Shakai vs Society:
Exploring Divergence in Meaning[1]

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Introduction

Change is present in all things, including language. Despite the best efforts of grammarians and pundits, syntax gets modified, words take on new meanings and are used for different parts of speech, and new lexical items appear while old ones fall into disuse. For example, work by Nevalainen (1999) has shown that negative concord—the use of negative indefinites to agree with a negative element early in a sentence (e.g., ***I** don't got **no** money*)—predominated in 15th century English but was lost during the 16th and 17th centuries.   This kind of construction, which is also referred to as multiple negation, still exists in many non-standard varieties of English but has become highly stigmatized as "illogical" and grammatically incorrect in standard British and American English (Nevalian, 1999, cited in Meyerhoff, 2011). Also, the meaning of the English word *gay* has changed several times in the past 400 years. It was used to describe people who were "full of joy and mirth" in the 1300s, but by the 1600s, it had come to mean those "addicted to social pleasures and dissipations"; in the early 1800s it referred to a woman who was "leading an immoral life", yet by the mid 1930s, it was used to refer to homosexuals (Meyerhoff, 2011, p. 62). In addition, nouns such as *debut* and *impact* came to be used as verbs in the late 20th century, while *selfie* and *twerk* emerged as new terms during the past few years.

Nonetheless, in academia, great effort is exerted to define scholarly terms and limit their meaning to enable clarity of thought. While everyday language use changes constantly, as seen above, scholarly terminology is generally considered to be more stable.

A great deal of scholarly terminology in Japanese was developed during the late 19th century, after Japan was opened to the outside world following approximately three centuries of isolation. Japan was suddenly exposed to a wide range of new academic theories and concepts imported from the West. Japanese scholars therefore sought to create Japanese lexical terms that were written with Chinese characters and pronounced using Japanese phonetic rules but that represented Western terms used in the physical and social sciences. Among these were sociological concepts such as *bunmeikaika* (文明開花, for *civilization* or *westernization*), *jiyu* (自由, for *liberty*), *kenri* (権利, for *rights*), *bankoku kouhou* (万国公法, for *international law*) and *shakai* (社会, for *society*; Howland, 2002). Today, the *kanji* compounds coined at that time are commonly accepted to be equivalent to the Western terms they were created to represent, and their meanings are generally considered to be quite stable.

I was therefore intrigued to notice that the word *shakai* (社会) is used in slightly different ways than the English word it was created to represent—*society*. Moreover, when I was commissioned to translate a modern novella, I discovered that *shakai* was used in a far wider range of circumstances than *society* would be. It is the purpose of this paper to explore the origins of the word *shakai* and the differences in meanings that developed between it and *society* over the first century or so of its use.

Origins of the Word *Shakai*

Before the Meiji Period, there was no Japanese term that referred to the large-scale system of

human community life known as *society* in English. The closest term to it was probably *seken* (世間), which more closely corresponds to the English meaning of *the world* as in "go out into the world" or "a man of the world". The Japanese word *shakai,* which today is commonly used as the equivalent of *society,* derives from an ancient Chinese name for an earth god cult; by the 12th century it had come to be used to refer to any group organized for religious, educational or commercial purposes (Howland, 2002). In Japan, it was originally used by students of Dutch scholarship to refer to places of assembly such as schools, churches and meeting halls (Howland, 2002). A dictionary of word origins (*Gogen Yurai Jiten*) traces its first use back to the *Yochishiryaku* (『輿地誌略』)[2], the Japanese translation of a Dutch translation of a German geographical text produced by Aochi Rinso, a scholar of Dutch studies, in 1826 [3]. There, it was used to mean a religious group or faction.[2]

Other uses of the word appeared around the time of the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the early Meiji Period[3]. Some sources have attributed the first use of it as the equivalent of the English word *society* to Fukuzawa Yukichi in 1876 or 77[2, 3], but other sources argue that it was Fukuchi Gen'ichiro who first used the *kanji* 社會 with *rubi* superscript *sosaiechi* (ソサイエチー) as the equivalent of *society* in an 1875 article in the *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun*.[2, 3] At first, the term tended to be used to refer to a small community or a company, but by 1877, the word had come into widespread use with the same meaning it has today.[3]

Howland (2002) ties this rapid introduction and standardization of the usage of this new word to the translation of a number of English works on the philosophy of government and human rights, including William and Robert Chambers' *Political Economy,* Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help*, John Stuart Mills' *On Liberty,* and especially, the writings of Herbert Spencer*,* which were employed in the debates surrounding the transformation of the Japanese government from an oligarchy to a constitutional democracy during the early Meiji Era.

