affords endless opportunity for creativity intended to amuse, to shock, or sometimes to act as an in-group code for particular subgroups of society.

This assessment echoes that of other commentators cited above, and I would present that auxiliary semiotic signification involving the Roman alphabet is no less viable than multilateral play involving the other scripts. Albeit due to its unique associative ascriptions, the emblematic values that Roman characters contribute are altogether distinct. Moreover, to come to terms with the overall semiotic situation, as well as the script's positioning, it becomes necessary to wrestle with conceptual and imaginative connections that exist between Roman characters and the English language within Japanese.

### 3. English and Japanese, English in Japanese

As with Roman alphabet characters, English is taught in Japan as a segment of the public education curriculum, and while no claims can be made about universal societal bilingualism, there is a shared social awareness of the English language that manifests not alongside but within Japanese. Nobuyuki Honna (1995, pp. 57, 60) suggests that “Japan is not a society in which English plays a meaningful role as a language of international communication”, and despite—or perhaps because of—this lack of practical, daily application for many speakers, “Japanese do not hesitate to use English if the purpose is intralinguistic”. In my view, this summation does not adequately convey the magnitude nor the spectrum of different types of English that are present, to say nothing of other languages that have historically impacted and made their way into Japanese.<sup>4</sup> It may also inadvertently give the worrisome and problematic impression that such usages are a ‘contamination’ of Japanese or a ‘debasement’ of prescriptively correct English.

One comparatively straightforward variety of Japanese English is the case of loanwords which have been implemented to fill semantic gaps and describe objects or concepts that are perceived to be of external origin, e.g., ‘バター *batā* (butter)’. Such concrete borrowings, however, do not even represent a majority of foreign-derived words within the Japanese lexicon. In addition to these more purely referential words formed by “direct translation”, Jackie Hogan (2003, p. 45) categorizes six additional paradigms for the formation of English-derived vocabulary in Japanese: semantic restriction, semantic expansion, loan truncation, loan blending, foreign lexeme composites, and Japanese + foreign lexeme composites, exemplified in the following Table 2.

**Table 2.** Common Paradigms for English-Derived Vocabulary Formation in Japanese.

Rule	Derivation	Term	Meaning
Direct Translation	butter	バター ( <i>batā</i> )	butter
Semantic Restriction	instant	インスタント ( <i>insutanto</i> )	ready-to-cook foods
Semantic Expansion	up	アップ ( <i>appu</i> )	increase, intensify, improve, close-up
Loan Truncation	personal computer	パソコン ( <i>pasokon</i> )	PC, personal computer
Loan Blending	kiss + する ( <i>suru</i> ‘to do, etc.’)	キスする ( <i>kisu-suru</i> )	to kiss, kisses, etc.
Foreign Lexeme Composites	open + car	オープンカー ( <i>ōpunkā</i> )	convertible, cabriolet
Japanese + Foreign Lexeme Components	教育 ( <i>kyōiku</i> ‘education’) + mama; gorilla + 鯨 ( <i>kujira</i> ‘whale’)	教育ママ ( <i>kyōiku-mama</i> ); ゴジラ ( <i>gojira</i> )	pejorative term for a mother who doggedly pushes children to study; ‘Godzilla’

The content of this table is largely adapted from Hogan (2003), but I have also included untransliterated Japanese, as well as further examples drawn from (Tsunoda 1988) and personal observation.

Neologisms which are not found in standard English are referred to as *wasei eigo* (English made in Japan), and the distinction between these words and more conventional *gairaigo* loanwords can be difficult to discern in many cases. Further complexity is added by the fact that less assimilated words of English origin and entirely unassimilated outliers are witnessable in addition to legitimately assimilated loanwords and widely accepted pseudo-English. Moving beyond questions of etymological derivation, Laura Miller (1998, p. 135) emphasizes the important reality that, such examples “didn’t get into the Japanese language through the usual contact situation, but were calculatedly propagated in Japan”.

Calculated propagation combined with a degree of linguistic detachment from English—both in terms of syntactical dissimilarity and infrequent usage as an operative language of communication for many speakers—motivates different instances of English to function with heightened associative value. Alterity is even further heightened for less assimilated examples, and in contrast to the neat groupings presented above, in reality it is not at all simple to categorize English-derived words’ associative connotations. These associations unavoidably vary based on contextual factors and the subjective choices of individual language users. The following patterns, therefore, should be understood not as delimiting boundaries but as exemplars of flexible and overlapping archetypes.

Speakers do use borrowed English and English-derived terms in semantically concrete ways to fill perceived lexical gaps. As in many other modern languages, there is a remarkable array of English-derived technical terminology and field-specific jargon that is used to designate specific concepts or new items in specialist areas such as business and academia. These instances are reasonably straightforward, and despite being intralinguistic, their usage is comparable to code-switching practices of multilingual individuals and communities. They are routinely employed for similar interlinguistic and interpersonal purposes, such as “fitting the word to the topic”, “finding a word with [an unavailable] nuance”, and “strengthening intimacy” (Edwards 1994, p. 78; see also: Unseth 2008).

On the other hand, commentators such as Honna (1995, pp. 52–53) additionally note English that is used in less clear-cut cases for diglossic purposes of establishing “a new version of an old thing to impress that something is different between the two”. Honna cites the example of the English-derived *katakana* word ‘キッチン *kitchin* (kitchen)’ as opposed to ‘台所 *daidokoro* (kitchen)’,<sup>5</sup> and this illustrates how the borrowing goes beyond filling a lexical gap since roughly the same concept is indicated by both words. Instead, what the loan achieves by means of pseudo-code-switching is a *re-imaging* of the concept itself.

Much like previously noted patterns of Roman alphabet usage, the re-imaging of a concept in these instances purportedly relies on certain innate associations that supplementary ‘English’ vocabulary has with ‘the West’ and is bound up with historical developments related to that ideological construct. Whether written in Roman characters or *katakana*, it has been presumed that these associations are exploited in order to convey notions of modernity, trendiness, etc., that are profitable in the fields of marketing, branding, and advertising. These same contexts also give rise to extensive and creative use of bilingual word play. Yet, as Mark Rebuck (2002, pp. 58–59) points out, the emblematic use of English does not always depend on nor entail positive associations; it can operate along negative or more neutral lines, such as triggering what are essentially ethnocentric stereotypes, or simply distinguishing between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ versions of a similar concept. For example, ‘ガーデニング *gādeningu* (gardening)’ refers to the leisure activity of maintaining a Western-style garden, whereas ‘園芸 *engei* (gardening)’ calls to mind more traditional Japanese-style horticulture.

