

# THE LANGUAGE OF MOBILE PHONE NOVELS: JAPANESE YOUTH, MEDIA LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICE<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

*Keitai shousetsu* (mobile phone novels) are a variety of amateur fiction written mainly by young women that has gained popularity in Japan since 2000. These novels are read and written on mobile phones and resemble text messages, utilizing affective visual elements which are not part of conventional orthographies, such as smileys (emoticons) and symbols. Through providing supplementary paralinguistic information with symbols and non-standard script uses, *keitai shousetsu* authors can exploit written language to express youth colloquial spoken styles. This paper explores unusual orthographical features found in *keitai shousetsu*, focusing on emoticons, symbols, non-standard punctuation and unconventional script choice and size, resulting in a novel which is appealing and easily accessible to young people. As a text about youth experiences authored by youth for other youth, *keitai shousetsu* point the way to a better understanding of prevalent youth communicative and cultural practices and values in Japan.

## **Introduction**

Known as *keitai shousetsu* (携帯小説 or ケータイ小説), mobile phone novels are typed using the mobile phone's keypad (or a computer) and can be uploaded to portals such as the website Magic iLand<sup>2</sup> and each short chapter, generally two or three screens, accessed via mobile phone. There are also pay sites which require readers to subscribe. On either kind, readers can leave messages for the writer. The majority of authors and readers are young female amateurs in their teens and early twenties. These *keitai shousetsu* are written in a variety of oral-based youth language strongly influenced by conventions of computer-

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<sup>2</sup> <<http://ip.tosp.co.jp/>>

mediated communication (CMC), an umbrella term that includes short message service, e-mail, chat, Bulletin Board System (BBS) and instant messaging (IM). There have been numerous studies on Japanese youth language (Yonekawa 1996; Katou 2005; Yamaguchi 2007) and many on CMC across various countries (Herring 1996; Ling 2005 on SMS; Hard af Segerstad 2005; Nishimura 2003; Crystal 2006, 2008; Baron 1998, 2000, 2003). The former of these studies generally concluded that youth language favoured intimacy and novelty, while the latter found that CMC reflected features of both speech and writing.

The question then presents itself as to how two very different media –a novel and a mobile phone- with different conventions and expectations can be combined, and in what ways. The novel suggests a certain quality of writing and structure, while mobile phones are for sending brief and scratchy messages which are highly associated with oral language. This paper has sought to investigate the nature of *keitai shousetsu* and its uncertain standing on the oral-literate continuum. The study has aimed to discover whether ideas of the novel are carried through, resulting in a text which resembles conventional novel writing, or whether the influence of the mobile phone medium is greater, and why.

This paper analyses the language of *keitai shousetsu* as a mix of (youth, informal) spoken and written language. The study explores which features of each are present, to what degree and to what purpose they may be used for. I venture further to argue that this language use is highly appropriate. By comparing *keitai shousetsu* with similar media (manga, magazines and light novels), both common features and sites of deviation appear. The hypothesis is that although still be informal, the act of writing a novel requires a slightly different style than writing an SMS even if the medium is the same, and it seems reasonable that *keitai shousetsu* would have more in common with the light novel and manga than it does with SMS.

### Source of Data

The source of data for this study were five *keitai shousetsu* which had been turned into print format during 2006-7, their most intense period of popularity. While they are also available online,<sup>3</sup> published versions were selected to test the durability of unconventional features. A

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<sup>3</sup> *Aitsura Dake no Ohimesama!?:*

<[http://ip.tosp.co.jp/BK/TosBK100.asp?I=drop\\_honey&BookId=3&SPA=200](http://ip.tosp.co.jp/BK/TosBK100.asp?I=drop_honey&BookId=3&SPA=200)>

*Katayoku no Hitomi:* <[http://ip.tosp.co.jp/bk/TosBk100.asp?I=TIFFANY\\_N&BookId=1](http://ip.tosp.co.jp/bk/TosBk100.asp?I=TIFFANY_N&BookId=1)>

*Mata Aitakute:* <<http://ip.tosp.co.jp/BK/TosBK100.asp?I=mataaitakute&P=0>>

certain amount of deviance from the standard is now accepted in CMC but it would be highly unusual in a print novel. If unconventional features such as emoticons survived publication, they must be integral to *keitai shousetsu*. While there were some small differences, when compared to the original online versions, published versions were found to be similar in most regards and thus I refer to the published editions.

