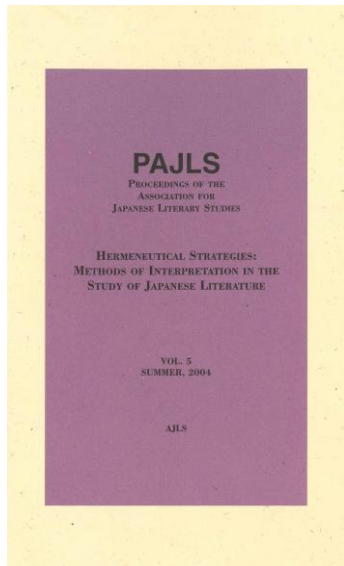


“Whether Birds or Monkeys: Indefinite Reference and Pragmatic Presupposition in Reading *Waka*”

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**WHETHER BIRDS OR MONKEYS:
INDEFINITE REFERENCE AND PRAGMATIC
PRESUPPOSITION IN READING *WAKA***

Gian Piero Persiani

This paper deals with the problem of decontextualized meaning. Specifically, it addresses the question of how classical poetry (*waka*) can communicate meaning to readers who are centuries or continents away from the time and place in which it was originally composed. I will look in particular at the process through which poetic names (*utakotoba*) can traverse their immediate spatio-temporal context, and become social entities that retain currency across centuries and millennia.

Generally, scholars have tended to emphasize the importance of being acquainted with the poetic tradition and the literary conventions of the Heian court in compensating for the structural brevity and the semantic compression of *waka*. The information that can be packed in the 31 syllables of a *tanka* (short poem) is so limited and coded in such a fashion that resorting to contextual information of some sort seems to many inevitable. This call for a context is perfectly captured in Earl Miner's definition of a *tanka* as 'five lines in search of a context' (1968: 28).

But if it remains indispensable to situate the work within the historical moment to be able to see the organic relation it holds with contemporary society, it is equally important to examine texts within the larger systems from which they emerge and through which they become accessible and intelligible, namely language and thought. In a recent special issue of *Kokugo to kokubungaku*, Nishiki Hitoshi (2000) has brought attention to how poetry originally produced in specific situations can be appropriated in different local contexts, and acquire an independent life as a cultural resource (文化資源 *bunka shigen*). Simultaneously, Nishiki has urged scholars to adopt a broad interdisciplinary perspective capable of accounting for such phenomena (2000: 66).

It is with the cognitive preconditions of similar appropriations that this paper is concerned. My intention is to isolate the minimal conditions of successful interpretation and to discuss some basic interpretive mechanisms that allow readers to access meaning, partly at least, on the basis of very little or no contextual information. This primary level of textual meaning, which may be variously labeled cognitive or pragmatic, is the basis for all subsequent interpretive efforts, but with few exceptions

it has either been completely ignored, or scarcely considered. As written texts, by virtue of their transportability, are always potentially decontextualized messages, this is an important question that a rigorous theory of literary interpretation must confront.

WORDS THINGS CONCEPTS READERS OTHERS

There is a famous anecdote, due to the philosopher of language Jerrold Katz (1977: 14), in which an ideal speaker of a natural language receives an anonymous letter containing only one sentence. No indication whatsoever is given as to the motives or the circumstances of transmission, and any other relevant information that would help to understand the sentence on the basis of the context is omitted. This example served to Katz to draw a distinction between semantic and pragmatic interpretations: what the ideal reader would know in the anonymous letter situation is the "sentence meaning," susceptible of a semantic interpretation, the rest, which can only be deduced by measuring the sentence against some context of enunciation, pertains to pragmatic interpretation.

During the past three decades, this distinction has been repeatedly called into question as linguists and philosophers have doubted that there is anything at all in the meaning of a sentence that can be understood apart from its context. We need not accept Katz's terminology, however, nor presuppose that there is a purely semantic component of meaning to realize that even in the situation he sketches meaning can still be communicated.

Readers will agree that in many respects the situation of the hypothetical speaker with the anonymous letter very closely resembles that of the modern reader who approaches *waka* for the first time. He or she is ideally equipped with some command of the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of classical Japanese but has no knowledge whatsoever of the circumstances of composition. To complicate matters further, it is likely that this hypothetical reader has never seen nor heard about many of the objects and places mentioned in *waka* poems.