A third interrelated use for intralinguistic English is euphemism. English can be seen to “camouflage” or conversely to “embellish” aspects of socially sensitive, taboo, or more risqué topics (Miller 1998, p. 132). For example, the English-derived ‘ローン *rōn* (loan)’ does away with some of negative connotations that may accompany the term ‘借金 *shakkin* (loan, debt)’, and ‘ソーランド *sōpurando* (‘soapland’)’ masks—however transparently—what is in essence a house of prostitution (see further: Hogan 2003; Honna 1995; Miller 1998; Rebuck 2002).

Beyond lexical expansion, substitution, and euphemism, Hogan (2003, p. 45) adds two further potential functions for English-derived terminology and argues that “Unassimilated terms in particular not only convey semantico-referential meaning, but also reflect power relations between interlocutors and between cultures”. She suggests that on the level of the individual speaker, English can be made to “assert authority or status”, “to manage social distance”, and in a slightly broader sense “to inflect [speakers’] statements with subtle value judgments about the West” (Hogan 2003, pp. 44, 48). Hogan (2003, p. 57) further writes that:

The use of English-derived vocabulary allows speakers to manage personal impressions and social distance, and to talk more comfortably about taboo or intimate topics, while simultaneously expressing acceptance or rejection, approval or criticism of the West and Western cultural influences in Japan.

All of these patterns are worth bearing in mind for the relevance that intralinguistic Japanese English has to multiliteral signification bound up with Roman character and *katakana* usage.

My purpose in reviewing the connotative and emblematic functions of English in Japanese is not to support the supercilious view that many Japanese speakers “see [English] not as a communicative system which can actually be put to use but as inert knowledge to be learnt and then forgotten” (Hyde 2002, p. 16). Rather, it is to affirm observations more in line with those of Johannes Scherling (2016, p. 277) and Miller (1998, p. 135) who, respectively, propose that:

The Japanese case shows that loanwords, once incorporated into a certain language system, no longer obey the structural rules, nor share the semantic domains, of the donor language, but become entirely the property of the recipient language to be used as new language material wherever and however needed.

*Wasei eigo*’s novel and provocative blends and constructions go way beyond a simple borrowing of English and represent an imaginative syncretism of the linguistic materials at hand.

The notion of imaginative linguistic syncretism is not only more critically stimulating, it conspicuously mirrors my observations above in Section 2 regarding imaginative script-based syncretism.

#### 4. Differentiating Scripts and Depicting English

To unite the preceding two sections’ subjects, I would first acknowledge that I have not yet made a point of distinguishing between English-derived words that are presented in Roman characters and those that are presented in *katakana*. The justification behind an individual’s choice of *katakana* over Roman, or vice versa, is a vexing issue that many commentators simply pass over in silence. Others decline to engage with it fully and merely acknowledge the complexity of the enterprise, e.g., Honna (1995, p. 54), who writes that, it is “a decision whose socio-psychological nature is too complicated to go into here”. Indeed, it is impossible to produce a universally satisfactory paradigm that distills the variety of individual occurrences into a succinct generalization. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain overarching features that in turn prove beneficial to the examination of multiliteral script-based signification.

A question that lies at the crux is whether Roman characters that depict ‘English’ can or should be interpreted as equating to English and representing an authentic code-switch. Peter Backhaus (2007, p. 83) highlights an interesting aspect of the frequent employment of the alphabet for words of foreign language origin, and he points out that word spellings often emulate English spellings, regardless of a word’s actual pronunciation in spoken Japanese. For example, the spelling ‘haircut’ is consistently preferred over the theoretically more phonologically precise ‘heakatto\*’ which would be closer to a one-for-one match for the *katakana* rendering, ‘ヘアカット’. However, Backhaus (2007) also acknowledges the potential validity of arguments such as those made by Honna (1995) and Hiroko Someya (2002), that it is the *katakana* version of the word (i.e., the more faithful reflection of Japanese

pronunciation) that mentally precedes and allows for such Anglicized spellings. While a reasonable enough deduction, it presents a minor dilemma of causality, since as [Tranter \(2009\)](#) notes, in other cases the pronunciation of many English loanwords in Japanese marks them instead as “graphic loans” with pronunciations based more on spelling than on pronunciation in spoken English, e.g., ‘ラベル *raberu*’ for English ‘label’.

The situation seems only murkier if one considers the swath of representative possibilities that are facilitated by the lack of a universal standard for the Romanization of Japanese,<sup>6</sup> the possibilities for error, individual preferences, instances apparently void of discursive meaning, and additional complexities such as *furigana*.<sup>7</sup> Viewing Japanese script use as a more open-ended writing system provides a degree of resolution, and still further clarification comes in a classification formulated by John [DeFrancis \(1989\)](#); DeFrancis identifies that the Roman alphabet must be understood as having dual and overlapping scriptal capacities in Japanese. It can be used to represent indigenous or Sino-Japanese words, and in those cases it typically functions as an authentic, more phonologically faithful representation of spoken Japanese. It can alternatively operate along the same lines as Modern English as a “meaning-plus-sound” system of writing, and this latter happens especially frequently when indicating words that are of foreign, often European, language origin ([DeFrancis 1989](#), p. 200; see also [Unger 1996](#)).

In either case, English-seeming words and phrases in Japanese writing contexts are regularly better understood if they are interpreted first and foremost as Japanese, even when rendered in Roman characters and influenced by English spelling. Laura [MacGregor \(2003, p. 22\)](#) reaches a similar conclusion in her analysis of Tokyo signage, where by analyzing the various scripts that are used stylistically for foreign and indigenous/Sino-Japanese words, MacGregor determines that foreign languages function “as an extension of Japanese [...] widening an already rich language and text palette with the potential to communicate on several different levels”. Whether on a sign or in the pages of a Japanese text, English usages in either script are likely to be misinterpreted if taken as linguistic code-switches into English, rather than on their own terms as being intended for readers of Japanese and functioning from within that matrix language.

Thus, I would argue that at its core the issue of semiotically parsing Roman character use from *katakana* (with or without the involvement of English or other languages) is governed by the same socio-psychological factors that govern the uses of all the scripts in the Japanese writing system. Whereas the relationships between and uses of *kanji*, *hiragana*, and *katakana* display greater conventionalization, a larger role is likely played by interpersonal aspects and personal background in the distinctions between *katakana* and Roman character usage, particularly as the scripts possess associative links to English and other foreign languages/cultures. Nevertheless, the same semiotic processes are at work informing individual writers’ choices and readers’ perceptions.

In addition to writer selection, a text’s audience—both the anticipated audience and the actual reader—also exerts influence over script differentiation and plays a key role in the ascription of emblematic value. The predicted, presumed, and actual reception by a particular audience directs script choice and associative value, enabling auxiliary multiliteral signification. One straightforward example is that many Japanese children’s books are monoscriptally oriented toward their intended audience by being written entirely in *hiragana*, customarily the first script a child is taught to read and write.<sup>8</sup>

For a literate adult reader, the perception that a particular script usage conforms to or deviates from expected convention plays off of one’s preexisting associations in a way that calls to mind Hans Robert Jauss’s “Horizon of Expectations” and reception aesthetic (see first: [Jauss 1982](#)). Just as a reader approaches a text with a framework of cultural knowledge and textual expectations regarding genre, style, and so forth, they bring to a multiscriptal text their experience and expectations which relate to script. Manipulation of these expectations through variation draws on readers’ associations and can thereby encode supplementary metalinguistic “emotional semantic information” along with the linguistic

content transcribed in a text (Iwahara et al. 2003, *passim*; cf. Hudson and Sakakibara 2007; Kataoka 1997).

