GENERAL SEMANTICS AND
THE REVISION OF ROMAJI
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From Grand Forks, North Dakota, a traveler can proceed west on US Highway 2 and in about 210 miles be in Minot, North Dakota. A tourist traveling on Japan Railways in Tokyo can take the Green Line clockwise around Tokyo and visit any of these stations in the Tokyo area: Tokyo, Harajuku, Shinjuku, or Ueno. I predict that either of these statements could be validated by experience should a traveler wish to act on them. The statements can be verified by consulting official and current maps before venturing forth, and by the experience of actually traveling to these places. Of course, I am predicting success in these travel ventures effective June 2, 2007, the day I write this. Since the world is always changing, I understand that earthquakes and other changes could modify this terrain so that the travel routes predicted here would have to be modified. Had I asserted that the stops in the Tokyo area were counterclockwise, your official maps and your experience would prove me wrong. If I had contended that Minot was 80 miles north of Grand Forks, my claim would conflict with official maps and your experience. If you chose to follow my inaccurate travel directions, however, it would be at your expense, risk, and time. You would not get to where you wanted to go, because my verbal maps would not correlate with the territories as you would find them.

Just as travel can be predicted and mapped, so other aspects of human life can be predicted as well. We can make maps to guide us for “travel” into numerous other undertakings: for example, financial, athletic, culinary, medical, religious, political, and linguistic. In this study, the learning of language is the challenge and applying general semantics principles to language learning is the method for improving the current language learning map. The maps to be considered here are

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popularly used international travel guides and basic texts on Japanese that use the
Romanized alphabet or *romaji* to help the traveler learn and use Japanese when
traveling in Japan. To the extent that the romaji in these texts is precise and not
confusing, you will probably be able to function well as a traveler using Japanese.
Where it is not precise, it may be confusing, and you will find the maps of the
language text useless, at best, possibly counterproductive and sometimes even
costly. The inaccurate Japanese usage may place intercultural communicators in
verbal quandaries and prevent them from adjusting meaningfully to the messages
they wish to understand. (Johnson, 1946)

Hayakawa (1968) emphasized the importance of “learning alternative symbol
systems to English or any natural language to counteract linguistic imperialism.”
While encouraging in general the study of mathematical and other symbol systems,
Hayakawa especially stressed to native English speakers the value of learning
natural languages other than English. He urged English speakers to learn a foreign
language like Japanese or French. Likewise, he recommended that native speakers
of Japanese or French study English or German or a language other than their
native one. Hayakawa prescribed such learning to dispel the linguistic imperialism
that a single language holds over the speaker of a single native language. In fact,
he would say that language is created by and subsequently creates language users.
Along with Hayakawa, Richard Dettering (1970), echoing Ralph Ross in his
*Symbols and Civilization* (1963) and Suzanne Langer in *Philosophy in a New Key*
(1942), advised us that humans create symbols and are created in turn by symbols.
If our symbols are incorrect or faulty, we inherit the faultiness of the symbolic
transformation. (Langer, 1942; Fiordo, 1977; Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003)

One European linguist (Gutenberg, 2005) explains that hearing a word
pronounced correctly in a foreign language significantly contributes to learning
that language efficiently and accurately. If we hear the word pronounced
imprecise or incorrectly, we may imitate the mispronunciation, which can lead
to misunderstanding the word. When we misunderstand the word, we then have to
remedy this by learning the proper pronunciation. The delay becomes linguistically
and motivationally counterproductive to learning foreign languages. It forces us
into a continuous process of relearning the language so that we can communicate
meaningfully in it.

Romaji is respected as the *sine qua non* for most Westerners wanting to learn
Japanese for pragmatic use. As a Westerner who considers romaji enormously
useful, I also respect it enough to see the weaknesses. I would urge professional
linguists using romaji for beginning instruction in Japanese to reform it so that its
utility increases beyond its already admirable level. I offer here my suggestions for
revising and reforming the phonetic and semantic aspects of romaji and demonstrate
readily correctable difficulties that surface with Japanese language learners.

