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***the phenomenon of voice***

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Traditionally, the well-heeled Japanese woman uses a melodic, high-pitched voice when speaking in public. Whereas men are expected to use deeper, more gruff, vocal ranges, women's use of this high and often syrupy tone conveys an aura of courtesy and cultivation that signifies femininity and awareness of a woman's role within society. Even today, the use of this tone-of-voice is *de rigueur* in certain business settings, such as dealing with customers or speaking to strangers on the phone. Although it may make the speaker seem dollish and childlike to western ears, most Japanese men and women still seem to find this sing-song inflection comforting, if not appealing. Public announcements and advertising tend to be spoken in this voice, while hostesses, matrons and shop girls almost invariably use this nearly falsetto tone in their place of work. At home or amongst friends, however, women in Japan will use a speaking voice that is one or two octaves deeper. Japanese women are not born with peeping voices; they simply choose the tone of voice they believe will be most effective and flattering for the situation at hand.

The use of tone is just one of the many differences in how Japanese men and women use the language that they share. Even the vocabulary is often different. For example, when speaking of themselves in the first person, men will use the word *watashi*, but would never use the word *atashi*, which is reserved for women. Men generally use the word *mizu* when ordering water in a restaurant, whereas women tend to say *ohiya*. These differences are so well codified that women are said to communicate using *onnakotoba* (roughly speaking „woman's speech“) - which is a more courteous and formal than the "male" form of Japanese – even when talking amongst themselves. Yet, although it may be one of the most striking example of gender-differentiation in language, Japanese is certainly not the only one. In many languages, such as, for example, Hebrew, men and women pronounce different vowel endings for otherwise gender-neutral words, while the English-language phrase "speak like a lady" reflects the culture's expectations that women should express themselves in a politer, more cultivated form than men.

While gender is often a basis for the distinctive usage of language, it certainly isn't the only one. Anyone traveling through England will notice that the different classes and regions have different vocabularies and vocal colorings for the same linguistic message. Differences can be socially based; this is certainly true in Japan as well. For example, the Japanologist Andrew Horvat notes the *Yakuza* cultivate an almost Spanish-sounding rolling r, while elderly persons will refer to themselves as *washi* when using the first person. What this points to is how context and tone are exceptionally important for transmitting what needs to be said. In fact, the usage of *onnakotoba* is not always gender-based. When men want to communicate a tone of gentility, they will use phrases taken from "woman's speech"; while the new generation of female newscasters finds it appropriate to use a deeper voice and more "masculine" vocabulary. Thus, when needing to convey gravity, integrity or cultivation, men and women use those linguistic nuances that are fitting for the message they want to transmit. Usage and meaning aren't written in stone; making language work means striking the right tone.

Consider how visual language - which we choose to define here as a coherent system of visual forms which does not refer directly to ordinary language - must communicate its message. In contrast to Japanese, which enjoys an established set of symbols possessing a baseline or "riverbed" of agreed-upon meanings that help guide its interpretation in use, a visual language is not endowed with a canon of interpretation that defines the meanings implied by its forms. Certainly, there are some obvious examples of commonly understood visual systems based upon non-linguistic symbolism such as the tri-color traffic light, but it is already been debated as to whether this specific example represents either a language or a universal sign to begin with. Absent the sort of commonly accepted framework for interpretation (which determines that *this* sign implies this family of meanings; while *that* sign implies another) which all ordinary languages possess, the quality of visual tone, as well as the nuance in manipulating form, becomes decisive for visual languages.

What further differentiates visual languages from ordinary languages is that they are constructed systems, which is to say that someone invented them. Of course, we are always inventing systems; this seems to be something we humans are programmed to do. But what makes a system a language, much less a visual one? Language is a coherent system that uses a repertoire of forms to convey messages or meanings. All languages require a catalog of forms and a set of rules, which is called syntax, for their combination. Some languages are conventionally referential, like, for example, Japanese, where *watashi* refers by convention to the (male) speaker in first person. This language, of course, is referential yet unconsciously conventional, as it is difficult to determine *who* has decided that *watashi* would ultimately mean. Vilém Flusser offers modern dance as an example of a language that is unconventional and non-referential: the movements of the body represent feelings and sentiments, but the dancer and the viewer share no expressed convention which would designate what these movements mean. Certainly, the viewer can perceive or feel the emotions involved, and the dancer must consciously make rules that proscribe which motions must proceed or follow all other movements in the piece. Thus, while dance demonstrates a conscious and coherent syntax of movement, it offers no conventionally communicable significance: the choreographed movements don't refer directly to anything at all.

Design is the art of working with consciously unconventional formal systems. The system is conscious, in that the rules of form and combination are intentionally devised; it is unconventional because the forms with which a designer works signify nothing in their own right. One might suppose that a designer working with type or images is working with conventionally symbolic materials, but it is important to remember that the manipulation of the meanings encrypted within the raw content is outside of the scope of the design project itself. Consider further that languages have different types of correspondence between their repertoire of forms and the meanings that these forms convey. Languages such as mathematics have a highly explicit correspondence between symbolic form and signified meaning and are said to be *denoting* languages. Ordinary languages, while having a high correspondence between form and meaning, involve themselves with implication, context and tone and are therefore a mixed breed of connotation and denotation. A visual language such as dance is almost entirely *connotative*, in that the meanings that it expresses can only be implicitly interpreted out of its formal movements. Much like dance, the visual language of the designer refers to nothing directly; it is entirely connotative. As a means of expression, it can only aspire to syntactical coherence and expressive effect. Design offers only two avenues for articulation: the systematic of formal composition (i.e. syntax) and the nuance of expression that can be wrought out of form within the bounds of its own syntactic system.

The syntax of a language can be structured, yet it cannot convey meaning in and of itself. As a visual language is a consciously created systematic, designers have two possibilities for acquiring syntax for their work. They can use an existing syntax of forms, one that has developed by their colleagues or one that has been passed down by tradition. Or, they can invent one for themselves.

Yet, while the creation of new syntax and new languages are the sign of an original mind and an invaluable component of a progressive design, in the sort of connotative visual language that designers work, defining the formal structure is only a part of task. Regardless whether the syntax is proprietary or cribbed from others, the designer must be able make it "speak". For example, while the mastery of syntax and key is necessary for the Jazz musician to improvise, the tone quality and the emotive intensity of the playing is what we enjoy. And while grammar and vocabulary are the structure which a Japanese woman uses to speak, the interplay of words with the tone fall of the voice – her ability to "play" the language – is what comes across. Like musicians and oriental ladies, designers engage in a game of presentation (much as a performance is presented to the audience) and reception. (for example, how the listener interprets the piece that is being presented). Presentation – that is, the sending of messages – depends upon their mastery of syntax in relationship to form; without this mastery there is no coherence, and nonsense results. But what the user perceives is first the *tone* of the work, or, how the syntactical system is "played". All languages, visual or otherwise, are instruments of communication. In order to produce an eloquent and evocative visual whole designers must not only know their instrument and what it can do. They must compose form and syntax with feeling, and develop an intensely personal voice that can be modulated into precise and pertinent tones.