This dependence on reception goes a long way toward rationalizing many commentators' hesitancy to address the issues of emblematic script usage and multiliteral signification. Yet, at the same time, it emphasizes a prevailing virtue of specific literary analysis for such investigation. While literary study has to grapple with its own limitations and the same baseline difficulties involved with dissection of a subjective phenomenon, it has the advantage of avoiding certain potential biases from the observer effect, such as the skewed and distorted findings realized by Hogan (2003, p. 47), as survey participants may consciously and subconsciously attune their spoken and written usage to the perceived goals of a study, to the patterns of another speaker, or even to a non-native speaker's presumed level of linguistic competence (on this last point, see also: Ross and Shortreed 1990). Although a literary study presents a narrow focus and therefore demands critical restraint, the evaluation of texts which are *de facto* created, edited, and intended for readers of Japanese offers something of a controlled experiment in this regard. Grounded in specific example, what is observed in microcosm allows for more broadly applicable and informed speculation about print media's functionality and overarching trends.

### 5. Haruki Murakami's *Norurwei no mori*

Given the nature of the Japanese writing situation, there are countless literary options that would no doubt be worthy of detailed evaluation in multiliteral terms. The selection of any single writer's output has an air of arbitrariness about it. A study of celebrated writers from previous generations like Sōseki Natsume (1867–1916) and Yukio Mishima (1925–1970) or Nobel laureates Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972) and Kenzaburō Ōe (1935–) might shed light not only on a writer's individual stylistic inclinations, but also on fascinating aspects of periodization and canonization. No less, a study of a text such as Minae Mizumura (1951–)'s cross-lingual, horizontally oriented, and orthographically blended 『私小説 from left to right』 (Shishōsetsu from left to right, Mizumura 1995; English translation: *An I-Novel*, Mizumura 2021) or the work of exophonic or 'border-crossing' (越境 *ekkyō*) writers the likes of Ian Hideo Levy (1950–) or Yōko Tawada (1960–) would likely further illuminate aspects of multilingualism, transculturality, and audience perception which are pertinent to multiliteral signification.<sup>9</sup> The reasoning that prompts my analysis here of Haruki Murakami (1949–) is twofold. First, Murakami is widely read in Japan not only as a writer, but also as a translator of English fiction. His individual bilingualism and cognizance of Japan's societal awareness of English play out in his texts in ways that speak to contemporary experiential contexts through the incorporation of intralinguistic English, intertextuality, and frequently high degrees of multiliteral complexity. For example, Ezaki (2010, pp. 197–98) observes specific instances even in Murakami's nonfiction where he elects to use *katakana* for Sino-Japanese words in a "self-deprecating" way "to avoid the bookish impression" a *kanji* rendering might impart; "to create casual intimacy with the reader"; and to "[maintain] the casual tone of the text".<sup>10</sup> Choice of script in these cases reflects the associations of *katakana* with sound and of less commonly used *kanji* with societal conceptions about the extent of one's education, or poshness, etc. Second, I am motivated by the simple fact of Murakami's unprecedented international market penetration, and the accompanying accessibility this grants to the broader semiotic considerations and the global media industry implications of this article. Readers unable to work with Japanese texts in the original may nonetheless possess a familiarity with his work as published internationally in best-selling translation, and at the same time the issue of multiliteralism presents peculiar challenges for translators.

First published in 1987, 『ノルウェイの森』 (*Norurwei no mori*; *Norwegian Wood*, trans. Jay Rubin) (Murakami [1987] 1991b; 2000) is ideal in several respects as a representative study. The novel marks Murakami's "break into the mainstream" (Wray 2009, p. 340), and it is the work that greatly boosted the author's profile, launching the so-called "Murakami phenomenon" (Rubin 2002, p. 152). That said, it also embodies something of an

anomaly amongst his larger body of fiction. Murakami has stated that one of his primary intentions with the work had been “100パーセント・リアリズムへの挑戦 [an attempt at 100% realism]” (Murakami [1987] 1991b, np), and though not perhaps entirely true to life, it nevertheless provides an altogether accessible point of entry. In this interpretative assessment, I shall argue that by and large the novel’s script usage contextually and associatively reinforces its ‘realistic’ setting and characterization by echoing conventional practices. Simultaneously, however, the text also plays with perspective and stylistically cultivates estrangement through pointed instances of script and language variation that are tied up with cultural reference and irony—both in the sense of insincere tone and in the literary sense of incongruities between expectation, circumstance, and perception.

*Norurwei no mori* tells the story of Toru Watanabe, a young man who comes across as both passively apathetic and unreservedly derisive of the hypocrisy and pretense that he perceives in such group assemblies as the student protests and demonstrations at his university. He is also individualistically well-defined in terms of his literary and musical tastes. *Norurwei no mori* opens with Watanabe traveling to Germany many years after the main plot of the novel, and when he hears the Beatles’ song that lends its title to the book, he recalls the activities of his life as a student in Tokyo, and in particular his interactions with two young women, Naoko and Midori. After the sudden and unexpected suicide of Watanabe’s friend/Naoko’s boyfriend, Kizuki, at the age of seventeen, both Watanabe and Naoko find their lives and general outlooks irreparably altered.

Watanabe and Naoko come to spend time together walking the streets of Tokyo, and eventually the pair sleep together for the first and only time on the night of Naoko’s twentieth birthday. Thereafter, Naoko withdraws from school and goes to live in a secluded mental health facility. Watanabe later visits her there and meets her roommate, the middle-aged Reiko Ishida. Over the course of the narrative, Watanabe also interacts with the exceptionally charismatic Nagasawa whom he periodically accompanies to bars solely to encounter random women and engage in casual sex. Watanabe additionally meets and befriends the eccentric Midori Kobayashi, and he struggles to articulate the nature of his feelings and relationship with her until near the end of the novel when he is wrestling with the news of Naoko’s suicide.

Script variation is a reasonably prominent feature of the novel, despite the fact that usage is largely in keeping with the realistic tone and abides for the most part by normal Japanese patterns of use. I will first present accessible examples that are far from unique to the writing of Murakami, and then afterwards I will turn to the text’s more profound and layered multilateral effects.