The five novels selected represent the two most common genres as identified by Honda (2008), the true story, often fictionalized (*riaru-kei*) and the romantic comedy. *Dear Friends* by Yoshi and *Mata Aitakute (I Want To See You Again)* by SINKA are *riaru-kei* as they are partly or wholly based on real events: the preface to *Mata Aitakute* states that it is based on the author's experiences, while *Dear Friends* was based on information the author Yoshi was sent by a young woman. I tentatively group the other three novels, *Aitsura Dake no Ohimesama!?* (*A Princess Just For Those Guys!?*) by Yui, *Katayoku no Hitomi (One-Winged Hitomi)* by Nanase and *Sensei wa Ore no Mono (Natsu, You Are Mine)* by Mie as romantic comedies, although *Katayoku no Hitomi* is more serious than the other two. The distinction is rather artificial as love is a major theme of all the stories. Nevertheless, the main theme of the latter three is romance; the stories themselves are fictional and they are much lighter in tone.

### Script Choice

Four scripts are commonly used in Japan: *kanji*, *hiragana*, *katakana* and *romaji*. *Kanji* are borrowed Chinese characters used to write nouns and verb stems, whereas *hiragana* and *katakana* both reflect phonology. *Hiragana* combine with *kanji* to form words where *kanji* reflects lexical morphemes and *hiragana* the grammatical morphemes. *Katakana* are used to transcribe foreign words, onomatopoeia, or for emphasis. Transcribed words must often undergo phonological change such as the insertion of epenthetic vowels and substitution of native phonemes for sounds not present in the Japanese system. *Romaji* (Roman letters) are used to transcribe Japanese words but are also used to write English without phonological adaptation.

Roman orthographies use italics, bolding, underlining and capital letters for emphasis.

However, these tactics are less successful in Japanese script, and existing conventions cannot be used on mobile phones due to technological limitations. Therefore, young people have had

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*Sensei wa Ore no Mono*: <<http://tosp.co.jp/BK/TosBK100.asp?i=sensei0001&BookId=1>>  
*Dear Friends* is not available online.

to find new strategies to embellish their writing. *Katakana*, one of the four scripts used in Japan, is one such method. Compared the other scripts, *katakana* is spiky and harsh (to demonstrate the difference, the word *keitai* ケータイ was given in *katakana* in the introduction; in *hiragana* it would be けいたい). According to Tranter, *katakana* is perceived as 'modern' and is preferred by young people, whereas older people tend to prefer *kanji* (2008:135). Therefore, greater use of *katakana* would be expected in youth media. Kataoka writes that "paralinguistic manipulations through choice and alternation of scripts are devices to evoke certain images, users, and genres; they thus serve as an indexical strategy for representing "voices" and identities of the writer" (2003b:5); *katakana* is thus suitable for expressing a youth identity.

An immediately noticeable use of *katakana* was for names: in three of the five *keitai shousetsu* in this study, names were written in *katakana*. Although typing the name out in *katakana* is longer than using *kanji*, it simplifies the reading process considerably – the combinations of *kanji* used for Japanese names usually have multiple readings and create difficulties even for native speakers. Small characters (*furigana*) can be added at the top of the *kanji* to indicate the reading, but as this is difficult on a mobile phone it is simply easier to leave off with *kanji* altogether. This usage was also found in other books aimed at youth. Another strategy I have noted in some *keitai shousetsu* was to provide the reading in brackets next to the *kanji*.

*Katakana* are used for emphasis in the same way as English italics. Nishimura (2003) found that this use of *katakana* was similar to the use of the asterisk on BBS (e.g. you've \*got\* to be kidding), a remnant of days when italics were not supported by many browsers. To give a native word *katakana* bestows it a strong emotional punch because it is unconventional. In many cases only part of the word was written in the *katakana* and the rest in *hiragana*. *Katakana* is used for elements that carry lexical content (the part that would be written in *kanji* were they being used). *Hiragana* have only grammatical meaning, so it is less important for them to be stressed. In cases of extreme emotion, the entire word was sometimes written in *katakana*.

(1) あの男 ちよームカツクー!!!