This inquiry into general semantics and romaji primarily considers the focus on language learning and its critical role in human interaction. I speak of general semantics with humility, for I would not claim expertise in this respectable discipline. Hayakawa (1979, p. xiii) dramatically illustrates his own modesty when he recounts a meeting with Alfred Korzybski following a summer session in general semantics in Chicago. After a cordial greeting, Korzybski declared in a most unconventional manner: “So you are Hayakawa! You have been lecturing on general semantics at the University of Michigan and you don’t know a goddam thing about it!” Hayakawa remarks that he interpreted the greeting with warmth and took no offense. Besides, he was in no position to disagree with the seminal thinker. Both laughed and got on “good terms at once.” To be direct, although general semantics provides us with workable concepts from the first hour of study, it has deep and expansive reserves of wisdom that can help even the most learned of scholars. Furthermore, a dialectical tension exists, stemming perhaps from the works of Bois (1966; 1969) that contributes to the animation and growth of general semantics and protects it from fixation and stagnation.

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Those who have studied general semantics reiterate that the word is not the thing, the symbol is not the thing symbolized, and the map is not the territory. (Korzybski, 2000, p. 750; Hayakawa, 1972, p. 29; Hayakawa, 1959, p. 209) In this study, I focus on a selection of romaji language learning shortcomings, and use the general semantics premises of the map-territory analogy and the word not being the thing symbolized to correct the shortcomings I have identified. A map misused can be counterproductive. As Rapoport (1950) so eloquently elucidates: “No map contains all the information about the territory it represents.” In situations requiring effective communication, as when we use romaji while traveling, valid and reliable maps “bring about effective communication.” While principles of effective communication might be learned from “principles of sound map-making,” communication difficulties might be extrapolated from the difficulties of cartography. Since maps are both abstractions and symbol systems, maps, like words, can be media of communication. (pp. 85-86) As a map of Japanese, a romaji text might wisely be checked for aspects of a sound map: namely, its measured accuracy, “how the map lies” (i.e., how much it differs from the objective territory), its degree of obsolescence, the differences in what it features, and its account of its
Seeing romaji as a map of Japanese, I conclude that it only needs revision: not a radical makeover. Romaji as a system is functional but could operate more efficiently with some minor, albeit fundamental, modifications. I aim to improve its accuracy, help it “lie” less, make it more current with usage, highlight the aspects most trying to the novice Japanese speaker, and overall to reflect more consistently how Japanese is currently used. I view the effort to revise romaji advancing semantic accuracy and communication fidelity. Linguistic functioning in romaji depends in part, at least, on linguistic functioning in general and on general semantics functioning in particular with respect to a language other than our native English. General semantics, being, perhaps, the most workable and well-developed of meaning theories, could provide a solid, scientific orientation for advancing the accurate learning of a foreign language and the prevention of the faulty learning of a foreign language. General semantics can become an indispensable resource for those promoting fidelity in language learning and in improving romaji in particular. Unfortunately, the current use of romaji has a number of grammatical, phonetic, and semantic distractions that obscure true Japanese. With an adjustment that is comparatively effortless, romaji can make gigantic semantic strides. (Gibson, 2007, pp. 125-126)

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Hayakawa (1968; 1979, p. 3) recommended an extensional orientation and underscored that the ways of science are the ways of sanity. He encouraged his listeners “not merely to listen to what one says but to watch what one does.” He endorsed an observational, scientific, extensional, or fact-minded orientation in matters semantic while appreciating, as the literature professor he was, the complexity and richness of language. Like Riffaterre (1978, pp. 1-5), Hayakawa respected the complexity of natural language, including its specialized literary and poetic functions which may represent nothing more than its textual self. Respecting the complexity and beauty of Japanese, we must stay close in romaji to Japanese usage or flounder in an intensional world of words relating to words only and not to language in action – a world in which we use language not with communicative effect but in a manner akin to psittacosis. We must also respect a perspective from Lee (1949, pp. xvii-xviii) that a “language has within it the means of correction”; that is, if a “set of terms implies antiquated notions, it is perfectly possible to rephrase or recombine them to imply a new set of notions” or “terms
which embody the desired formulations” since a “language is subject to this kind of instrumental adaptability.” Lee guides us insightfully through adaptability into the advancement of contemporary romaji.