At the Ami Hostel facility, Naoko and Reiko care for a parrot that screeches “アリガト *arigato* (thanks)”, “キチガイ *kichigai* (loony, crazy person, etc.)”, and “クソタレ *kusotare* (bastard, shithead, etc.)” (Murakami [1987] 1991b, p. 196). More sensitive words like ‘*kichigai*’ or ‘*kusotare*’ may habitually appear in *katakana*, but transcription of all the bird’s utterances completely in *katakana* helps to underscore the sound quality of the words. The parrot is merely reproducing sounds that it does not properly understand or that should not be perceived as legitimately discursive language. This type of *katakana* rendering emphasizing sound and distinction is exceedingly common in many different types of Japanese written entertainment media, appearing for example in the dialogue of non-human characters in video games or manga, or awkward Japanese spoken by a non-native speaker (see again: Hudson and Sakakibara 2007, especially p. 185).

Another example that draws on the same functionality but which inverts the principle is witnessed in a conversation that takes place between Watanabe and Midori’s father. Mr. Kobayashi is bound to his bed in the hospital, and he is unable to utter more than a few words at a time. In the following extract, he urgently attempts to communicate something to Watanabe:

「気分どうですか？」と僕は訊いてみた。

<すこし>と彼は言った。<アタマ>

「頭が少し痛むんですか？」

そうだ、というように彼は少し顔をしかめた。

「まあ手術のあとだから仕方ありませんね。僕は手術なんてしたことないから  
 というもんだかよくわからないけれど」

<キップ>と彼は言った。

「切符？なんの切符ですか？」

<ミドリ>と彼は言った。<キップ>

何のことかよくわからなかったので僕は黙っていた。彼もしばらく黙っていた。それから<タノム>と言った。「頼む」ということらしかった。彼はしっかりと目を開けてじっと僕の顔を見ていた。彼は僕に何かを伝えたがっているようだったが、その内容は僕には見当もつかなかった。

<ウエノ>と彼は言った。<ミドリ>

「上野駅ですか？」

彼は小さく背いた。

「切符・緑・頼む・上野駅」と僕はまとめてみた。でも意味はさっぱりわからなかった。 (Murakami [1987] 1991b, pp. 278–79)

In order to make script use more transparent, I offer the following reasonably literal, if also deliberately stilted, translation, with **boldface** differentiating *katakana* usage by Midori's father from *hiragana*.

"How do you feel?" I ventured to ask.

<A little> he said. <**head** [atama]>

"Does your head hurt a little?"

As if to say exactly, he screwed up his face a little.

"Well, since it's after an operation, it can't be helped. Though I've never had an operation, so I don't really understand what sort of thing it is".

<**ticket** [kippu]> he said.

Ticket? What sort of ticket is it?"

<**Midori**> he said. <**ticket**>

I didn't really understand what sort of thing it was, so I kept silent. He also kept silent for a moment. After that he said, <**Please/I'm counting on you, etc.** [tanomu]. It seemed to be "Please/I'm counting on you, etc". He opened his eyes fully and looked fixedly into my face. He seemed to be wanting to communicate something to me, but I didn't have the slightest idea about the content.

<**Ueno**> he said. <**Midori**>

"Is it Ueno Station?"

He nodded slightly.

"Ticket · Midori · Please/I'm counting on you, etc. · Ueno Station", I tried bringing it together. But, I didn't understand the meaning at all.

Throughout the novel, Midori's father is limited to extremely short, typically one-word responses. For example: "もういい *mō ii* (That's enough)", "うまい *umai* (delicious)" (Murakami [1987] 1991b, pp. 274, 278). His dialogue mostly appears in *hiragana* with very occasionally simple *kanji*. In the interaction reproduced above, however, *katakana* is employed in a way that accomplishes a specific effect. Watanabe attempts to piece together the meaning of isolated *katakana* words by asking questions and repeating ostensibly the same words back to Midori's father. Yet, when Watanabe speaks, he seeks to confirm

meaning and repeats the words in *kanji*. The distinction is subtle, but the shifting of script reflects Watanabe's personal grasp of the situation. Whereas *katakana* merely records sound, the *kanji* carry greater semantic weight. Watanabe's perspective bleeds over into the transcription of Mr. Kobayashi's reported dialogue.

This effect is one that is difficult to reproduce in a monoscriptal text. In endeavoring to produce a more fluid and readable English translation one may be tempted to render Mr. Kobayashi's text as less intelligible somehow, perhaps through use of atypical spellings, clipped words, or a similar editorial technique. This is, in fact, the way an analogous feature is dealt with by translator J. Philip Gabriel in the English version of another of Murakami's novels, *Kafka on the Shore* (*Umibe no kafuka*). In that text, the illiterate character Nakata frequently uses *katakana* where *kanji* would be expected as a way of representing Nakata's lack of total comprehension (e.g., “キンユウロン” for ‘金融論 (financial theory)’; “ブチヨウ” for ‘部長 (department head, section chief, etc.)’ (Murakami 2002, vol. 1, pp. 96–97). In the English, Gabriel gives deliberate misspellings: “theery of fine ants”, “depart mint chief”, etc. (Murakami 2005, pp. 49–50). I believe it is to Jay Rubin's credit, however, that in the English *Norwegian Wood* he avoids such stylistic instruments in the treatment of this scene with Midori's father. Rubin offers what is in my view a more authentic approximation by presenting Mr. Kobayashi's words in isolation and slightly adjusting Watanabe's responses to suit (Murakami 2000, pp. 252–53). This more accurately recreates the atmosphere and semiotic sequence of the original scene, because it is not that Mr. Kobayashi's speech is presented as garbled. Rather, it is the lack of comprehension on the part of Watanabe that prompts the use of *katakana*. This also has the side effect of visibly filtering the reader's perspective through that of Watanabe as the internal first-person narrator.

In a similar vein, character interactions, emotions, and relationships all can be seen to influence script with regard to the depiction of personal names. Murakami has admitted in interview to an early career preference for giving character names in *katakana*. He explains that:

Each word has its own image as a Chinese character. I wanted to avoid those characterizations. If I put the name in *katakana*, it's more anonymous, as you say. It's a kind of symbol. It's a sign [...] So I use *katakana* names for my characters, mostly. (Ellis and Hirabayashi 2005, p. 562)

Chiaki Takagi (2009) even goes so far as to read intense cultural symbolism into the scripts used for each character name. Takagi (2009, p. 98) writes:

*Norwegian Wood* is the first novel in which Murakami gives real names to his characters. Although Watanabe's name should be written with Kanji (Chinese characters), it is written with Katakana throughout the novel. If his Katakana name also implies his Americanized self, the fact that he is attracted to Midori is all the more symbolic. For whenever he refers to her, her name is written with Kanji. The only times it is written with Katakana is when she introduces herself to him and when she is called on by somebody else. I believe that this implies that Boku [=the narrator, i.e., Watanabe] recognizes Midori's Japaneseness. Considering that Naoko's name is written with Kanji throughout the novel, it can be contended that Boku seeks 'home' in the women he loves. Boku's repeating Midori's name at the end of the novel implies his search for home/Japaneseness.