One of the obvious ways in which the context aids language comprehension is by providing referents for the things named in a sentence. The inability to identify particular referents in space and time, however, hardly seems to preclude comprehension of the words that are used to refer to them. According to a view of meaning which has been dominant since at least Aristotle, to understand a word is not to know a referent, but to associate it with a concept, a signified. Frege (1892), the founder of modern logic, held that what a word "means" is the sense (*Sinn*), not the actual referent (*Bedeutung*). Along similar lines, Bertrand Russell (1911: 207) distinguished between direct knowledge of an object

(acquaintance), and knowledge of its properties (knowledge by description). Much modern linguistic philosophy maintains, correctly, that there is no direct relation between an object mentioned in a sentence and the meaning of the sentence. According to Hilary Putnam (1988), however, to whom the discussion hereafter owes much, it does so for the wrong reasons.

Our very capacity to interpret written texts depends on the possibility of communicating without referents. Disengaging words from wordly referents by appealing to concepts, however, hardly seems to solve all the problems that the anonymous letter situation poses. Consider the following poem by the late twelfth, early thirteenth century retired Emperor Gotoba:

Cherry trees blossom	<i>sakura saku</i>
in the mountains afar.	<i>tōyamadori no</i>
Even on a day long like	<i>shidari o no</i>
the drooping tail of a mountain pheasant	<i>naganagashi hi mo</i>
one has never enough of their color.	<i>akanu iro ka na</i>

(*Shinkokinwakashū*, Spring, No. 99)¹

(さくらさく遠山どりのしだりをのながながし日もあかぬ色かな)

The poem presents the reader with a perceived similarity between a long spring day and the tail of a certain type of bird. Although it is probable that most readers have never directly seen a *yamadori* prior to reading this poem, we can say without hesitation that most effortlessly understand the simile. What makes cases such as this worth careful consideration, however, is that the hypothetical reader here is not only unfamiliar with real world referents, she or he also lacks the descriptive knowledge sufficient to form a specific mental representation (a concept) of the bird. In short, there is no single specific meaning to assign to the word *yamadori*. While we can quite readily accept that direct acquaintance with every object mentioned in a sentence is not indispensable for comprehension, that we can dispense with concepts seems less intuitive: if it is not referents nor concepts that meaning depends on then what is it?

Putnam (1988: 22-23) has argued that although not many of us are able to tell an elm from a beech, most of us know that they are two different kinds of trees, and more importantly, that we can rely on experts

¹ Numbers and Japanese orthography for all poems cited are from the cd-rom edition of the *Shinpen kokka taikan*, Kadokawa Shoten.

for a positive identification. All names for Putnam carry the metalinguistic appendix “whatever the expert calls by that name”. This deferral of knowledge to more competent authorities of some sort, which Putnam aptly calls the ‘social division of linguistic labor,’ is evidently at work when dealing with a lot of the vocabulary used in *waka*. Many of the plants, animals, objects, and places that appear in these poems are not familiar to readers today. Yet, the fact that these objects are simply named in poetry is a sufficient guarantee to assume that they were part of the landscape of ancient Japan.

In his “Reference and Definite Descriptions” (1966), Keith Donnellan made a distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions (noun-phrases marked by a definite article). A description, he claimed, is used referentially when a speaker intends the interlocutor to visualize *one* specific object in time and space. It is used attributively when it simply expresses a general statement about that object. The importance of Donnellan’s contribution lies in the fact that he recognised that natural language communication allows for referential indeterminacy as well as for semantic underdetermination. An expression used attributively does not “refer” to any individual in particular, it rather points at the whole class of individuals that may answer to that description.

