The transcription of personal names: the Japanese passport

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Abstract

An important matter of language policy today, affecting thousands of individuals around the world on a daily basis, is the roman transcription of personal names in identity documents. Yet, despite a half-century of effort by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to standardize travel documents, state authorities often issue passports with improper and contradictory roman spellings The modern Japanese passport is notably bad, but such problems face international travellers from Chinese, Arab, and other cultural areas. The documentation and verification of personal names is an important feature of international policing, banking, and general commerce; and linguists must help craft language policy which informs the documentary records of people and their personal names.

Keywords: language policy, Japanese passport, names, document standards, roman transcription

1. Documentary names

One of the most important matters of language policy today, which immediately affects thousands of individuals around the world on a daily basis, is the roman transcription of personal names in identity documents. Moreover, the current climate of wariness over international terrorism has heightened the scrutiny of identity documents, raising also the risks faced by normal innocent people. Strolling through today's global village invites routine police stops, questionings, and requests for a "photo ID". One's personal name is no longer what one utters in reply to a friendly greeting: "Hi! What's your name?" Instead, personal names have become so many patterns of ink on government documents; and woe be to the person with discrepancies in the documentation of his or her personal name! Yet, despite a pressing need for rational and perspicuous language policy decisions, and despite a half-century of effort by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to standardize travel documents, we have a situation which may be aptly termed "unplanned language policy" (cf. Touchstone 1996); in this case, where a state authority issues passports with insufficient regard for the precise manner of name transcription. The resulting frustration and complaints are similar to those described for laissez-faire language policy by Phillipson (2003: 133-137).

In former times, passports were fairly casual travel documents in which a person's name was written as he or she might desire, which is actually a very good policy. After all, if I were to say, "My name is 'Joe'," and you were to say, "Oh, hi Jim," then I would correct your misapprehension of my name by saying something like, "No, my name is 'Joe', not 'Jim'."

> **1. a plausible introduction**
>
> — Hello! My name is 'Joe'.
> — Oh, hi Jim!
> — No, my name is 'Joe', not 'Jim'.

Similarly, as a competent adult, I tell people how to write my name, especially since people often have a hard time with "DeChicchis".

Over the past generation, passport offices have increasingly usurped the responsibility for writing a person's name "properly", with unfortunate consequences for travelers. Such usurpation is done in the name of "uniformation" (cf. Rubin 1977:

171-172), and Japan's passport offices have ostensibly done this in order to better meet Japan's international obligations toward the standardization of travel documents. Officials at Japanese passport offices have become more careful in checking roman transcriptions, and they have become less tolerant of variation, all with an eye toward achieving the goal of a uniform passport transcription policy. Ironically, in part due to these same passport officials, Japan is now replete with stories about the bizarre misspelling of names. By striving for passport uniformity, these officials have actually contributed to the proliferation of discrepancies vis-à-vis other identity documents.

Due to ICAO-led standardization, the passport has come to serve as a proof of personal identity. Therefore, it is particularly surprising to learn that the passport name of a person may not be that person's legal documentary name. This is the area where the discrepancies between countries' documentary traditions and the ICAO's emerging international standards are most glaring. Personal names may be natively written using scripts or diacritics or styles which are eschewed by the international passport standard. The modern Japanese passport is notable, not only because the person's roman script passport name does not match the person's legal Japanese script name, but also because the Japanese government's protocol for romanizing Japanese personal names is often at odds with Japanese cultural tradition, documentary precedent, and the personal desires of the Japanese people. As a result, many Japanese have become accustomed to using a passport with an incorrectly spelled name. The passport spelling may not match the spelling on a credit card; it may not match the spelling on a school diploma; it may not match the spelling on a driver's license.

The official Japanese documentary name of a person is written on a document which constitutes proof of that person's Japanese nationality. The data of the "koseki tohon" (戸籍謄本 "one's family registry record") are written using a limited set of Chinese and Japanese script characters. This koseki system of family registration records and certifies the official Japanese script name of each Japanese person.[1]

田中　犬
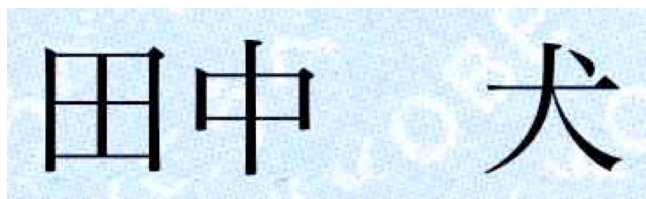
3. official Japanese name as registered and printed on proof of nationality

On the other hand, the official Japanese passport is printed without the Japanese person's official name; instead, in accord with ICAO guidelines, a romanized name is given.