Though intriguing, Takagi's interpretation of names and script choice is thrown into question by comparison with Murakami's other writing and by an outlier instance from *Noruruei no mori* itself.

*Noruruei no mori* may be the first novel in which Murakami gives real names to *all* of his characters, but as Kōjin Karatani (1990; English translation: Karatani 2011) stresses in a seminal consideration of Murakami's ([1979–1980] 1991a) 1973-nen no pinbōru (*Pinball*, 1973), the proper name Naoko (直子) had actually appeared in that novel first as a deeply symbolic, destabilizing exception to the general pattern of naming. Moreover, 1973-nen no pinbōru's Naoko is also a girl the narrator knew who committed suicide, setting up a

poignant intertextual association between that surreal work and *Noruwai no mori*. Takagi (2009) also overlooks one uniquely striking example in *Noruwai no mori* where the distinction between *katakana* and *kanji* seems actually to demonstrate a heightened level of intimacy between Midori and Watanabe. During an emotionally charged conversation between the pair, Midori asks Watanabe to say something nice to her, something to make her feel good. She specifically asks him to use her name, to say “ミドリ Midori”, and when he obliges, he too sounds out her name using *katakana* rather than *kanji* (Murakami [1987] 1991b, p. 334).

Another recurring technique that deserves special comment is the idiosyncratic use of *furigana*. As noted above, *furigana* is a ruby text system used in Japanese that appears above other characters as a kind of gloss. It often provides a reading or pronunciation guide for particular *kanji* that a reader may have trouble recognizing or processing. Various examples

of this standard usage style can be drawn from *Noruwai no mori* itself, for instance “<sup>すずき</sup> 鱈 *suzuki* (Japanese sea perch)” (Murakami [1987] 1991b, p. 295). The superscripted *hiragana* acts as pronunciation guide for the *kanji* below.

In contrast to such straightforward instances, there are several places in the novel

where *furigana* is used in a slightly less orthodox fashion. One finds, for example: “<sup>リンボ</sup> 辺土 *rinbo* <sup>limbo</sup> hendo(remote region)”, “<sup>シスター</sup> 修道尼 *shisutā* <sup>sister</sup> shūdōni(nun)”, and “<sup>シエスタ</sup> 午睡 *shiesutā* <sup>siesta</sup> gōsui(nap)” (Murakami [1987] 1991b, pp. 17, 29, 138). In each of these cases the superscripted *katakana* does not clarify the pronunciation of the *kanji* but instead offers a foreign loanword. This results in what is ostensibly a single written word that borrows aspects from two separate items and demands an interconnected reading and interpretation.

The feature of idiosyncratic *furigana* glosses is far from unique to Murakami, and in other forms of writing it is made to serve a variety of different functions, including translation, emphasis, and clarification of specialist terminology. In Murakami’s writing, however, I would make a case for it purposefully introducing an unreliability into the literal text. Addressing this same subject, Rebecca Suter (2008, p. 73) correspondingly argues that:

this creative use of the graphic potential of Japanese writing also adds layers of meaning to the text making it richer and more complex, while at the same time raising the reader’s awareness of the existence of different linguistic realities and the textual nature of the text itself, and also constructing a multifaceted vision of reality.

The destabilizing presentation reinforces the novel’s ironic distancing, one prominent aspect of Murakami’s style and tone more generally. In the case of *Noruwai no mori*, moreover, these qualities materialize even prior to the start of the novel proper.

The title page contains a multifaceted use of idiosyncratic *furigana* that sets the tone for the novel linguistically, referentially, and in terms of script. The dedicatory epigram

reads: “<sup>フェト</sup> 多くの祭りのために *ōku no matsuri no tame ni* (For Many Festivals)” (Murakami [1987] 1991b, np). Superficially, the French ‘*fêtes*’ that is presented as *katakana* ruby text conflicts with the *kanji* beneath it. ‘祭り *matsuri* (festival, etc.)’ is not only a commonplace word that hardly merits a pronunciation guide, but the *furigana* also superscripts *hiragana* ‘り *ri*’, a phonemic *okurigana* character that accompanies the *kanji* stem and does not merit a guide whatsoever. Instead, readers are presented with a double reading/graphic representation that goes beyond a mere guide to pronunciation. Regardless of whether or not an oral recitation of the phrase is undertaken, a reader is presented with a double graphic representation that incorporates not only aural/visual clarification, but also a fusion of sociolinguistic and associative nuances. Coupled with this and even more telling, the line is an apparent dedication to the author F. Scott Fitzgerald; it echoes the dedication that precedes *Tender is the Night*, “To Gerald and Sara: Many Fêtes” (Rubin 2002, p. 153). The ties to Fitzgerald are made even more explicit within the novel, as both Watanabe and Nagasawa share an admiration for *The Great Gatsby*, a work which Murakami himself also

translated into Japanese (Fitzgerald 2006). My purpose in highlighting this is not solely to emphasize intertextual connections between the two writers, but rather to highlight from the outset the ways in which Murakami's strategies of script use parallel his manipulation of foreign languages and cultural referents.

Likewise, the Japanese title of the novel (ノルウェイの森 *Noruei no mori*) presents analogous cross-cultural and linguistic disingenuity. In opposition to the sense from the Beatles' song lyrics, '*mori*' indicates 'wood' only in the sense of 'forest' and not of 'lumber'.<sup>11</sup> While the mistranslation does not originate with Murakami, he nonetheless declined to improve upon it despite his English proficiency and his passionate, extensive knowledge of music. This is entirely in keeping with what Daisuke Kiriya (2016, p. 115) suggests about Murakami: "through his 'non-Japanese Japanese' style as well as his frequent use of (mis)translation", Murakami "directs our attention to the interspace between texts". Before one even cracks the cover, the authenticity and reliability of text and authorial figure are called into question.

Following an examination of the apparent discrepancies between Murakami as real individual, as authorial entity, as well as the unreliable internal narrator, Hideyo Sengoku (1991, pp. 6–38) argues that the major characters of *Noruei no mori* suffer from an ill-defined yet paralyzing, language-based ailment. Sengoku writes that in spite of all his efforts, "Watanabe is unable to save this person, Naoko. The reason being that he too is also a person suffering from <sup>Americanism</sup> *language*" (Sengoku 1991, p. 30).<sup>12</sup> Sengoku even colorfully illustrates his argument with his own idiosyncratic *furigana*, pairing the *katakana* 'アメリカニズム' *amerikanizumu* (Americanism)' with the word '言葉 *kotoba* (word, language)' as in the previous quotation and elsewhere with '片仮名語 *katakanago* (*katakana* words, loan words)'. Ultimately, what Sengoku suggests is that the characters of *Noruei no mori* display a linguistic and cultural *chic*-ness that is simultaneously a *sick*-ness.<sup>13</sup>

The notion that language plays a key role in the novel's presentation of identity management is important. However, I would caution against clumsy overemphasis of Sengoku's Americanism malady. The characters do struggle with questions of self-definition and identity that arise amidst the novel's turbulent societal, political, and relational backdrops. Yet, I would argue that Murakami's literary, linguistic, and cultural borrowings are not used in an overtly exoticizing capacity. Nor are they merely an expression of *cooler-than-thou* cosmopolitanism. Borrowings, references, and allusions are often presented in a flat way, in line with the novel's pervasive ironizing.