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Noting possible confusion about “intensional orientation by verbal definition” and “extensional orientation by facts,” to reduce the confusion, Korzybski (2000, p. xliiv) asserts: “‘Pure extension is humanly impossible; ‘pure’ intension is possible, and is often found in hospitals for ‘mentally’ ill and in some chairs of ‘philosophy.’” While we have to have a symbol uniting us with a verifiable reality for extension to occur, we can live in a fantasy or a pathological world constructed entirely – or purely - of symbols alone (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003, p. 34). As Bois (1966, p. 30) suggests, general semantics deals with the “world of happenings-meanings” as well as with the world of semantic reactions. Bois (1969, p. 159) argues for a broad application of principles from general semantics and not just the “rather simplistic ‘extensional’ approach.” The semantic concern here is with what Morris would call the designative, word-object, or word-referent relationship (Fiordo, 1977, p. 57), especially the denotative or empirical signification (p. 58).

With respect to extensional and intensional orientations, like a slinky toy, some of us are predominantly extensional and others predominantly intensional. Korzybski grounds us in the extensional orientation preferably, while recognizing that symbols are inescapable. He is not alone in this preference for an empirical orientation. Morris (1964; Fiordo, 1977) favored scientific empiricism. Morris encouraged taking scientific verifiability as far as possible in reporting on matters (and on matter) that can be verified through the senses. Hayakawa (1972, pp. 35-36) stressed the extensional orientation also in his account of verifiability via science, as well as stressing behavior over words. Morris (1973) stressed the preeminence of the deed. Morris and Hayakawa normally employed different verbal expressions for similar phenomena.

The extensional orientation of science has the potential to reduce unsanity and insanity while leading increasingly to sanity verified through the senses and extensions of the senses. (Pula, p. xx; Hayakawa, 1972, p. 35) Rapoport (1950) adds that we should evaluate an assertion’s truth value by measuring how much we are able to predict based on it. The criterion of predictability from general semantics applies. The assertions we make about the world are our maps of the world. Rather than asking about whether something is true, it might be more functional to ask: “How good is your map?” The answer follows: “a map is the better the more
you can predict about the territory by means of it.” Consequently, to “speak the truth means to predict well.” In other words, “Good prophets have good maps.” (p. 161) An implicit complement to the criterion of predictability is the principle of falsifiability. A scientific orientation to experience requires that the statement of an idea must allow for that idea to be “disproved by counterevidence.” The principle of falsifiability does not mean the idea will be disproved; it only means that the idea could be disproved “if certain kinds of facts were to be discovered.” A scientific prediction, in short, must be specific enough to expose the prediction to the “possibility of disconfirmation.” A scientific prediction must predict both what will happen and what will not happen (Wade & Tavris, 1993, p. 43).

THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE AND ROMAJI

Written Japanese uses kanji, hiragana, and katakana scripts. (Akiyama & Akiyama, 1998) Kanji includes drawn symbols or characters adopted from Chinese, which represent meaning and sound and may resemble the words they represent. One kanji symbol may have more than one reading or pronunciation and more than one meaning. Most Japanese speakers learn at least 2,000 basic kanji by the end of high school. The basic 2,000 kanji characters are used in newspapers, magazines, and textbooks. Kanji characters can be simple, having one or two strokes, or complicated, having many strokes. The hiragana and katakana are types of alphabet with 46 sounds representing syllables, not words as with kanji. While hiragana “spells” words native to Japanese like yokoso or “welcome,” katakana is used for words that have foreign origins like poketto or “pocket.” (p. 377)