*ano otoko chou mukatsukuu!!!*

"That guy is SOOOO annoying!!!" (*Katayoku no Hitomi*:115)

## Small Characters

Standard *kanji* and *kana* are the same size, but Japanese keyboards also allow the input of half-size characters. あ would thus become あ. Half-size characters conventionally represent phonological changes, so that き *ki* becomes きゃ *kya* (palatalization) and ばか *baka* becomes ばっか *bakka* (gemination). These small characters do not change the meaning but emphasise the colloquial nature. They were used frequently in *keitai shousetsu* to reflect mimic conversation, as in this example:

(2) そっかあ、そーだよねっ

*sokkaa, soo da yo ne*

“Reeeeeally? I guess that’s so.” (*Katayoku no Hitomi*:190)

Small っ *tsu*, called *sokuon* in Japanese is as a moraic consonant and is pronounced long. *Sokkaa* should be *soo ka*, but gemination allows two syllables to be combined colloquially for emphasis, and is common in spoken language. One common example is *bakkari* instead of *bakari*, 'just.' Final *tsu* is pronounced very short and clipped. It is not generally used word-finally in writing but is common in manga. This usage is supposed to give the dialogue the flow of real spoken conversation with informal non-standard pronunciation. *Sokuon* is used in some other varieties of light novel writing, such as Yoshimoto Banana’s *Kitchen*, a popular work of contemporary fiction published in 1988, suggesting that *keitai shousetsu* merely exaggerate a tendency that has long been found in other media.

## Unconventional Orthographies

Written language has less recourse to paralinguistic information than oral language, which can provide nuance with tone, stress and volume. It is that lack that non-standard orthographies attempt to remedy. Adolescents, the main practitioners of unconventional typographies “seek, invent and add symbols that give their written messages the expressive nuances and pragmatic cues that characterize their oral conversations” (Caron & Caronia 2007:190). This results in a rich, personalized text which suits the playful nature of youth communication and reconstitutes lost paralinguistic information. Frehner (2008:104) also notes the role of graphological features in expressing suprasegmental information, and argues that these strategies “rather than reflecting impoverished or simplified communication,

demonstrate the ability of users to adapt the computer medium to their expressive needs." In his research on informal letter writing, Kataoka comments that young women use "a distinctive graphic code of pictorial signs and unconventional punctuation that signals, in part, solidarity and bonding" (2003a:119). Following these researchers I focus on the non-conventional orthographic strategies utilized in *keitai shousetsu*, arguing that they result in an oral-written hybrid that reflects youth linguistic creativity; is entertaining to read; and creates intimacy through signalling in-group identity

*Keitai shousetsu* were found to share orthographic conventions, such as emoticons and multiple punctuation, with e-mail, forum postings and IM as well as text messaging, therefore this section will also draw from research on other technologically-mediated communication. Studies such as Thurlow (2003) on SMS, Werry (1996) on IRC, Nishimura (2003) on BBS and Baron (1998, 2000) on e-mail have all found that non-standard symbols are present in technologically-mediated communication and that despite differences (e.g. synchrony/asynchrony), there is remarkable similarity across the different media. I describe, with reference to those four media, the unconventional deployment of three elements: multiple scripts, emoticons and creative punctuation, and how their use creates the *keitai shousetsu* feel that mimics conversation as well as providing advantages unique to the written medium.

## **Emoticons**

Emoticons, small symbols such as the ubiquitous smiley :) which represent the users' facial expression, gesture or mood, are the one of the most talked-about features of technologically-mediated communication. Despite this, Ling (2005:343) found that only 6% of messages included emoticons. Thurlow (2003:7) also reported that emoticons were rarely used, but this is not the situation in Japan, where they are enormously popular in SMS and *keitai* e-mail. The Japanese mobile phone company SoftBank boasts that its handsets feature hundreds of different emoticons.<sup>4</sup> According to Matsuda (2003:36), emoticons are used to make messages cute and to relay emotional cues that cannot be conveyed by text only. Kataoka writes that emoticons "elaborate on subtle emotional shades contingent to the narrated states and events" (2003a:130). They are a way to reconstitute extralinguistic cues

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<sup>4</sup> <<http://mb.softbank.jp/mb/service/3G/mail/index.html#pictgram>>

and help to clarify meaning (Hard af Segerstad 2005:314). Miyake (2006:20) outlines three kinds of emoticons in SMS: *kao-moji*, *emoji* and *kakko-moji*.

*Emoji* are pictographs. They are not used in *keitai shousetsu*, most likely due to display issues, with the exception of the music note ♪, which is very common, and occasionally hearts or stars. Although it is usually categorized as a symbol Nishimura (2003) identifies it as a punctuation mark. There is value to this judgment as other punctuation usually drops when ♪ is used. The symbol ♪ expresses playfulness and a musical, upbeat tone of voice. It accompanies descriptions of sound, such as a mobile phone ringing, but it also pairs with dialogue. In fact, it can be dialogue by itself, or appear as part of the narrator's thought process when they think of something pleasant, as in (3).

