

Japanese rubi: Finessing the writing/reading/meaning interface

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Intrinsic to its unique composition of multiple scripts, one particularly distinctive characteristic of the Japanese writing system (JWS) is its convention of marginal annotation known as rubi (Joyce & Masuda, 2019; Wakabayashi, 2006); a term inclusively denoting the small-font materialization of annotations, the basic practice, and its multifarious applications. Prototypically, when rubi in hiragana script are attached above a base-word in kanji script, as is (1), it is to indicate the base-word's **pronunciation**; a simple device for bridging the writing/reading interface.

(1) ^{にほんご}
日本語 /nihongo/ Japanese language

However, rubi also function as an innovative device for creatively finessing the writing/reading/meaning interface. As Wakabayashi (2006: 3) astutely observes, rubi can serve to “enhance a word’s expressiveness, emphasize, exaggerate, elucidate or delimit its meaning, convey a different register or speech mode, or act as a paraphrase or inside joke”. This creative potential stems primarily from the juxtaposition of two closely related aspects. The first is that the base-rubi interface is malleable; indeed, it is often inverted and typically reciprocal in nature. Mirroring the JWS’s propensity for graphematic variation (Joyce & Masuda, 2019), the second aspect is that base words and rubi can be graphematically represented by any component script. For instance, in the commonly attested (2a-c), the kanji accentuate specific nuances of the katakana-script rubi /maji/; a casual, yet polysemous, spoken word.

(2) a ^{マジ}本^マ当, b ^{マジ}本^マ気, c ^{マジ}真^マ剣 a /hontō/ true; b /honki/ serious; c /shinken/ earnest

Sampling contemporary examples from advertisements, manga, magazines and literature, this paper outlines a framework for interpreting Japanese rubi. One dimension maps the rich interplay across the writing/reading/meaning interface that rubi embodies. Initially espoused to account for graphematic variation within the JWS, the second dimension extends Joyce and Masuda’s (2019) notion of intentionality; a factor of singular significance for Japanese rubi.

Joyce, Terry, & Masuda, Hisashi. (2019). On the notions of graphematic representation and orthography from the perspective of the Japanese writing system. *Written Language and Literacy*, 22(2), 248–280.

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Wakabayashi, Judy. (2006). Translating in a forked tongue: Interlinear glosses as a creative device in Japanese translations. *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, 1(2), 3–41. <https://doi.org/10.1075/tis.1.2.01wak>