As a service to non-native language speakers who cannot read the official written form of Japanese, instructional sources use romaji to symbolize spoken Japanese. Dr. Charles Hepburn, an American missionary to Japan, developed romaji, which is the rendition of Japanese sounds in Roman letters. Romaji means literally “Roman letters.” Through romaji, Japanese could be studied and learned without having to master kanji, hiragana, and katakana (De Mente, 1988, pp. 3-4). The service romaji renders to those who do not know formal and official Japanese is effective and honorable. The society of Hyojun Romaji Kai (1986), which contributes to the development of romaji, is helping to reform this already remarkable symbol system. We might also look to romaji organizations on the Web, such as romaji.org or romaji.com (2 June 07), to observe romaji in action.

While the linguistic effort of romaji is commendable, it creates significant proactive language learning problems. General semantics principles will guide us in suggesting workable ways to modify and improve romaji. In this paper, I hope to suggest a friendlier phonetic and semantic approach to romaji, to propose a practical revision of romaji, and to show English speakers learning romaji how to

**THE ECSTASY AND AGONY OF ROMAJI**

As a language especially challenging to English speakers, Japanese poses numerous opportunities for misunderstanding between native Japanese speakers and native English speakers using romaji. When English speakers visit Japan and use the literal romaji as presented in popular language texts, the difficulties that follow reflect the fact that linguists often indulge several risky assumptions about romaji phonetic and semantic usage. Native Japanese speakers would have to be familiar with the mispronunciation of Japanese that typically results from using the current romaji transcription. As someone who has traveled to Japan repeatedly, I can say with confidence that the societal courtesy of the Japanese people might compel them to apologize for not understanding the romaji-based Japanese of the Anglophone. Anglophones would be confused as well since they may believe they are speaking Japanese accurately when in fact they are speaking only a subset of Japanese as transcribed through romaji in a tolerable manner. One might make the erroneous assumption romaji accurately reflects the territory of the Japanese language. Unfortunately, this is only partially valid, like a map of Japan that has islands and cities placed correctly with respect to direction but incorrectly with respect to distance.

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Since many Japanese words use the silent “u” and “i” in romaji, the chance of mispronouncing them is high. The more that are mispronounced the lower will be the fidelity to actual Japanese and the higher will be the misunderstanding. It may take some reassessment for romaji speakers to realize they cause the majority of their miscommunication problems. Furthermore, semantic errors occur through an ignorance of the abstraction and non-allness principles in relation to romaji (Korzybski, p. 68; Lee, 1941, p. 63): that is, that not all has been presented about Japanese in texts using romaji. Both native Japanese and romaji speakers may be frustrated by the confusion that can result from ignorance of abstraction and non-allness in contemporary romaji.
Of course, to study Japanese in Japan with certified teachers of Japanese would be optimal. To study Japanese with formal texts in Japanese that use the International Phonetic Alpha (IPA) to clarify pronunciation would be wise and beneficial also. Neither may be readily available, however, and popular texts on traveler’s Japanese may be the only sources readily available. As beneficial as romaji is overall, it predictably creates semantic confusion by the way it uses specific Roman alphabet letters. Preventing and minimizing misunderstandings in Japanese is necessary to meet daily and immediate needs when traveling in Japan or when addressing native Japanese speakers anywhere. As it stands, romaji falls short of fulfilling its linguistic and communicative ideal, potential, and mission; it also creates proactive learning problems (Wade & Tavris, 1993, p. 264) when Anglophones (and others) realize they are mispronouncing Japanese enough to need remedial work; and, it does not improve upon itself, despite the fact that Japan embodies a culture that routinely strives toward perfection.