4, Japanese name as written on the Japanese passport

    Two questions immediately present themselves. First, how is the roman script name to be decided? The Japanese government has devoted some attention to this question, and their policy is discussed below. Second, when looking upon a Japanese passport, how is an official looking at the passport able to infer the actual Japanese documentary name of that person? Considering the romanization of many common Japanese names yields an appreciation for the relevance of this seemingly abstract policy question, For example, the passport name "Watanabe" can correspond to one of four common family names: 渡部, 渡辺, 渡邊, 渡邉. The passport name "Tachibana" can be 橘 or 立花; and "Sakai" can be 坂井 or 酒井. The Passport Law (法律第二百六十七号) remains underspecified as to the nature of Japanese orthography; however, it does require that the "shimei" 氏名 be written in the passport. Now, the authority for a Japanese person's shimei is undeniably the "koseki", i.e., the family registry, where the shimei is written without the use of roman characters, and where the shimei is typically written using only kanji. In other words, the official documentary name of a Japanese person, the shimei, is never written in roman and is typically written only in kanji. One immediately wonders why the passports currently issued by Japan do not bear this shimei, as required by law.

    Of course, romanizing names for passports does not just affect Japanese people. International travellers from Chinese, Arab, or other cultural areas experience similar choices, and even absurdities. How should Arabic be romanized? Moreover, troublesome transcription problems are not necessarily associated with nonroman scripts, as the Latvian court cases involving the variant spellings of "Mentzen" and "Mencena" made clear. Although Latvia's ultimate court decision on this particular woman's passport name transcription indicates that even a linguistically hard-line government can show sensitivity in language policy making (cf. Republic of Latvia 2001), such sensitivity is still uncommon.

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5. Arabic يوسف

Yusef, Yousef, Yusf, **or** Joseph**?**

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6. spelling in Latvia

Mentzen **or** Mencena**?**

2. Japan's modern personal name

Japan's modern era begins with the Meiji Restoration, shortly after which all Japanese were required to adopt surnames, and these became the inherited family names of today. Thus, the modern Japanese personal name, the seimei 姓名, consists of a family name and a given name, both of which are recorded in the family registry (the koseki 戸籍) maintained for each Japanese person by the appropriate municipality. Such registration constitutes proof of Japanese nationality.

> **7. the Japanese name**
>
> **pattern:** seimei 姓名 = myōji 苗字 + namae 名前
> **example:** 田中犬 = 田中 + 犬
> **romanized:** Tanaka Ken.

Today, a person's family name may be called a myōji (苗字 or 名字), uji (氏), or sei (姓), although these terms were not synonymous in former times. The given name is called the namae (名前 "name") or, when disambiguating, the shita-no-namae (下の名前). In the family registry, the family name is written in an area separate from the given name, but in other documents the family name and given name are written together and in that order. Technically, for Japanese nationals, there is no space between the family name and given name when written together as one seimei; however, on many official documents, a space or even a punctuation mark can separate the family name from the given name. Thus, a person's documentary name may be printed in several ways.

> **8. common seimei variants**
>
> 田中犬
> 田中 犬
> 田中　犬
> 田中、犬
> 田中・犬
> 田中, 犬

A myōji may be written with between one and five kanji, though most family names are written with either two or three kanji. Of the fifty most common Japanese family names, forty-six are written with precisely two kanji. Thus, even when written without an intervening space or punctuation, the boundary between the myōji and the shita-no-namae is normally easily guessed.

The Japanese family registry records the official transcription of the seimei, and only a proper subset of the Japanese script characters are used in this registry's transcription. Moreover, the pronunciations of the names are not explicitly recorded. Consequently, the family registry record cannot differentiate homonymous names, nor can it identify homophonous names.

> **9. script ambiguity**
>
> **homonymous** 上野 **and** 上野 **(i.e.,** Ueno **and** Uwano**)**
>
> **homophonous** 川村 **and** 河村 **(i.e.,** Kawamura**)**

Using the Japanese syllabary, we can easily write the pronunciation of a family name or a given name. For example, my own family name (which is the registered name of Japanese nationals) is written デキキス with syllabic characters. However, most registered Japanese names are written with kanji (i.e., with Chinese logographic characters).   Thus, for a typical Japanese person, the family registry affirms the official documentary name of that person, in Japanese script, and the name is typically written with logographic characters. The indeterminate nature of such pronunciations is well

known.[2] Nevertheless, the pronunciation of such logographic characters is not explicitly written on the koseki tohon and other Japanese family registry documents.