Howland (2002) notes that at first, a wide variety of words were used to translate *society.* In the Japanese translation of the Chamber brothers' *Political Economy*, which was published between 1866 and 1870, Fukuzawa Yukichi used *seken* (世間), *sekai* (世界)*, sejou* (世情)*, sejin* (世人) and *kousai* (交際) as equivalants of *society.* Similarly, Nakamura Keiu, in his 1871 Japanese translation of John Stuart Mills' *On Liberty,* used a wide range of words to express three different interpretations of the word *society.* When he felt *society* referred to a kind of association, he translated it as *kousai* (交際) or *tsukiai* (付合い) when used in an abstract sense, and *kaisho*(会商)*, kaisha* (会社)*, kumiai* (組合)*, nakama* (仲間) and *renchu* (連中) when referring to specific types of societies. When Nakamura felt that *society* referred to "the people", he translated it as *kou* (公)*, ooyake* (公)*, koushuu* (公衆)*, soutai* (総体)*, jinmin* (人民)*, kokumin* (国民)*, kuni no tami* (国の民)*, heimin* (平民)*, shumin* (衆民) and *minshu* (民衆)*.* Nakamura's third interpretation of *society* reflected a Confucian view of the moral function of the elite class; translations he used for this interpretation include *jinrin* (人倫). Moreoever, Nakamura did not clearly differentiate between *government* and *society* in his translation of Mills' work (Howland, 2002).

Yet shortly after these translations appeared, *shakai* became the preferred translation of *society.* Howland (2002) links the popularization of the neologism *shakai* to its use in the Japanese translations of the works of Herbert Spencer, which began appearing in 1877. Since Spencer's ideas were employed by both the conservative and liberal sides in the ongoing debate surrounding the establishment of a national assembly and the composition of its membership, the terminology used in translations of his works spread quickly. By the time the second edition of the *Dictionary of Philosophy* was published in 1884, it asserted that *shakai* was the preferred translation of *society.* Moreover, in 1885, the word used for name of the sociology department at Tokyo Imperial University

was changed from *setaigaku* (世態学) to *shakaigaku* (社会学). Thus, by the mid to late 1880s, *shakai* was firmly established as the best equivalent for the English term *society* (Howland, 2002).

Divergent Meanings

Knowing that *shakai* was coined as an equivalent for *society* and that the two words are considered to have the same meaning, I was surprised when I noticed that people were using the word *shakai* in ways that the word *society* can not be used. At universities, people speak of students' future after graduation as *shakai ni hairu* or shakai ni deru [going into or going out into *shakai*], or *shakaijin ni naru* [becoming a *shakai* person].

In the 1990s, Japanese universities even began a system of accepting *shakaijin* [*shakai* people] as students. These were older people who had been employed for some time and then decided to enroll in a university. While this kind of thing happens frequently in the United States and there is no special term for such older students, Japan has a tradition of enrolling students directly out of high school and young people who do not pass the entrance exam on their first try and are studying for an extra year or more are called *ronin*. Older students were therefore unusual and a special term was created to refer to them: *shakaijin gakusei* (社会人学生).

Hearing such terms, I slowly realized that sometime between the Meiji Period and today, the meanings of the words *shakai* and *society* had diverged. This difference can be clearly seen if their definitions are compared, as follows.

> **社会**（１）人々がよりあつまって共同生活をする形態。（２）一般的に，家庭や学校をとり
> まく世の中。世間（『国語大辞典』）
> [*shakai*: (1) a form of community life in which people come together to live. (2)
> In general, the world surrounding the home and school. The world. (*Kokugo Daijiten*)]

> society *   (*uncountable or countable noun*)   You can refer to the people in a country as its
> ***society***. (*Collins Cobuild Dictionary*):
> * 2. A body of individuals living as members of a community. 3. human beings
> collectively, associated or viewed as members of a community. 4. a highly
> structured system of human organization for large-scale community living that
> normally furnishes protection, continuity, security, and a national identity.
> (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*)

As can be seen from the above definitions, the basic meanings of *shakai* and *society* are the same. However, the second meaning of *shakai* ("In general, the world surrounding the home and school. The world.") is very different from the English word *society* because it excludes the family and school, while *society* consists of everyone in a community, including those in the home and in school.