Suter (2008, p. 9) too makes the convincing case that literary and cultural references ought hardly to be taken unironically at face value: "Murakami's references to American and European culture do have an ironic function, which is not to create a distance *from* the West but a distance *through* the West, to move away from conventional reality using foreign literature and culture for their alienating effect". I do not see it as reasonable to interpret all of Murakami's non-Japanese references as ironic, given his own declaration that one function they have is to enhance realism (Huy 2003; Japanese translation: Murakami 2012, pp. 153–78). Yet, denying the ironic qualities of many references and foreign language instances seems equally obtuse. Takagi (2010, p. 56) makes the suggestion that what Murakami presents in his early works is not the colonization nor the *Americanization* of Japan, but rather the "*Japanization* of the West", whereby the West is conceptually manufactured as an invented simulacrum "that Japan lets colonize itself".

There are two major notions to take away from Suter's and Takagi's assertions. First, it is necessary to come to terms with Murakami's repeated usage of cultural references and allusions that exhibit varying degrees of irony. He does not do so with an eye toward *othering* foreign peoples, cultures, and languages—i.e., Suter's (2008, p. 9) "distance *from* the West"—since the same variable irony applies to many of his Japanese cultural referents. Rather, Murakami exploits different cultural artifacts and foreign language fragments from within the Japanese context in disorientingly realistic and surrealistic ways, creating "distance *through* the West". As Matthew Strecher (2018, p. 258), writes "Murakami's fiction [...] is more like a series of open-ended questions, any of which could lead to multiple

answers. Without our active input—our participation in the discussion—the narrative does not come to life”. Murakami purposefully makes the stylistic choice to leave the question of how earnestly particular elements ought to be perceived open to individual reader interpretation.

Second, this same logic can be found to apply directly to the use of scripts and multiliteral signification encountered in Murakami’s texts. Suter (2008, p. 86) elaborates that:

The distancing of one’s own culture through the American/Western “Other”, in order to question one’s own cultural presuppositions and to foreground the discursive and constructed nature of individual identity and of reality itself, is directly connected to the question of the linguistic sign evoked through polygraphy, i.e., the emphasis on the opacity and arbitrariness of the sign.

In addition to being linguistic and print media tools, scripts have the ideological associative functions identified in the preceding sections. These associative functions are open to the same manipulation—sincere or ironic—as cultural referents and language transplantation or code-switching. A consequence of this is that Murakami’s use of the Roman alphabet and snippets of foreign language in *Norurwei no mori* should not simply be taken as chic cosmopolitanism. They participate in the same ironically engineered disorientation that is witnessable on the levels of allusion, theme, and motif.

With respect to Roman characters, the novel’s uses in large part conform to conventional practice. The script appears, for example, in fairly utilitarian acronyms and abbreviations: “BMW”, “FM”, “NHK”, etc. (Murakami [1987] 1991b, pp. 7, 27–28). Realistically unremarkable in most cases, even commonplace usages of this type are sporadically employed to striking effect. The car model that Kizuki asphyxiates in is an “N360”, and in the section that describes his suicide, that Roman-letter Arabic-numeral compound stands out ominously and hauntingly recurs in the passage (Murakami [1987] 1991b, pp. 38–39). Reiko also can be seen to use the Roman “OK” in more of a conversation-turning sense to acknowledge Watanabe’s request to hear the second part of her story, and then pages later she uses the *katakana* “オッケー *okkē*” in a more affirmative sense (Murakami [1987] 1991b, pp. 218, 223).

A valid attempt to isolate and interpret such minor examples in terms of their general connections to cultural spread, technology, and language influence might be made, but for my purposes here, there are more extended instances of script variation that are explicitly tied in with foreign cultures and languages that demand more detailed consideration. Multiliteral signification not only illuminates aspects of character and setting, but by challenging cultural perceptions and connections between spoken and written language, script play actualizes what Suter (2008, p. 62) proposes to be one of Murakami’s perennial themes: “foregrounding the linguistically constructed nature of reality”.

A prominent and complex example comes in the novel’s opening pages. Watanabe is sitting on an airplane that has just landed in Germany when he is spoken to by a German flight attendant. Rubin’s English translation renders the scene as follows.

Before long one of the German stewardesses approached and asked in English if I were sick.

“No”, I said, “just dizzy”.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Thanks”.

[...]

The stewardess came to check on me again. This time she sat next to me and asked if I was all right.

“I’m fine, thanks”, I said with a smile. “Just feeling kind of blue”.

“I know what you mean”, she said. “It happens to me, too, every once in a while”. She stood up and gave me a lovely smile. “Well, then, have a nice trip. *Auf Wiedersehen*”.

“*Auf Wiedersehen*”. (Murakami 2000, pp. 1–2)

While the English version presents a minor linguistic code-switch at the end that reminds the reader Watanabe is in Germany, the same interactions in the Japanese version are much more visually and linguistically disorienting.

やがてドイツ人のスチュワーデスがやってきて、気分がわるいのかと英語で訊いた。大丈夫、少し目まいがしたただけだと僕は答えた。

「本当に大丈夫？」

「大丈夫です、ありがとう」と僕は言った。

[...]

前と同じスチュワーデスがやってきて、僕の隣りに腰を下ろし、もう大丈夫かと訊ねた。

「大丈夫です、ありがとう。ちょっと哀しくなっただけだから (It's all right now, thank you. I only felt lonely, you know.)」と僕は言って微笑んだ。

「Well, I feel same way, same thing, once in a while. I know what you mean. (そういうこと私にもときどきありますよ。よくわかります)」彼女はそう言って首を振り、席からたちあがってとても素敵な笑顔を僕に向けてくれた。「I hope you'll have a nice trip. *Auf Wiedersehen*! (よい御旅行を。さようなら)」

「*Auf Wiedersehen*!」と僕も言った。 (Murakami [1987] 1991b, pp. 7–8)

Before long a **German stewardess** came around and asked in English if I were sick. I answered that I just got a little dizzy.

“Are you really alright?”

“I am alright, thanks”. I said.

[...]

The same **stewardess** as before came around, sat down next to me, and asked again if I was alright.

“I am alright, thanks. I just got a little sad. (*It's all right now, thank you. I only felt lonely, you know.*)”, I said and smiled.