10. names registered in syllabic script
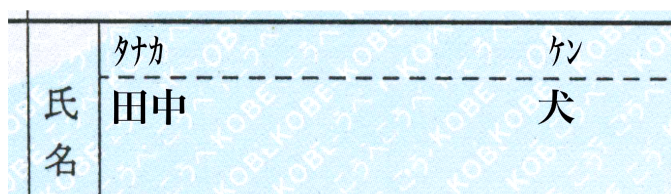
family name: デキキス

given name: りな

Although it is not written on the koseki documents, the pronunciation of a Japanese person's documentary name is written on other official documents. For example, it is now always written on the document used to register a person's birth. The official pronunciation of a seimei may also be transcribed with the Japanese syllabary in the person's residence certificate, which replicates the data of the jūminhyō 住民票, the address registry maintained by the appropriate municipality. The city of Kobe prints the pronunciation using the Japanese syllabary on the residence certificate; however, the city of Osaka does not.

11. Kobe pattern:

The Japanese pronunciation is printed on the residence certificate above the official seimei (jūminhyō 住民票).

12. Osaka pattern:

No pronunciation is printed on the residence certificate,

Currently, as seen here, the Kobe residence certificate prints these pronunciations along with the seimei. In Osaka, on the other hand, the pronunciation is not printed. A person's birth registration certificate, or sometimes even a national insurance card, can be used as documentary evidence of a name's pronunciation; however, a Japanese rarely has to document the pronunciation because simply saying the name aloud suffices in most contexts. In the case of passport applications, when documentary proof of a pronunciation cannot be provided, the passport official must be willing to accept the applicant's attested pronunciation.

3. Japan's romanization schemes

Neither the family registry nor the residence registry provides for a romanization of a personal name. Thus, in order to comply with ICAO passport standards, it is necessary to romanize the personal name of each person who receives a Japanese passport. Japan's foreign ministry has thus been entrusted with the task of romanizing the seimei of any Japanese who desires a passport.

Japanese language has been romanized in various ways over the years, but the most common romanization schemes used today are all either a Hepburn version or a variant of the Nihon-shiki. Varieties of the Hepburn romanization scheme have been used since 1885, although no Hepburn system is currently the legal standard of Japan. Since 1954, the legal standard for romanization has been a variant of the Nihon-shiki known as the Kunreisiki, which was the basis for the international standard ISO 3602. Figure 13 shows how some Japanese names might be romanized under different systems.

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13. variant romanizations

大谷　Ohtani, Ôtani, Ootani, Outani, Otani
中島　Nakajima, Nakazima
藤原　Fujiwara, Huziwara, Fudziwara
鋳治　Meiji, Meidi, Meizi

A Cabinet Order of 1954 (内閣告示第一号) standardized the romanization, resulting in the so-called Kunreisiki system. However, the wording of this order was vague enough to allow for continuing discrepancies. In particular, exceptions listed in "Table Two" were intended to accommodate the most common Hepburn transcription practices. Figure 14 gives the three rules of the 1954 Order.

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14. government romanization rules

(1) In order to transcribe Japanese into roman characters, you must follow Table One.

(2) If, due to international relations or convention or such, you are unable to follow Table One, then Table Two may be in order.

(3) In any case, the notes below must generally be applied.

To compensate for such vagueness, one would expect that the administrative protocols for transcription be well specified. How are the tables to be read? Precisely when should Table Two be used? Who is authorized to answer these questions? However, as is often the case in Japan, a consistent protocol for resolving transcriptions according to these 1954 guidelines has not been published.

As can be seen in the passports issued by the various passport offices of the Foreign Ministry, passport names generally violate the 1954 law. To take two simple examples, Japanese passports have been issued which vary on the spelling of し as either SHI or SI, and on ち as either TI or CHI.

15. Table One and Table Two conflicts	
し should be romanized as:	
(re Table One)	SI
(re Table Two)	SHI
ち should be romanized as:	
(re Table One)	TI
(re Table Two)	CHI

Passports have also been issued which vary on the use of R~L and N~M, even though the 1954 Order is clear that L and syllabic M should not be used. According to the Notes of the Order, ん should always be written as N, and both Table One and Table Two require writing れ as RE (never as LE). Some representative variants are listed in Figure 16.