It is easy to see the capital role that this notion of indefinite reference plays in the interpretation of names, in both everyday and poetic language. The line “the drooping tail of a mountain pheasant,” to return to my example, does not really refer to any one bird in particular. It is used attributively, that is, it expresses the general proposition *whichever bird a mountain pheasant is, it has a long tail.*² The crucial move from individual to class or kind (from mountain pheasant to bird) transforms the name into a context-independent variable which still contains the potential to refer to a particular object in the real world but does not necessarily refer to any.³

Françoise Meltzer (1987: 71), in an attempt to circumvent the complex problem of reference in literature, has hypothesized that readers construct fictional referents she names “cognitive nominat[a]” to

² Indefinite reference in Gotoba’s poem: $\forall x[(yamadori)x \rightarrow (\text{long tail})x]$, (to be read: for every value of x if x is a *yamadori* then x has a long tail).

³ An important thing to note in applying this discussion of names to Japanese poetry is that in old as in modern Japanese nouns have no number or gender, and there are no articles either definite or indefinite. The selection between definite and indefinite uses of a noun is sometimes indicated by demonstratives, sometimes left to the discretion of the interpreter. Therefore, in the discussion that follows I move rather freely between singular/plural and definite/indefinite uses of names although these have been examined separately in much Western philosophy of language.

compensate for the absence of material referents. Much like Frege's theory of meaning which she admittedly draws on, however, Meltzer's model can say little of cases in which a reader lacks a specific representation for a word, or the information necessary to build one. Another problem of this model is that it seems to be cognitively inefficient, at least in the case of single references.⁴ The linearity of the reading process forces readers to construct provisional accounts of meaning that are tested, modified, and progressively validated or discarded as new information is processed. Mental simulations of the kind Meltzer hypothesizes could be disproved at any time in the course of this process. Consequently, it seems more plausible to suppose that before committing to a certain specific representation, readers confronted with an unknown name simply associate it to the nearest object or class of objects that they are familiar with.⁵

For the incompetent reader a poetic name has no intrinsic semantic value (a meaning) in itself, it is simply a signal which triggers a certain interpretive procedure. But if processing names as variables bypasses the need for specific signifieds, it also poses important conditions. Identification and verification can only be deferred to more favorable circumstances so long as it is assumed that one, there is somebody somewhere capable of identifying a referent and two, that the writer is not making things up.

Operating under what might be called conditions of suspended verification is in fact very common in language processing. Umberto Eco cites the example of a traveler who has never been to Hong Kong but needs to go there for business. In such cases, the natural thing to do is to go to a travel agent and purchase an air ticket simply assuming that the city exists (Eco 1994: 89-90). Assumptions of this kind are a formidable way to cope with our limited capacity to store information about the environment. They enable people to deal with so much more of the world than any single individual can ever hope to experience. But for a communicative system based on approximations and the deferral of verification to work efficiently, it is imperative that there be sufficient guarantees that limit the risk of errors and misunderstanding.

As a matter of fact, however, acceptance to operate with variables and incomplete information is hardly ever just a leap in the dark. Quite to the contrary, when readers choose to suspend verification and "believe" a

⁴ Although the creation of mental referents might be practical when reading longer forms of poetry or novels with repeated anaphoric references.

⁵ A similar move is made by Wolterstorff (1980) in the context of fictional worlds semantics. Fictional characters, Wolterstorff claims, are not specific individuals but kinds.

text, chances are that their credulity be rewarded. Communication through language, as first mirably pointed out by Paul Grice (1975), is minutely regulated by shared norms that channel it toward regular patterns. Literary genres, to borrow a recent definition, can be thought of precisely as “program[s] of positive or negative prescriptions and authorizations that regulate the generation of a text as well as its interpretation” (Rastier 1997: 20). One of the most powerful of these norms, and one that is widely conformed to across different speech genres, is that which prescribes to speakers engaged in a verbal exchange, both oral and textual, to be reliable.⁶

Although I will have to leave to a subsequent paper the analysis of how crucial communicative norms are to the genre of *waka*, I want to stress here that the assumption of a cooperative intent in the text delivers readers from the quixotic task of personally having to verify whether each word they encounter corresponds to a real world object exactly in the manner it is said to. Once correspondence is assumed by default, whether or not words and sentences correspond to facts and/or concepts becomes completely irrelevant.⁷

WORD MEANING IN MEDIEVAL *WAKA* SCHOLARSHIP

The pairing of linguistic philosophy and classical poetry on the question of indefinite reference is less abstruse than one might think. A concern for the problematic relation between poetic language, knowledge to that associated, and the world of experience traverses the tradition of poetic scholarship and has generated different, often competing views by different exegetes.