“Well, I feel same way, same thing, once in a while. I know what you mean. (I have that very thing sometimes too. I understand well), she said that, shook her head, stood up from the seat, and turned a very lovely smile toward me. “I hope you'll have a nice trip. *Auf Wiedersehen*! (Have a good trip. Good-bye)”

“*Auf Wiedersehen*”, I also said.<sup>14</sup>

In the first case, typical Japanese is used to transcribe all the narrativized speech and direct dialogue for a conversation that the reader is explicitly told takes place in English. When the flight attendant returns and asks Watanabe again if he is alright, there is a clear shift. Watanabe's half of the dialogue appears in Japanese with parenthetical Roman-letter English translations, and the woman's speech is presented in reverse order. Within just a few lines, the linguistic variation and script transplantation achieve several different aesthetic effects.

On the surface, the Roman characters and use of English and German help to establish the conversation's setting. The differing translation directions of the parenthetical glosses characterize Watanabe as a speaker of Japanese and the woman as an English-speaking German, and yet that reading is incomplete in its assessment of these switches. If merely a means of setting and character establishment through reflection of perceived linguistic

and script norms, then surely the same patterns would have been applied to the initial interaction as well. As it stands, the shift from typical Japanese direct speech to cross-lingual glossed speech is the first of many disorienting instances.

Despite its outward appearance as English with a borrowed German greeting, the exchange ought not to be interpreted as authentic linguistic code-switches that function outwith the Japanese text. Rather, the interaction is an artistic, intralinguistic use of English in Japanese, and one that is revealing in terms of narrative level. As readers of contemporary Japanese—if not also statistically first-language Japanese speakers—the vast majority of the text’s audience possess at least an elementary ability to process this brief English exchange. In processing the English as part of the Japanese text, one encounters not simple repetition but minor instability in the sense-for-sense translations. Dynamic translation of this variety is not employed consistently, and it does not come across in this case as stylishly modern so much as distancing.

With regard to the woman’s slightly stilted English line, “I feel same way, same thing”, there are several possible readings. It could simply be an incidental, irregular usage on the part of Murakami as the author. The intranarrative conversation is not disrupted by the abnormality, nor is the feature duplicated in the parenthetical Japanese. Other plausible readings emerge, however, if we keep in mind [Strecher’s \(2014, pp. 29–30\)](#) rejoinder to readers of Murakami: “language does not exist in a vacuum; it is rather, dependent on two fundamental factors: experience and culture”. Beyond an accidental error made by Murakami, the line could no less feasibly be interpreted as any or all of the following: a characterizing element of this specific character’s English, a mishearing/misremembering on the part of Watanabe as narrator, or even a ploy to make the line accessible and less alienating to a Japanese readership.

From the very beginning of the novel, the language and script use in the text is purposefully revealed to the reader as unstable and openly inviting interpretation. It is itself a semiotically contributive element of the unfolding narrative. Subjective impressions and experiences are incorporated so that they are inextricable from the ‘objective’ recording of occurrences and depictions of dialogue. In the above instance, the multiplicity and deliberate mismatching introduce misgivings about the reliability of the written word to faithfully convey Watanabe’s individual experience into the narrative and literal text.

Interpretative difficulties regarding language are further compounded when attention is drawn to Watanabe’s German studies. As a young man, he remarks time and again throughout the main plot of the book on his studies of the language and his reading of Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*). Yet, if the opening scene taking place in Germany where Watanabe uses English is any indication, then these linguistic endeavors have apparently not come to full fruition ([Sengoku 1991, p. 35](#)). If not wholly Sengoku’s Americanism, then this thematic observation at least plays along with other aspects of the novel and partially situates *Noruei no mori* with respect to the notion of language’s inherent fallibility. Nevertheless, I would caution against forming a hasty, one-dimensional reading of this variety. For, another superficially similar shift featuring an American cultural reference reveals itself to operate in a distinct manner.

While drinking together in a bar, Watanabe and Midori have a conversation with entirely distinct aesthetic results to those seen in the previous instance. Midori ruminates on how pleasant it would be if Watanabe had been her first kiss, and then prompts him with the following.

「ねえ、どうしてそんなにぼんやりしているの？もう一度訊くけど」

「たぶん世界にまだうまく馴染めてないんだよ」と僕は少し考えてから言った。「ここがなんだか本当の世界じゃないような気がするんだ。人々もまわりの風景もなんだか本当じゃないみたいに思える」

緑はカウンターに片肘をついて僕の顔を見つめた。「ジム・モリソンの歌にたしかそういうのあったわよね」

「People are strange when you are a stranger」

「ピース」と緑は言った。

「ピース」と僕も言った。(Murakami [1987] 1991b, p. 246)

“Hey, why are you spacing out like that? I’m asking again”.

“Probably I’m not used to the world yet, you know”. I said after I thought for a bit. “I get the feeling somehow that this place is not the real world. The people and the surrounding scenery like somehow seem not real”.

Midori rested one elbow on the **counter** and stared at my face. “I’m pretty sure there was something like that in a **Jim Morrison** song, right?”

“*People are strange when you are a stranger*”

“**Peace**”, said Midori.

“**Peace**”, I also said.

In certain ways, this instance parallels the previous example. It features literal transplantation tied to an apparent linguistic code-switch. A simplistic interpretation would be to read Murakami and his characters in light of their cosmopolitan knowledgeability of American pop culture as represented by the untranslated, untransliterated fidelity to the original song. However, as a single element of the Japanese passage, the usage does not come across as simply cool and fashionable. It is not even technically faithful to the song’s lyrics—“People are strange when *you’re* a stranger”.<sup>15</sup>

Tongue is instead firmly in cheek for both Murakami and Watanabe. The shift further emphasizes the underlying irony and self-deprecatory nature of the entire scene. A *katakana* rendering of the lyric along the lines of ‘ピープルアーストレンジ *pīpuru ā sutorenji*’ might theoretically have sufficed to convey the spoken conversation faithfully, but the Roman character match for the false linguistic code-switch plays along visually with an ironically deployed cultural referent. Emblematic aspects of script, language, and allusion combine, allowing Murakami and his characters sarcastically to quash the sincere tone of the conversation and abruptly withdraw from the serious emotional tenor that is building in the scene. The conversation then returns to *katakana* and more commonplace loanword English, as the pair offer one another the playfully self-mocking and deflated “ピース *pīsu* (peace)”. Utterly drained of earnestness and imbued with an altered, ironic significance, the same *katakana* ‘peace’ is used once by Midori prior to this scene and appears again twice later on in the text (Murakami [1987] 1991b, pp. 95, 262, 277).