Thus, Japanese has terms like *shakaijin* (社会人) and *shakai ni hairu/deru* (社会に入る／出る) that do not make sense if literally translated into English ("society person" or "going (out) into society") because all people, including housewives and students, are considered to be part of *society*. The English equivalent of this second meaning of *shakai* is "the world" or "the real world" or "the working world", and *shakaijin* refers to what in English is called "a working person" or "a person with a full-time job." The English equivalent of *shakai ni hairu/deru* would be "get a (full-time) job" or "go out into the real world". Thus, it appears that the term *shakai* has come to be used as the equivalent of

the earlier term it replaced: *seken* (世間), whereas English separates the terms *society* and *the (real) world.*

For a long time, I thought that this was the main difference between these two terms, but then I began translating two English novellas by Kometani Foumiko that were published under the title *Family Business* (『ファミリー・ビジネス』) in 1998 [4]. These short pieces are based on Kometani's experiences living between two cultures—America and Japan. They are fiction, but their aim is to expose deep truths about differences in culture.

The first of the two novellas, *Family Business*, is quite light-hearted, focusing on a Japanese expat's visit to Japan after living in the United States for many years. Looking at Japanese culture again almost from the outside, the narrator pokes fun of many aspects of modern Japanese culture, some large—like the very formal, very expensive system of caring for the dead, including *hoji* (法事) memorial services—and some small—like the confusing nature of Tokyo station and the fact that the main train station in Fukuoka is called Hakata.

The second novella, *1,001 Fires Raging* (『千一本の火柱』) is also a fictional account, but this time, it offers Kometani's perspective on the U.S. It is a story about a Japanese woman living in Los Angeles during the Rodney King riots of 1992. These were race riots protesting the brutal treatment of African Americans by white policemen. Kometani writes about what it felt like to be an Asian American woman in Los Angeles at that time. She, too, faced discrimination as an Asian and as a woman, and in her fictional account, she describes the feelings of someone who faces such prejudice but is also married to a white person, and is therefore—again—"between" cultures: that of the oppressed and that of the elite, that of Japan and that of white America.

It was in translating this second novella that I encountered multiple examples of the use of the word *shakai* in contexts where *society* could not be used as its equivalent. Since Kometani writes in a very colloquial style, it would be too much to say that her uses of the word *shakai* represent academic usage of the term, but I would like to examine these examples to illustrate how the word *shakai* is used in everyday Japanese discourse today.

Examples from *1,001 Fires Raging*

To explore the different ways that the word *shakai* was used in *1,001 Fires Raging*, I will present nine short passages from the original Japanese text with the word *shakai* used one or more times in each. I have underlined the term for easy reference. After each, I will present a Japanese paraphrase of the word *shakai* in that specific context, and then provide my English translation of the example. After presenting all of the examples, I will analyze the various meanings of *shakai* that were discovered in this data set.

Example 1: p.140 [5]

In this example, the narrator Yu is explaining the tension between her husband and herself over who should be responsible for the housework. Recently, when she complains about his lack of help, Bob has begun arguing that in a household, the person who makes the most money should be given a bigger break. The following is his argument and her thoughts on it:

> 　最近，ボブが何も考えないで，「家の中で，稼ぎの多い方に優先権がある」などと言おう ものなら彼女は直ちに反撃に出るようになった。
> 　「わたしは女で，東洋人で，その中でもこの社会で嫌われている日本人であるとう二つの

ハンディキャップを背負っているのやから。お気の毒やけど，あなたは他の白人同士の夫婦の配偶者より，わたしにより以上のサーヴィスをする義務があるのやないの？」

In analyzing Kometani's use of the word *shakai* in the above example, I felt that it could be paraphrased in Japanese as *kono kuni* (この国) , since it's really just contrasting the situation in the two countries—Japan and America. I therefore translated the sentence with *shakai* in it as follows:

I'm female and I'm Asian, and a Japanese at that—the most hated Asians **in this country;** that means I'm working with two and a half handicaps.

Example 2: p. 142

In this example, the narrator is describing their house and how they were able to purchase it; she admits it was due to the financial success her husband Bob had experienced—which, in turn, she attributes to his being a while male—one of America's elite.