As a general tendency, it is fairly accurate to say that as of the end of the Heian period (796-1185), the art of *waka* takes a decided turn toward abstraction and referential indeterminacy. In *Korai fūteishō* 古来風躰抄 (A Treatise on Styles since Antiquity, 1197), poet and leading *waka* theorist Fujiwara Shunzei makes the programmatic statement that beauty only exists within the confines of the poetic world of the *uta*. The statement voices an elitist view of poetry as an art for the educated *connoisseur*, but it also expresses the epistemological persuasion that

⁶ I am assuming here that the communicative principles pointed out by Grice are as crucial to literary communication as they are to the common everyday use of language. For a recent counter-argument see Culler 1997:14.

⁷ It should be noted that belief can also be induced. Texts have what Doležel (2000: 145) calls authentication authority, the power to grant existence to fictional worlds. Textual authority is particularly strong in the case of texts that enjoy canonical status such as imperial collections of poetry.

reality is only accessible through the mediation of (poetic) signs, which form the basis of poetic creation (*Korai fūteishō*: 273).⁸ No matter what part the intrinsic qualities of actual objects might have played in the development of *waka* diction, by Shunzei's time they had been supplanted by a mass purely intellectual constructs.

Several converging factors contributed to this progressive move away from referentiality, but among these surely the practice of composing on poetic topics (*dai* 題) and the consequent codification of fixed poetic associations called essences (*hon'i* 本意) had the most significant impact. As Suzuki Hideo (1999: 98) has noted, at a certain stage in *waka* history essences became so deeply entrenched in the vocabulary of *waka* as to progressively erode the original meaning of the words. Centuries of usage provoked a gradual shift of the *locus* of meaning from the actual object or scene the words were associated by direct observation, to what they were said to stand for by poetic convention. A famous place name like Yoshino, for instance, used in poetry since the earliest times, gradually ceased to denote a specific geographical location and simply came to indicate a place where the snow is deep in winter, and cherry blossoms inspire awe in spring. As Lewis Cook (2000: 126) has put it, the practice of composing on topics using essences "entailed that the connotations and aesthetic associations of poetic words should far outweigh the importance of wordly referents."

Another main cause of the general move away from experience is the diffusion of the practice of using older poems as bases for allusive variations (*honkadori* 本歌取). An often cited example of this type of explicit allusion, which is emblematic of the shift of attention from sensorial experience to poetic precedent, is the following poem from the summer book of the *Shinkokinwakashū* 新古今和歌集 (New Collection of Poems Old and New, 1215):

With spring passing,
summer has come. Or so it seems.
"White robes are
spread out to dry" they say,
On heavenly Mount Kagu

*haru sugite
natsu ki ni kerashi
shirotahe no
koromo hosutehu
ama no Kaguyama*

(No. 175; Empress Jitō)

⁸ The original reads: 歌といふものなからましかば、色をも香をも知る人もなく、なにをか本心ともすべき。Moto 本 must be here understood in the sense of a codified response to things to be found in poetic precedents.

(はるすぎて夏きにけらし白妙の衣ほすてふ天のかぐ山)

The base-poem, attributed to the seventh century Empress Jitō 持統 (645-702), figures in the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 (Collection of Myriad Leaves, c. 759) with slight but significant variations:

With spring passing, summer has come. white robes are spread out to dry on heavenly Mount Kagu	<i>haru sugite natsu kitaru rashi shirotahe no koromo hoshitari ame no Kaguyama</i>
--	---

(Book I, 28; Empress Jitō)
(春過而夏来良之白妙能衣乾有天之香来山)