Thus, on top of learning Japanese incorrectly, additional energy and motivation is required to relearn the challenging sequences of sound from Japanese words, phrases, and sentences. A false sense of linguistic security prevails when students study Japanese through sources that use romaji without careful qualification. The romaji maps may not match the territory of Japanese. The romaji maps can be improved upon and should be. The Japanese tour guide might assert validly that Tokyo is northeast of Nagasaki or that Tokyo is far more than 200 kilometers northeast of Nagasaki but would not in good faith declare that Nagasaki is 100 kilometers east of Tokyo unless making an attempt at humor. If they had studied with Korzybski or Hayakawa, tour guides would predictably have higher fidelity with the geographical facts. Likewise with romaji, native Japanese speakers would not teach Japanese with romaji distortions; rather, they would correct the error created by the use of the Romanized alphabet or correct on the spot the misleading romaji. By revising and reforming romaji but moderately, the tourist would learn with higher fidelity despite the inherent incapacity for high fidelity to be attained in natural language (Longabaugh, 1957, p. 5).

PHONOETIC AND SEMANTIC PROBLEMS WITH ROMAJI

Richards (1936) proposed that rhetoric might be beneficially conceived as the study of misunderstanding and its remedies. Richards’ notion of rhetoric overlaps respectably with comprehension aspects of general semantics and resembles the themes covered in the titles of Hayakawa’s (1962) The Use and Misuse of Language and Johnson’s (1946) People in Quandaries. To illustrate the grounds for semantic confusion and general misunderstanding in romaji, consider the two Roman alphabet letters, mentioned earlier: the letters “i” and “u.”
Since romaji becomes its own pronunciation key, as distinct from, say, the IPA pronunciation key, ambiguity and arbitrariness are present to a degree that can lead to communication problems – problems that the revision of romaji can reduce, if not eliminate. De Mente (1988, p. 11) makes the worthwhile point that Japanese has many words in romaji which include the $u$ and $i$ vowels even though they “are virtually silent when pronounced in ordinary speech.” His solution is to indicate these silent letters with phonetic spellings in his text. He does this with precision and rigor and should be applauded. In one case, De Mente (p. 92) translates “Why are you crying?” into romaji: “Doshite naite imasu ka?” Rather than leave it to the neophyte speaker of Japanese to pronounce the sentence as “Doh-shee-tay na-eetay e-mahss-oo kah,” De Mente adds his own phonetic transcription to provide more accurate pronunciation: Doh-ssh-tay na-eetay e-mahss kah.” Note that his phonetic transcription has replaced the “shee” in “doshite” with a mere “ssh” and eliminates the “oo” in “imasu.” Most other romaji guides do not offer this linguistic kindness and the resulting mispronunciations lead to semantic (especially, word-object) confusion.

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While several other Japanese linguistic conventions can be expressed in romaji, I will mention only a few that can add to semantic confusion and errors: that is, the words employed can be unintelligible or represent different words. For example, novice speakers of Japanese often find the use of particles such as “ga,” “wa,” “o,” “no,” “ni,” “de,” and others challenging (Hyojun Romaki Kai, 2000, pp. 16-17). Politeness levels or levels of language that reflect interpersonal relationships in society are requirements in Japanese. While other languages have formal distinctions, such as the Spanish “usted” and “tu” for formal and informal uses of the second person singular pronoun “you,” Japanese has more formal levels of distinction than most languages and Japanese people take these different linguistic designations very seriously (Akiyama & Akiyama, 1990, p. 5): for example, depending on one’s gender or level of formality, the pronoun “you” might translate in Japanese to “anata” for the polite level, “kimi” for men speaking on the plain level, and “omae” for men speaking on the rough level (Kamiya, 2005, p.2). The Japanese equivalent of the English copula of the verb “to be” comes at the end of a sentence and has plain and polite grammatical forms: “da” being the plain form and “desu” being the polite form. Past tense for the Japanese copula is given by “datta” for “da” and by “deshita” for “desu” (Kamiya, 2005, pp. 2-3, & 19). Japanese does not use grammatical forms to distinguish singular from plural, for
the context signals number. Japanese also uses a subject-object-verb syntactic order. This means “I am going shopping” gets expressed as “I shopping am going” (De Mente, 1988, p. 9). The macon (or bar above a vowel) lengthens the vowel and transforms one word into another. For example, obasan means “aunt.” When a macon is added above the first “a,” the word becomes obāsan (with the “ā” sound drawn out) and refers to “grandmother.” Likewise, biru means “building”; but bīru, with a bar above the “i,” means “beer.” Similarly, a double consonant in romaji is pronounced differently from a single consonant and may be used to change a word entirely (Akiyama & Akiyama, 1998, p. 4; De Mente, p. 11). Many other complications exist in Japanese.