16. authorized and unauthorized romanizations			
pronunciation in hiragana	authorized by Table One	authorized by Table Two	unauthorized romanization
しまの	Simano	Shimano	
みちえ	Mitie	Michie	
じゅんぺい	Zyunpei	Junpei	Jumpei
れお	Reo	Reo	Leo

In defense of their deviation from the Kunreisiki standard, passport officials routinely state that they are adhering to Hepburn rules for romanization; however, they do not specify which version of Hepburn they follow. The traditional Hepburn system sometimes transcribes ん as M, whereas later versions always use N (often with a diacritic, such as an apostrophe or macron). In any event, to explicitly claim to follow Hepburn rules is still a violation of the 1954 Cabinet Order which mandates Kunreisiki. Moreover, no version of the Hepburn transcription permits writing LE for れ, yet such a spelling can be used on a Japanese passport, and Japanese passports have indeed been issued which spell names with L.

4. The problem: no protocol, case-by-case variation, local passport office caprice

In short, there is no published protocol for uniquely transcribing Japanese names into roman letters, and examination of official practice reveals that transcriptions actually vary on a case-by-case basis. Currently, at Japanese Passport Offices, the reality of Japan's transcription protocol is simply this: An applicant for a Japanese passport is browbeaten to transcribe the pronunciation of the seimei in conformity with Table Two

of the 1954 Cabinet Order, unless the applicant can show good reason to do otherwise. Passport officials may also insist on transcriptions which violate the Notes of the 1954 Cabinet Order (e.g., syllabic M instead of N). In general, in completing the application form, whenever an applicant for a passport provides a roman transcription which a passport official does not like, the transcription is routinely changed, and a passport is issued in the "acceptable" spelling; the applicant can either take it or leave it.

Thus, the modern Japanese adult who travels abroad now receives a third transcription of his seimei. Besides the seimei as traditionally written with kanji in the koseki, and besides the official pronunciation of the seimei as written with the Japanese syllabary on the birth certificate and elsewhere, there is now the romanized seimei as written in the Japanese passport.

5. The case of Genmoto~Gemmoto

Japan's passport authorities and their romanization insensitivity have been a source of trouble for many people. The case of the Genmoto げんもと family is illustrative. The traditional Hepburn transcription occasionally uses M to transcribe the syllabic ん, but later versions of Hepburn (e.g., the Library of Congress version) do not use M in this way. Under Japanese law (e.g., the 1954 Order), this name should be transcribed as GENMOTO, and it is so transcribed on the credit cards and important civic and commercial documents of one Genmoto family. Yet, in the case of this family, the passport office has insisted on spelling their name GEMMOTO. The spelling GEMMOTO explicitly contradicts the 1954 law, which specifies that the syllabic ん must always be transcribed with N.

17. Genmoto~Gemmoto	
pronunciation in hiragana:	げんもと
VISA card romanization:	GENMOTO
passport romanization:	GEMMOTO
air ticket romanization:	??????????

Since 2001, heightened scrutiny of documents at airports has been troublesome for the Genmoto family. If an e-ticket is issued in the name GENMOTO, then it will match the name on the purchasing credit card; however, it will not match the name on the passport. Alternatively, using the passport spelling makes it difficult to purchase a ticket. Despite pleas from the Genmoto family, the Japanese passport officials have refused to issue a passport with the desired spelling of GENMOTO, even though this is the spelling which has been official since 1954. As one member of the Genmoto family puts it: "I have spelled my name both Genmoto and Gemmoto. For Japanese friends and when I am in Japan, I use 'Genmoto', and for friends outside of Japan and when I go abroad, I use 'Gemmoto'. This is because of my passport."[3] Of course, the Genmoto family would like to use a uniform roman spelling of their name, but the Japanese passport authorities have made this impossible.

In 1954, Japan showed promise for implementing rational language policy when it reaffirmed its pre-war decision on Japanese romanization; however, today, Japanese policy in this area remains inchoate. Romanization is important in Japan because of its widespread use in banking and commerce. In addition, the roman transliteration and transcription of Japanese names is widespread outside Japan, especially in the Americas and Oceania, and the reconciliation of alternate spellings of family names across international boundaries is an issue of Japanese concern. For other reasons as well, Japan has long recognized the need for a sensible romanization policy, but it has simply failed at implementation.