By replacing the perfective auxiliary *tari* with the quotational construction *tehu* (*to ihu*, it is said), the anonymous editor of the *Shinkokinshū* version attenuates the vivid, almost pictorial quality of the poem in favor of indirect speculation. Mount Kagu, one of the Three Mountains of Yamato (大和大山 *yamato daisan*), is located in the former Jushi district (today Nara prefecture), at the outskirts of Fujiwara no Miya, the site of the imperial capital for some time in the seventh century. It is possible that this little mountain (ca. 150 meters) was visible from the imperial palace at the time Jitō composed the poem. This has led commentators to argue that the original poem was inspired by the actual sight of the robes, while the unspecified author of the later version simply relied on the imagery of the earlier poem. Medieval commentators have also tended to interpret 'white robes' as either a symbol for the mist of early morning, or as a figure for the flowers of white verbena (*u no hana* 卯の花).⁹ While proving that the base poem was inspired by direct observation is problematic, these readings well illustrate the medieval predilection for indirection and the gradual move away from referential determinacy.

Predictably, the link between a poetic word and its original wordly referent becomes increasingly faint as the temporal distance from its first occurrence widens. Edward Kamens appropriately speaks of the progressive commodification of poetic language: "words for things themselves become things, commodities that must be recognized as such" (1997: 10). By the Muromachi period (1392-1573), the process of

⁹ For an overview see Ariyoshi 1983: 23.

emancipation of the poetic word from their worldly referents had reached an unprecedented stage. Following is an excerpt from sections twentyfive and twentysix of the *Shōtetsu monogatari* 正徹物語 (Tales of Shōtetsu), a poetic miscellany of the first half of the fifteenth century:

To compose poetry one needs not be concerned with learning [*saigaku*]. It is preferable that one deeply understand the nature of poetry [...]. Should someone ask me what province Mount Yoshino is in, I would simply answer that I think I use Mount Yoshino for flowers, and Mount Tatsuta for crimson leaves, and that this is all there is to composing poetry, and that I do not know whether these places are in the province of Ise or Hyūga. There is no use in remembering details of learning such as where these provinces are. (*Shōtetsu monogatari*: 175-76)

Shōtetsu's may well be one of the boldest formulations of "weak" referentialism in the entire history of poetic criticism. If little consideration for the technicalities of learning (*saigaku*) is often found in the writings of the more innovative currents in *waka*,¹⁰ Shōtetsu's claim that the meaning of poetic words resides in their usage in poetic practice rather than in their correspondence to real-world objects or places echoes Shunzei's particularly suggestive version of radical poetic 'intensionalism'¹¹. Needless to say, not all the practitioners of *waka* were equally willing to dismiss the importance of direct acquaintance with things and places used in poetry. Quite to the contrary, an equally strong current of what can be called strong referentialism can also be detected in medieval *waka* scholarship.

With the establishment of Kamakura shogunate, the inevitable derive from reference by direct observation to reference by convention became a matter of capital importance. As a result of the political decline of the court, poetry, once the literary pastime of the aristocracy, was gradually transformed into a profitable enterprise for professional teachers

¹⁰ A similar assessment of the little importance of *saigaku* for composing and interpreting poetry is made by Kyōgoku Tamekane at the beginning of his *Tamekanegyō wakashō* 為兼卿和歌抄 (Waka Treatise by Lord Tamekane, ca. 1287). In Hisamatsu Sen'ichi and Nishio Minoru eds., *Karon nōgakuronshū*, Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikai 65 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1961), p. 154.

¹¹ I find this term strangely apt to describe Shunzei's theory of signs. In medieval philosophy of language and certain modern semantics, a word is said to denote an extension (a referent) and connote an intension (the set of all attributes or properties it entails).

competing to secure a generous patron. Within the new order, the prestige and the very survival of the various poetic houses came to depend on the jealous custody of the so-called poetic secrets (*hiji* 秘事), which ‘very often consisted in interpretations or glosses on ambiguous figures or tropes’ (Cook 2000: 27).

For many medieval waka scholars, then, the identification of worldly referents for poetic words was of crucial importance. There is one famous case that is symptomatic of the extent to which this was so: the case of the three secret birds of the *Kokinshū* (*kokin no sanchō* 古今の三鳥).¹² The “three birds”, that I roughly translate here as calling bird (*yobukodori* 呼子鳥), crop-carrying bird (*inaohosedori* 稲負鳥), and myriad-bird (*momochidori* 百千鳥), figure in poems of the *Kokinshū*, but their actual referents became obscure shortly after the compilation of the anthology. Despite the referential indeterminacy, however, the three birds continued to be used consistently in poetry, and considerable effort was devoted by generations of medieval and early modern exegetes to attempting a problematic identification.