The romaji word does not always correlate with the sound of the Japanese word, and so may not always correctly represent the same referent or thing; the romaji map is not always the Japanese map. Subsequently, the word might not have the same signification and significance (Morris, 1964; Fiordo, 1977) as the same Japanese word written in hiragana or katakana. Across the US and Canada, for instance, a popular Japanese dish is written in English, with romaji, as sukiyaki. Consequently, Anglophones see the “u” and pronounce this word as “soo-kee-ya-kee.” In Japanese the dish is pronounced “skee-ya-kee,” because the “u” is silent in this case. A native Japanese speaker might be politely confused when this word is mispronounced by an English speaker. After hearing it mispronounced several times, of course, the native Japanese speaker may adjust to the mispronunciation. The reformed romaji would use skiyaki. The “u” is also silent in the romaji “Ogenki desu ka” — “How are you?” — (“des ka,” not “des-oo ka”) and in the romaji “Ohayou gozaimasu” — “Good morning” — (“goh-zah-ee-mahs,” not “goh-zah-ee-mahs-oo”) (Akiyama & Akiyama, 1998, pp. 3 & 5). The proposed modified romaji would be “Ogenki des ka.” Yet, the “u” is pronounced at the end of some words. “Kinniku” or “muscle” is pronounced “kee-nee-koo.” And, the “i” is pronounced at the end of some words. “Maki” or “roll” is pronounced “mah-kee” (Barron’s, 1990, pp. 22 & 25).

Romaji also includes an “i” in words when this sound is silent. Since romaji is a fairly arbitrary symbol system, the inclusion of the silent “u” and “i” becomes problematic as well as unnecessary. The rule reported in Barron’s (p. 3) is that the “u” and “i” are sometimes not pronounced; the silencing of the “u” and “i,” however, “usually occurs between voiceless consonants (p, t, k, ch, f, h, s, sh) or at the end of a word following a voiceless consonant.” We find this silent sound in the romaji word tabemashita which means “I ate.” The word is pronounced in Japanese as “tah-beh-mahsh-tah.” The word as written in romaji might be mispronounced as “tah-beh-mah-shhee-tah.” To a native Japanese speaker, this pronunciation may not make complete sense. The reformed romaji word would be tabemashta. This
pronunciation would likely come closer to actual Japanese and would more likely be comprehended by a native speaker of Japanese. Even the very formal use of the first person singular in Japanese can cause problems. The polite form for “I” is *watashi*. The very formal Japanese word for “I” is *watakushi*. Although *watashi* is more commonly heard in conversational Japanese in Japan, the Westerner visiting Japan and guided by popular and beginning texts on Japanese using romaji might use the very formal *watakushi*, which might appear to the novice student of Japanese as “wah-tah-koo-shee” (Kamiya, 2005, p. 2). When the Westerner mispronounces the word by sounding the “u,” rather than correctly saying “wah-tahk-shee,” the native Japanese speaker is naturally confused. Misunderstanding prevails. *Watakshi* would replace the currently used romaji *watakushi*. Finally, *wakarimasu* is the much needed word in romaji for “I understand” (DeMente, 1988, p. 225). To repeatedly say incorrectly “wah-kah-ree-mah-soo” can distract and baffle Japanese speakers. The reformed romaji spelling for *wakarimasu* would be *wakarimas*, which would lead Westerners to pronounce the word properly as “wah-kah-ree-mahss.”