To appreciate the extent of this failure, it is enough to note that Japan's current passport law contradicts an earlier cabinet order. Moreover, Japan's passport law, in spite of Japan's ICAO membership and participation, also fails to comply with the ISO standard and with the ICAO's own guidelines for passport name transcription. After all, the 1954 Kunrei romanization system is the ISO standard, and it is cited in the ICAO passport guidelines as the proper way to romanize Japanese. Clearly, Japan's passport offices are not only failing to serve their own people, but they are also failing to meet their obligations under international agreements.

6. Government awareness of the problem

Passport officials are aware of the problems which name transcription currently creates. The biggest single problem is that a person's official Japanese script name does not appear anywhere on the modern Japanese passport. Towards rectifying this problem, and as a way of also bridging the gulf between disparate spellings, passport officials now encourage Japanese citizens to sign their passport using the Japanese script in block style.

Unfortunately, many Japanese have cultivated cursive signatures in both Japanese and roman scripts. Given that their passport signatures may be used as an identifying feature in their foreign commerce, they are reluctant to sign a passport in block letters, and they often prefer to use a roman script signature.

International experience often prompts a Japanese person to develop a cursive roman signature. Here is an example of the cursive roman signature commonly used by one Japanese man:
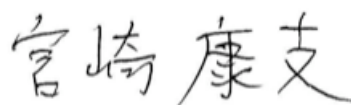

18. Cursive roman script signature

Of course, before developing his roman signature, he had also developed a cursive way of writing his name in Japanese, for both vertical and horizontal directions. For example, upon receiving certain letters or parcels, he commonly would write his

"shomei" 署名 in Japanese script as a mark of such receipt. When writing his Japanese shomei, (i.e., his Japanese signature), from left to right, it looks like this:

19. Cursive Japanese script signature

However, this same man, when writing in the block style suggested by the passport office, writes his name this way:

20. Name written in block-style Japanese

Clearly, the block style suggested by the passport office is the least personal of the three. Moreover, it can not serve as a basis of signature comparison for identification purposes.

7. An easy solution

In general, Japanese language policy in this area requires four things:

(1) There should be uniform government compliance with the 1954 government romanization rules. These rules are not perfect, but they are fairly clear, and government officials should generally not violate them. Moreover, the 1954 rules have been taught to Japanese school children for over a generation, they are institutionalized in various areas of commerce, and they are well accepted by the general public.

(2) With respect to the transcription of a personal name, any deviation from the 1954 rules should be made in accordance with the desires of the person affected. A passport official should not presume to tell Japanese citizens how to spell their own names.

(3) A passport name spelling should be amended whenever this is so desired by the person affected. Just as a foreigner living in Japan can change his or her official pseudonym (i.e., the tsūshōmei 通称名, which is registered in the municipal registry) at will, a Japanese citizen should be accorded a similar courtesy vis-à-vis the spelling of his or her passport name.

(4) Without violating ICAO specifications, the format of the Japanese passport should be revised to incorporate the Japanese script seimei of the passport holder, and the seimei should be printed in a standard style.

8. Linguistic expertise must inform government policy

The actual adoption of any reformulation of Japan's passport name policy would naturally be a governmental decision. Nevertheless, the precise articulation and the rational evaluation of such policy is the proper concern of "language policy" as an object of linguistic attention. Expert linguistic opinion is particularly important in technical issues which lack enough popular interest to make the political agenda, for absence from the agenda does not diminish the importance of an issue. The documentation and verification of personal names is an undeniably important feature of international policing, banking, and general commerce; and linguists have a duty to inform governments and other entities which manage the documentary records of people and their personal names. Despite today's focus on Japan, the issues raised here have global ramifications, not in an abstract academic way, but immediately for real people trying to live their normal lives.[4]

9. Notes

1. The graphic depictions of documentary name tokens herein are not exact replicas of actual personal documents. Rather, they are good simulations which preserve the important graphic features of those Japanese documents.

2. Often the indeterminacy involves a trivial morphophonemic variation, such as the pronunciation of を書宮川 as either みやかわ (Miyakawa) or みやがわ (Miyagawa). In many cases, however, the difference is quite significant, such as the pronunciation of 角田 as either かくた (Kakuta) or つのだ (Tsunoda).

3. Mrs. Genmoto, personal communication.

4. I am grateful to Yasushi Miyazaki, Bouzid Omri, Maki Nishizawa, and others for their help with various parts of this paper. Any errors of fact or interpretation are attributable solely to myself.

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