(3) *dakko shi ni iko ♪*

I'm gonna go hug her ♪ (*Sensei wa Ore no Mono*:18)

*Kao-moji* are the equivalent of Western emoticons. In the West emoticons such as :) or :( are written vertically, but in Japanese they are horizontal. Japanese mobile phones are loaded with many *kao-moji*, some of which are quite complex, but there was only one example of *kao-moji* in the *keitai shousetsu* studied, and that was in a quoting of an SMS.

(4) *daijoubu! hima da yo ( ^ O ^ ) /*

It's okay! I'm free ☺ (*Katayoku no Hitomi*:55)

As *kao-moji* take up more space and stand out more than other emoticons, it is difficult to insert them seamlessly into the text.

*Kakko-moji* is the final kind of emoticon identified by Miyake and Nishimura: a single *kanji* enclosed in brackets, indicating an action. Werry also found similar conventions used in IRC, such as \*shakes hand\* (1996:60). It is unusual for *kanji* to be used in isolation, but because they are ideographic they are easily understood. *Kakko-moji* have the advantage, then, of expressing meaning quickly and simply without typing out the entire word as in English CMC. Nishimura (2003) gives a list of thirteen *kakko-moji*, but the same diversity was not found in *keitai shousetsu*. *Kakko-moji* were limited and came mostly from the same novel. The use *kakko-moji* seems to be highly idiosyncratic.

(5) *maa, jiman no imouto desu kara* (笑)

"Well, since she's my precious little sister. \*grin\*" (*Katayoku no Hitomi*:18)

*Kakko-moji* could appear in either dialogue or narration, and were used by both male and female characters. Honda (2008:61) attributed their appearance merely to the fact that the phone had the function and so the writers made use of it. However, I believe they are a deliberate addition, chosen because they add to the tone of the utterance by allowing the writer to provide supplemental emotional information. They also give the text a casual, accessible feel which reflects SMS or blogging more than novel writing.

### Unconventional Punctuation

Crystal (2006:37) reports that among the kinds of paralanguage found in English CMC are extended vowels (represented by a dash), multiple punctuation and emoticons. Baron notes that informal e-mail utilizes informal punctuation such as exclamation points, trailing dots and sentence-final dashes with high frequency (2000:193). Punctuation is particularly important in expressing intonation. In studying Japanese unconventional punctuation, I follow Kataoka's study based on Japanese handbooks, which outlines the following punctuation as conventional: 。（full stop）, 、（comma）, 「」（single quotation marks）, 『』（double quotation markers）, 々（*kanji* repetition symbol）, ・（Japanese semicolon）, and —（dash）, with ?（question mark）, !（exclamation mark）and . . .（ellipsis）the same as English (2003b:5)

The dash — is conventionally used to represent long vowels in *katakana* (ex. オーストラリア *oosutoraria* 'Australia'), however in *keitai shousetsu* it was also used with *hiragana*.

(6) どーぞー

*doozoo*

"Come in!" (*Aitsura Dake no Ohimesama!*?:156)

Example (12) represents two unconventional uses. Long vowels in *hiragana* words are written with *hiragana*, so it should be written どうぞ. Secondly, the second vowel is not long

at all, but reflects an informal, drawn-out pronunciation. Werry (1996:57) reported a similar usage in English IRC, where reduplicated letters are used to signify expressive intonation.

The tilde was frequently used. It also represents a drawn-out vowel, but differs from the dash by indicating a sing-song intonation.

(7) *yuu cha~n*

Yu~u. (*Mata Aitakute*:142)

### Other Uses

Although the question mark is conventional, it is not strictly necessary since Japanese has an interrogative particle *ka*. *Ka* is often dropped in conversation since rising intonation is enough to signal a question. The *ka*-dropping tendency was reflected in *keitai shousetsu* and the question mark thus appeared with greater frequency to disambiguate questions. Question marks were generally favoured over *ka* although they reappeared in dialogue using polite language, indexing greater formality. There were also incidences where both *ka* and the question mark appeared despite the redundancy. This confirmed Honda's (2008:61) remark that question marks appear in sentences that are not technically questions, but represent a slight uncertainty on the narrator's part (see example 8). The same goes for the exclamation mark, as there is an exclamatory particle *yo*. The symbols "?" and "!" are very common in manga and informal writing and often appear together as "!?".

*Dakuten*, a diacritic which represents voicing (e.g. the unvoiced consonant しや *sha* becomes voiced じゃ *ja* with *dakuten*) was sometimes appended to vowels and the syllabic nasal *n*: い゛ , え゛ , あ゛ and ん゛ . This does not seem to be common even in informal writing and was not reported in Nishimura's study. Vowels and nasals are already voiced so there is no need for any additional marking. It is used for emphasis: in the above examples *dakuten* indicated a very short, emphatic pronunciation with an element of surprise and paired with phrases that express that surprise such as *maji* 'really.'