彼らの家は海の見晴らせる崖の上にある。まあ言うならば，ボブ一人で稼いで買った家で，成功した方であろう。その成功は白人男性という<u>アメリカ社会</u>で一番報酬の多い特権階級に負っているところが多い。それに乗っかっているゆうは，時々後ろめたく感じることがある。

The phrase *Amerika shakai* could be paraphrased as *Amerika no shakai chitsujo no naka ni* (アメリカの社会秩序の中に). Although the narrator is talking about America as a country here and comparing it to Japan, much as she did in Example 1, she is referring more specifically to the social system here. I therefore felt that this phrase could be directly translated as *American society*, or simply as *America.* In the end, I opted to stay close to the original Japanese in my translation:

That success owed a lot to his being a member of the elite class of top earners in **American society**—white males.

Example 3, p. 148

The third passage I chose contains the word *shakai* twice. In it, the narrator is describing conventional police treatment of minorities in Los Angeles and how, with the increase in the minority population in the city, this treatment had come under scrutiny and attack.

以前から，この町の白人ポリスは，少数民族に対して冷酷非情であるという定評があったのだが，実際に表だって取り上げられたのは珍しい。ポリスが証拠を隠滅してしまうからである。それでも，往々にしてこういうことがあるという話は<u>黒人社会</u>から聞こえてきていたのだった。それが，この度は，その残虐行為を一部始終ヴィデオ・カメラで撮った男がいた。白人の男で，新しく買ったカムコーダーを試していた時に，たまたま眼の前でその事件が起こっていたのだった。（省略）各テレヴィ局がその映像を放映してしまったのである。それでその時，残虐行為をしたポリスが，最近少数民族の数が増えた<u>ロスアンジェルスの社会</u>半分から批判を受け，裁判にまで持って行かれることになったのだった。

The first underlined phrase, *kokujin no shakai*, is referring to the blacks as a group or a community. It could be paraphrased as simply *kokujin* (黒人)or *kokujin kyoudoutai* (黒人共同体). This is too small an entity to be referred to as a *society* in English. It could be translated as *the black community* or simply *the blacks*. I chose the former in my translation:

> Nonetheless, there had been frequent reports from **the black community** about this kind of thing.

The second underlined phrase in this passage, *rosuanjerusu no shakai*, is only tangentially related to the English concept of *society*. In fact, it really is referring only to the people living there, or its population. It could be paraphrased as *rosuanjerusu no jinko* (ロスアンジェルスの人工) or to *rosuanjerusu no hitobito* (ロスアンジェルスの人々). I chose the former interpretation in my translation:

> In recent years, the number of people from minority groups living in the region had soared, and minorities now accounted for more than **half of the population of Los Angeles.** They condemned this act of police brutality, and the public outrage was so strong that the perpetrators were put on trial.

Example 4, pp. 152 - 153

This passage is part of a description of the economy in the greater Los Angeles area that provides historical background information for the novella. It contains two uses of *shakai* that I will analyze below.

> この土地は軍需産業と映画産業でお金がだぶついていたので，それで儲けた人達とは比べ
> ものにならなくても，少数民族にも充分といってよいほど職があったから，この社会は静
> かであったのかもしれない。でも，十四年間のベトナム戦争がアメリカの社会に与えた影
> 響は大変なものであった。

The first use of *shakai* in this passage is referring to the situation in Los Angeles at the time. It could be paraphrased as *kono machi no shakaiteki joukyou* (この町の社会的状況). Although it is describing the situation in society at that time, in English we don't usually say *society is quiet*. The colloquation we would most likely use in this case is *there had been no social unrest*, or possibly, *things had been quiet*. I chose the latter in my translation:

> At any rate, there was plenty of money flowing in this area thanks to the munitions and movie industries, so even if minority groups weren't making anywhere near as much as the people profiting from those industries, there were still plenty of jobs for them, and that may have been why **things had been quiet here**.

The second use of *shakai* in this passage, *Amerika no shakai*, refers to everything about the country: the social conditions and the social order. The Japanese could be paraphrased as *kuni no shakaiteki joukyou* (国の社会的状況). Here, I felt that it was appropriate to use *society* in my translation:

The Vietnam War, which lasted fourteen years, had had a huge impact on **American society**.