Early in the twelfth century, the *Toshiyori zuinō* 俊頼髓腦 (Toshiyori's Poetic Essentials, ca. 1115), the monumental poetic treatise by Minamoto no Toshiyori, already records that although the *inaohosedori* was said to bear similarities to other common species of birds no one really knew the actual referent (*Toshiyori zuinō*, 183).¹³ The question continues to puzzle later commentators. The *Kenchū mikkan* 顕注密観 (Secret Illuminations on Kenshō's notes, 1221), Fujiwara Teika's notes to Kenshō's commentary to selected poems of the *Kokinshū*, refutes a number of current etymologies but ultimately leaves the question unresolved (*Kenchū mikkan*, 168-69).

The *Yakumo Mishō* 八雲御抄 (His Majesty's Treatise of Eightfold Clouds), an early thirteenth-century poetic treatise by Emperor Juntoku, also lists several different birds that might correspond to the mysterious *inaohosedori* (*Yakumo Mishō*: 326-7). While firmly rejecting the pairing of the *inaohosedori* with the sparrow (*suzume*), Juntoku endorses Teika's thesis that the bird's song invites people to stay home. Despite the clear demarcation it strives to trace between correct (*shōsetsu* 正説) and wrong (*hisetsu* 非説) explanations, it is revealing that Juntoku should cite freely

¹² There was also a botanic counterpart for the three birds known as the “three trees of the *Kokinshū*” (*kokin sanki*). The *agatama no ki*, *medo ni kezuribana*, and the *kawanagusa* enjoyed an analogous fortune in the history of medieval waka exegesis.

¹³ いなおほせ鳥とは、よく知れる人なし。

from literary sources to substantiate his glosses: the *Kokinshū*, of course, but also the *Yamato monogatari* 大和物語 (Tales of Yamato, ca. 951), alongside more historical annals like the *Nihonki* 日本記 (Chronicles of Japan, 720).

Speculations grow increasingly bold as time passes. The *Bishamondōchū* 毘沙門堂注 (Annotations of the Bishamondō Family), a fifteenth-century poetic commentary known for its somewhat extravagant take on traditional interpretive cruxes, claims that the name *inahosedori* may have in fact referred to horses and cattle used to transport rice crops.¹⁴

John Searle (1969: 27) has posited as one of the conditions for successful reference in a speech situation “to provide some combination of demonstrative presentation or description sufficient to identify” the object. From this perspective, the numerous attempts by medieval glossators to identify the birds seem to suggest that poetic words were treated as referring expressions. Unsurprisingly, however, the quixotic enterprise to arrive at a positive identification on the basis of textual evidence fails, making these glosses little more than fascinating examples of philological curiosity. Failure to identify, however, did not seem to preclude usage in poetry. It is remarkable that despite the wide variety of competing readings none of the medieval commentaries cited here cautions against using names for which the referent was unknown. This suggests that although it is not stated explicitly until later in the history of *waka* scholarship, some authoritative practitioners of *waka* were convinced that an adequate knowledge of the semantic traits conventionally associated with poetic words was sufficient to justify their usage in poetry.

The case of the calling bird offers an equally interesting example of a similar referential opacity. An entry in the *Tsurezuregusa* 徒然草 (Essays in Idleness), the early fourteenth century miscellany by Yoshida Kenkō, places it among the spring birds noting that the actual referent was unknown. Kenkō, a priest by profession, cites an unspecified text of the esoteric Buddhist sect *Shingon* 真言 to sustain a transcendental gloss: “when the *yobukodori* calls, the circumstances are appropriate to perform the rite to summon the souls of the dead” (*Tsurezuregusa*: 281). In a final display of philological prowess, Kenkō likens the calling bird to the *nue* 鵺, a fantastic creature believed to have the head of a monkey, the body of a badger, the tail of a snake, and the appendages of a tiger.

Again, the compiler of *Yakumo Mishō* seems less concerned with possible referents and more attentive to poetic usage:

¹⁴ See Takeoka 1976: 611.