Linguistically, the rules for using a silent “i” or “u” become enormously complicated in a typical conversational exchange. Many words have this silent feature. While the native speaker of Japanese is distracted by the novice who mispronounces Japanese systematically, the novice speaker is baffled by the failure of the native Japanese speaker to understand what the novice believes to be carefully articulated Japanese. Not knowing which vowels remain silent puts the novice at a serious disadvantage in conversation. The arbitrariness of this rule exacerbates the native English speaker’s struggles with Japanese – a language that, in addition to other difficulties and challenges, is not Indo-European. The Japanese speaker hearing it mispronounced might not recognize the word at all and respectfully apologize for not knowing what the Anglophone is saying. A semantic failure has likely occurred. The mispronounced word may not be recognized. The referent is not clear. Meaning is lost. The map does not fit the territory. Misinformation substitutes for information. Miscommunication replaces communication. Representing such words in romaji without the “u” or “i” would alleviate a great deal of confusion.

CLOSING REMARKS

If we continue to use romaji in its current phonetic form, we will probably continue to violate spoken Japanese enough to perpetuate communication disorders. We violate expectations in language habits and human affairs (Lee, 1941), verbal and nonverbal violations some communication scholars study in Expectancy Violation Theory. (West & Turner, 2003, p.140; Burgoon & Hale, 1988) If the
driver guidelines used in the United States to ensure safety on the highways had the same discrepancies with fact that many romaji guides display, we would routinely see accidents on our roads. Another problem surrounding the misuse of romaji falls under Uncertainty Reduction Theory. (Berger, 1997) Native Japanese speakers might distance themselves from a foreign person who misuses Japanese but engage with a foreign person who speaks it in an understandable manner. Uncertainty reduction theory explains the avoidance and approach behavior by observing that high “levels of uncertainty seem to create distance” while “reduced uncertainty tends to bring people together.” (Littlejohn, 2005, p. 145) In short, if we can reduce the uncertainty of our communications, we can close the distance between ourselves and others.

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The linguist Gutenberg (2005) warns us about travelers’ texts in foreign languages, and advises caution on the selection of the text to avoid learning “rubbish.” As noted above, while romaji is a most helpful transliteration system, several features need revision. The limitation addressed in this paper applies to phonetic imprecision that might lead to semantic problems. Romaji is like a lovely fabric with minor flaws, but remains a workable and commendable linguistic tapestry. The goal here is to suggest improvements to increase its fidelity with Japanese, to have the romaji map fit Japanese as accurately as possible so that an extensional orientation toward official Japanese may outweigh an intensional orientation of an imprecise romaji alphabet.

Using varied terms, Hayakawa (1972), Korzybski (2000), and Morris (1964) all caution us on the descriptive and evaluative uses of language, as well as the inferences drawn between the two. Applying Hayakawa’s (1972) terminology to this study of romaji and its limitations, we might observe that when a report is neither accurate nor clear, drawing inferences from it may increase risks relevant to that subject matter. Romaji spelling may mislead the neophyte learner of Japanese but be used nonetheless, out of general ignorance of the Japanese language. When unskilled language users make inferences about romaji transcription, faulty inferences are likely to result. The faulty inferences may lead the novice to incorrectly judge the romaji as highly accurate, or even one with Japanese as spoken. Much knowledge of Japanese is required to adjust to romaji’s spelling rules on silent letters, as well as other romaji diacritical marks and linguistic customs. The novice speaker of Japanese faces an overwhelming number of grammatical, regional, and contextual aspects of this fine language that they must adjust to.
This paper advocates increasing the ease and efficiency of that adjustment through a revised and reformed romaji, under the general semantics principle that the linguistic map should render the territory with the highest fidelity possible.

References


www.romaji.org
www.romaji.com