Which of the various English and English-derived words of this passage ought to be regarded as markedly exhibiting linguistic or script variation and which not? Are they to be viewed as assimilated and intralinguistic English, or as English that is clearly marked and external to Japanese? From a purely functional standpoint, hard and fast dividing lines cannot be drawn that account for the different perceptions of readers with unique perspectives arising from their own linguistic proficiencies, referential knowledge, and cultural/individual backgrounds.

In summary, what this assessment of *Noruei no mori* primarily demonstrates is that Murakami’s uses of script and language both echo and accentuate the thematic and stylistic aspects of his text. The medium of script plays into the text’s deceptive ‘realism’ and largely abides by norms of convention, but it also stimulates feelings of disorientation and estrangement. Murakami occasionally employs strategic script switches that rely on readers’ associations and contribute to the establishment of setting and characterization. These are tied to specific contexts, and they also relate to the presentation and perceptions of narratorial perspective. At specific junctures, a reader’s conventional approach to the text is further disrupted by transplanted Roman-letter, *faux* code-switches that semiotically reemphasize ironic cultural referents and literary allusions.

## 6. Concluding Perspective

This article has put forward a basic theoretical schematic and a specific literary investigation of the ways in which conformity to Japanese readers’ conventional and semiotic

expectations causes the emblematic of script and language choice either to be made prominent or diminished. Through shared acknowledgment of plurality, script and language variation come to be imbued with auxiliary emblematic values with the potential to impact reader perceptions of the transcribed linguistic content. In the specific case of Murakami's *Noruwai no mori*, it was demonstrated how multiliteral signification conveys and contributes to paralinguistic aspects of interpersonal discourse, such as narratorial perspective, degree of comprehension, and ironic tone. By the same token, these observations point the way toward a broader understanding of the semiotic potential for creative multiple script and language use. Upon perception of meaningful differentiation and mediation, a reader ascribes auxiliary emblematic values to different appearances of script and language in given contexts. On the one hand, the orientation of these values is tied to overarching linguistic, historical, and sociocultural associations. On the other, it also relates to components of the specific text, as well as to more subjective elements of experiential background and familiarity/alterity. Individual readers are obliged to wrestle with all of these cultural, contextual, and subjective features, and so too are students of language, literature, and culture if their aim is to unpack the semiotic values a given audience attaches to the interrelated media substructures of script selection and language variation.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In this article, I use the terms “Roman alphabet (letters)” and “Roman characters” interchangeably as umbrella terms to denote all manner of different Roman script implementations. See further pp. 3–4 and Section 3 on the categorizational difficulties surrounding uses of the Roman script.
- <sup>2</sup> In this translation and transliteration, **boldface** represents *kanji*, *italics* = *katakana*, and normal typeface = *hiragana*.
- <sup>3</sup> Written more than two decades ago, J. Marshall Unger's (2001) assessment of functional digraphia in Japan is already significantly outdated in many respects. Rather than simply being obsolete, however, it fascinatingly captures *in media* aspects of Japanese language Roman character input strategies at an earlier stage of sociolinguistic development.
- <sup>4</sup> It is impossible to consider the development of Japanese writing practices, scripts, and vocabulary without noting prolonged and extensive influences from Chinese, nor can the numerous instances from other languages (French, German, Portuguese, etc.) that have more recently entered the Japanese lexicon be discounted.
- <sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this very example of *kitchin* vs. *daidokoro* features as a narrative element in another short story by Haruki Murakami: 『象の消滅』 (*Zō no shōmetsu*; *The Elephant Vanishes*) contained in (Murakami 1991c, p. 51).
- <sup>6</sup> In addition to the modified Hepburn Romanization I employ here which is modeled on English phonology and is likely most familiar to non-readers of Japanese, two notable other varieties of Romanization exist: *kunrei-shiki* (Cabinet Style) which predominates in elementary school instruction, and the now less frequently encountered *nihon-shiki* (Japanese Style) which closely maps Japanese *kana*.
- <sup>7</sup> *Furigana* is ruby text which appears above and glosses other characters. It often functions as a reading aid or pronunciation guide but can also be used in compelling aesthetic and idiosyncratic ways. The issue and specific instances of *furigana* are treated more fully in Section 5.
- <sup>8</sup> As an aside, I would reiterate that this formative association in turn contributes to the impressions of the script which were noted above. As Hudson and Sakakibara (2007, p. 189) write in regard to atypical *kana* usage, “The curved *hiragana* is generally regarded as giving soft, amiable, and/or childlike impressions, while the angular *katakana* is regarded as giving tough, distant, and/or modern impressions”.

- <sup>9</sup> Indeed, Levy (2001, pp. 34–35) reflects explicitly on cultural and scriptal multiplicity, writing that “I began to see a characteristic of the language of ‘here’ that is absent from the languages of the continents and that I didn’t notice while I reflected upon Japanese from afar. Simply put, it is the discovery that the written languages of the continents that declare themselves to be ‘multi-ethnic’—English that is written all in alphabets and Chinese that is written all in simplified Chinese-characters—look ‘mono’, and on the contrary the language of this island country that has been believed by the natives and the foreigners alike to be only understandable by the members of the ‘mono-ethnic’ group inherently has a very complex richness far from any ‘monotony’”. This English translation is borrowed from Keijirō Suga (2007, p. 32).
- <sup>10</sup> Specifically, the examples cited are of “シコー *shikō* (taste, preference)” and “モホー *mohō* (imitation, copying)” in place of “嗜好” and “模倣”, found in (Murakami and Anzai 1986, pp. 152, 262).
- <sup>11</sup> One might reasonably expect ‘木材 *mokuzai* (timber)’, if not simply a transplantation: ‘ウッド *uddo* (wood)’. The anomaly is effectively illustrated by a glossary entry in (Miyoshi and Harootunian 1989). Published prior to Rubin’s mass-market English language version and roughly contemporaneously with Birnbaum’s 1989 domestic translation, Miyoshi and Harootunian’s volume either deliberately strove to reproduce Murakami’s title faithfully or neglected to pick up on the Beatles reference despite explicit and recurrent mention throughout the novel. They list Murakami as: “Writer, concerned with the spirit of contemporary Japanese youth whose *Forests of Norway* [sic] was a runaway best-seller” (Miyoshi and Harootunian 1989, p. 292).
- <sup>12</sup> “ワタナベ君にこの人物直子を救うことはできない。なぜなら、かれもまた <sup>アメリカニズム</sup> 言葉に病む人物だからだ”. The English translations of Sengoku (1991) provided here are my own.
- <sup>13</sup> Sengoku’s wordplay is lost in English, as he uses “小粋 <sup>シック</sup> *shikku* (chic)” and “病気 <sup>シック</sup> *shikku* (sick)” as homophones.
- <sup>14</sup> As above, **boldface** represents English or German-derived words written in *katakana*. *Italic type* indicates Roman characters.
- <sup>15</sup> N.b. The quote *is* in fact amended this way in Rubin’s English translation (Murakami 2000, p. 223).

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