The calling bird [...] is used for “waiting for a lover at night” and the like. A spring bird. In the poems of old, it is the voice that awakens. It is used as the voice of deep night. Or it is simply said to call. (*Yakumo Mishō*: 324).

These remarks are representative of a purely intensionalist current in *waka* commentaries which propounded the understanding of poetic words as essences, crystals of poetic knowledge with little bearing on external reality, which we have seen boldly articulated in Shōtetsu.

The question travels unresolved to the world of *haikai* scholarship. In his *Kinrai Haikai Fūteishō* 近来俳諧風躰抄 (A Treatise on the Style of Modern Haikai, 1689), the Danrin poet Okanishi Ichū attributes to the great fifteenth century *renga* master Sōgi the following statement: “In old books there are various theories [about the *yobukodori*], but they are all of no use. One should simply understand it as ‘yobukodori’” (Ōgata 1963: 20). To Sōgi’s remark, Ichū attaches this *ku* (a verse in a linked poetic sequence) by the poet Tōfuno 遠舟:

The calling bird	<i>yobukodori</i>
<i>What memories of love you bring!</i>	<i>aara koishi ya</i>
<i>Though a monkey</i>	<i>saru ni te mo</i>
(よぶこ鳥あゝら恋しや猿にても)	

The pairing of the calling bird with a monkey seems to have had some currency amongst fifteenth century exegetes as results, for instance, from the manuscripts of the Ichijō family.¹⁵ As noted by Lewis Cook (2000: 131), however, Ichū’s intention here was most probably to simply mock the commercial slant that *waka* teaching had taken. It was clear to many by Ichū’s time that the poetic secrets around which poetic education revolved were more of a means for teachers to legitimate their poetic authority than actual scholarship of any substantial value.

Leaving aside the complex political maneuvers which accompanied professional poetic education, the etymological antics stirred by the three birds are interesting for what they reveal about the question of reference in literature. Earlier, I have addressed the situation in which an ideal reader, for various reasons, may ignore the referent of a name used in poetry. If under these circumstances failure to identify a referent can be attributed to a reader’s “ignorance”, the question with the three birds is rather one of problematic designation. If, as some seemed to hold, the *yobukodori* were indeed a kind of primate, then the bird for long associated with this name

¹⁵ See Takei 1980: 590.

would go to populate the realm of fabulous animals together with such legendary creatures as unicorns, sirens, dragons and the like. As a result, all literary references to a calling bird, from the *Man'yōshū* to the *Genji*, would become cases of what logicians call references to nonexistents.

While there has always been general agreement about the intelligibility of nonexistents, the question of how it is possible to talk about things that do not exist — technically, how something that does not exist can be the subject of a predicate, has for long seemed an insoluble logical dilemma. Until very recently, logic has done little more than say that references to nonexistent persons and objects can be neither true nor false as they cannot be verified. In 1950, however, Peter Strawson took a substantially new position arguing that there are no true or false assertions, only true or false *uses* of assertions by particular speakers in particular contexts (1950: 325). Strawson's intuition was fairly obvious: as sentences can be uttered at various occasions in time, their truth conditions can vary. The phrase "the present *shōgun* of Japan is bald", for instance, an improvised variation on the canonical example of problematic reference, has no actual referent today in 2003, but it has certainly had one for several centuries prior to the abolition of the shogunate in 1868.¹⁶

Strawson's intuition suggests that existence in language is not an immutable attribute but something that can change over time. The wealth of often contradictory glosses on the three birds of the *Kokinshū* offers strong evidence for the claim that the conditions of truth of an act of reference vary on different occasions of the use of a word. Due to reasons ranging from political expediency, to erroneous designation, or to simple ignorance, the ontological status of the three birds in medieval exegetical literature oscillated between reality and imagination, depending on whether one believed that there indeed existed a bird that was referred to as *yobukodori*, or that the latter was simply a name mistakenly assigned to a monkey. Temporal scatter alone, however, leaves unexplained how the communicative power of poetic words seemed to remain intact despite this oscillation.