The equal sign was also used creatively.

(8) *oya ga inai = ie ni futarikiri = chotto yabai?*

My parents are out = the two of us alone = kinda dangerous? (*Aitsura Dake no Ohimesama!?:55*)

A final usage, also reported by Nishimura, was the insertion of parenthetical comments.

(9) —*soshite (baka hentai) futari wa katte na mousou wo hajimeta*—

And then we two (stupid perverts) began making wild stuff up randomly. (*Aitsura Dake no Ohimesama!?:120*)

(10) *to, ikioiyoku futon kara deyou to shita. (doko iku nen)*

Then, I made to get out of bed with some energy (where am I going) (*Sensei wa Ore no Mono:11*)

Nishimura argues that parenthetical asides imitate Japanese comedic dialogues such as *manzai*, where one partner gives a scathing response to the other's silly statement, with the *keitai shousetsu* author taking on both roles. This use is supposed to make CMC messages enjoyable to read. (9) would be a good example of this. While Nishimura's theory is certainly plausible, in the cases noted above, it seems parenthetical statements are being used to reflect the narrator's thoughts or commentary on an action taking place. A similar use is seen in manga, where a handwritten comment often appears at the side of the speech bubble expressing the character's opinion on the dialogue.

## Conclusion

The use of unconventional graphemes in *keitai shousetsu* shows the willingness of young writers to embrace the orthographic resources of their language. Japanese youth ornament their texts with symbols to create interest and to replicate the playful feel of spoken conversation. Without being restrained by ideas about 'proper' literature, *keitai shousetsu* authors produce texts that resonate with readers. With paralanguage restored, *keitai shousetsu* straddle the boundary between oral and written language, using tactics of written language (symbols) to reproduce spoken features such as intonation and drawing on a long history of female creative literate practice, from the initial use of *hiragana* by women during the Heian

Period, the trend for writing cute, deformed characters ('kitten writing', Yamane 1989), letter writing using emotive symbols (Kataoka 2003), girls' write-in magazines (Miller 2004) and *purikura*, which comes from the term *photo club*, referring to pictures taken in a booth which can then be decorated and written on (Miller 2005). It allows writers to express their linguistic identity through orthography (Jaffe 2000:504) and readers to see themselves reflected back.

It was found that the romantic comedy stories used more non-conventional features than the real-life stories, and that in particular *Dear Friends* was very standardized; like because Yoshi is significantly older than the rest of the writers. Examples of the non-standard features, in particular emoticons, were found in other *riaru-kei* stories, such as Rei's *Daisuki Yatta Ya De*.<sup>5</sup> This lends weight to Hayamizu's argument that although Yoshi provided the initial template for *keitai shousetsu*, subsequent developments can be attributed to female writers (2008:114). In *Deep Love*, the first acknowledged *keitai shousetsu*, there are no emoticons; they have been added into following works by the young people this culture belongs to.

There are some limitations with the data which must be acknowledged. Firstly, it is impossible to tell whether a given *keitai shousetsu* is actually written with a mobile phone or on a computer unless the author states so, as Nanase does. It is easy to imagine that with the full keyboard, unlimited space and facility of typing offered by computers, a PC *keitai shousetsu* could be considerably more complex. It would have been desirable to be able compare 'computer' *keitai shousetsu* and mobile *keitai shousetsu*. Secondly, published versions have undergone at least some minor editing, the most obvious change being the deletion of long line breaks, which may have resulted in the loss or addition of certain features. Thirdly, while for an introductory study a small sample was adequate, a more detailed study would need to draw on a much larger pool of works as not all genres are represented here.<sup>6</sup> Here I have attempted a linguistic analysis of one subset of *keitai shousetsu* writing. Subsequent studies could examine *keitai shousetsu* in comparison with other young adult literature, differences in the texts produced across age, gender or platform, or focus on the other features in *keitai shousetsu* websites such as forums and spinoff television dramas. *Keitai shousetsu* offer a fertile field for researchers in various fields

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<sup>5</sup> <http://tosp.co.jp/BK/TosBK100.asp?I=rei1002sayaka&BookId=1>.

<sup>6</sup> See <<http://jp.tosp.co.jp/p.asp?I=MAHOBOOK&guid=on>> for a list of genres.

interested in youth, literature and technology in Japan, and a valuable peek into the culture of Japanese youth.

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