The other key tool to explain the seeming logical absurdity of references to nonexistents can be evinced from Paul Grice's theory of speaker meaning. In a much celebrated and equally criticized essay, Grice (1957) claimed that the meaning of words coincides with the beliefs (intentions) that speakers intend an audience to recognize. There can be a substantial difference, he argued, between what a sentence literally means and what a speaker means by uttering it. Similarly, it is possible for a

¹⁶ In twentieth century linguistic philosophy, "The present king of France is bald" is the classic example of problematic reference.

speaker to say something “false” but mean to say something “true”. Leaving aside the question of how much such beliefs have to be conventionally shared to be intelligible, rethinking word meaning in terms of speaker intentions and audience beliefs (their knowledge of the world at the time of utterance) reduces the extremely complex logical problems raised by the ambiguous and unverifiable existential status of material referents, to far simpler cases of more or less correct designation by specific individuals at certain specific occasions.¹⁷ For centuries, the calling bird was believed to be a winged biped, and the fact that the name *yobukodori* may at some stage have referred to a primate has not prevented poets from using the name to talk about a type of bird which sings plaintively in the mountains.

This mysterious creature, in other words, has always been whatever readers have believed poets intended to talk about. That is not to say that writers simply use the wrong name for a certain animal that exists, or that they erroneously speak of something that has never existed. The implication to be drawn here is rather that there cannot be an object that a word invariably corresponds to regardless of time, place, and the beliefs of those involved in communication.

The ultimate failure of the quest for the three birds in medieval poetic exegesis confirms that the link between words and things is extremely feeble. The intelligibility of a poetic name rests on a type of descriptive (as opposed to experiential) knowledge *about* things rather than *of* things. This knowledge, however, is not merely a gallery of fixed semantic correspondents for actual things, a collection of unitary meanings. It is rather a fluid, intersubjective mixture of data, assumptions and beliefs which undergoes constant renegotiation as time, place, and the individuals involved in communication change. Contrary to “externalist” (referential) and “mentalist” (conceptual) theories, this view of meaning is capable of explaining both how clusters of crystallized knowledge (essences) sufficed to talk about things regardless of the existence of actual referents, and how modern readers with limited knowledge of the *waka* idiom have access, no matter how superficially, to its poetic universe.

In medieval Japan, descriptive knowledge related to poetic diction formed what Haruo Shirane (1998) calls ‘cultural memory,’ an extremely rich and finely textured tapestry of notions and associations based on

¹⁷ A Gricean account of meaning makes it unnecessary to theorize an independent conceptual type for literary beings, as done, for instance, by Crittenden (1991: 59-63). As far as communication is concerned, whether an object is a fictional construct or it exists in the real world is completely irrelevant.

literary precedents. Reference in poetry was then to the poetic heritage to which names were tied to—or rather believed to be, by poetic association. The poetry master constituted both the ultimate authority, and the indispensable precondition for the social division of knowledge. One, however, should not be misled by such extraordinary wealth of semantic knowledge that was attached to *waka* diction. Cultural memory — in its journey across time and space, can be enriched, amended, impoverished, or distorted but never completely erased. To the very least, each and every speaker of any language, ancient or modern, knows how to transform a name into “whatever *x* this is or means”. This kind of rough approximations can bypass not only the absence of referents but the lack of specific concepts/meanings for a word, providing a powerful alternative to the poverty of contextual information. Simultaneously, as they rest on the assumption of an implicit cooperative behavior, these approximations point at the irreducibly social nature of language, revealing that the construction of verbal meaning is a collaborative effort of speakers and audiences, writers and readers.

One of my ambitions in this discussion has been to combine the analysis of a problem of textual interpretation with a reading of the medieval commentaries, in order to locate the problematic relation between words, concepts and experience within the history of medieval Japanese poetic exegesis. By surveying the exegetical fortune of the secret birds of the *Kokinshū*, I have suggested that there is some evidence to suspect that at least some authoritative practitioners of *waka* for a considerable span of *waka* history did not regard direct knowledge of referents in the real world as an indispensable requisite for the composition of poetry. This version of radical intensionalism becomes more pronounced as of the late twelfth century, and cohabits with an equally strong current of referentialism in the medieval and early modern commentarial tradition.

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