Example 5, pp. 153 - 154

The fifth passage is part of the economic history of the Los Angeles metropolitan area that serves as background to the story in *1,001 Fires Raging*. It describes what happened to the economy after the Vietnam War ended.

> 大量の解雇が出た。（省略）一番先に職を失うのは，そういう所で働いていた少数民族である。その中でも黒人社会が一番痛手を食う。

As in Example 3, *kokujin shakai* refers to the blacks as a group or as a community. It could be paraphrased as *kokujin* (黒人) or *kokujin kyoudoutai* (黒人共同体). This group is too limited to be considered a *society* in English. It could be translated as *the black community* or simply *the blacks*. In my translation, I tried to vary my wording—a sign of good writing in English—by using *African Americans* in this case.

> Thousands of people lost their jobs. . . . but the first ones to lose their jobs were the minorities working at those plants. And **African-Americans** suffered the most.

Example 6, p. 166

In this sixth example passage, the narrator of *1,001 Fires Raging* compares the discrimination against resident Koreans and Chinese as well as members of the former outcast (*Dowa*) group in Japan before the War with the situation faced by African Americans in the U.S.

> そのようにして徐々に，日本に住んでいる，韓国人や中国人，解放同盟の人々に対する一般の日本人の態度に思い至ったのだった。（省略）戦後でも露骨に軽蔑の態度を示す日本人が多かったし，また日本に住んでいる少数民族の人々の権利を守る法律さえなかったのだ。あの社会，ましてや，軍国主義の戦争中，これらの人々は命を掛けて，ジェイムズ・ボールドウインのような生活をしていたのだと，アメリカに住んで初めて理解したことだった。

Here, the phrase *ano shakai* is referring to the conditions in a specific country at a specific time. I would paraphrase it as *ano jidai no nihon*, possibly adding *no shakai* (あの時代の日本 ((の社会)). Translating this as *society* would somehow narrow the nuance. I therefore opted to translate this phrase rather freely as *in that setting:*

> Through experiences like these, Yu had gradually started to consider the attitude ordinary Japanese have toward Korean and Chinese residents of Japan, as well as towards members of the former outcaste group known as *burakumin* . . . . Even after the War, many Japanese openly displayed their contempt for people from those groups, and there weren't even any laws to protect minorities living in Japan. It was only after she had begun living in America that it dawned on her that **in that setting**, and even more so under the militaristic conditions prevalent during the War, those people's very lives were at risk—that they were in fact living under conditions very similar to those James Baldwin wrote about.

Example 7, p. 176

In this passage, the narrator is reflecting on how difficult it might be for her to readjust to the Japanese culture and lifestyle after having lived in America for so many years.

> 「私達も（日本）出てから，十二年にもなるのよ。日本に帰っても，狭苦しいしねえ。物価は高いし，人はうるさいし，再び<u>あの社会</u>にアダプトできるかやわ。」

As I mentioned above, the narrator is thinking about what it would be like to live in Japan again—within the confines of Japanese culture and in accordance with the Japanese way of life. *Ano shakai* might therefore be paraphrased as *ano seikatsu buri* (あの生活ぶり) or *ano bunka* (あの文化). Although here I would have a hard time saying that this does not mean *society* in the sense of definition 4 in the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (a highly structured system of human organization for large-scale community living that normally furnishes protection, continuity, security, and a national identity), when I was translating this, I felt that it was strange to talk about *adapting to a society*—we normally talk about *adapting to a culture*. In this respect, I felt it was important to find a natural-sounding collocation for the translation, and I settled on *that culture:*

> "Well, it's been twelve years since we left Japan, you know. If we went back there now, we'd probably just feel caged in. Prices are high and the people are so picky, I'm not sure we could adapt to that way of life again. I'm not sure we could adapt to ***that culture*** again."

Example 8, p. 186

In the eighth example passage, the narrator is thinking about the dangers of life in America:

> 外出した時，ホールド・アップされる可能性がある<u>社会</u>なので…

As in Example 1, this sentence is really just contrasting America and Japan; it's basically comparing the two countries, so *shakai* here could be paraphrased as *kuni* (国). I therefore translated it as *country*:

> In this **country** there was always the possibility that you could be held up when you went out, . . .

Example 9, p. 187

In the next passage, the narrator, Yu, is thinking back to her first days in America, when she was quite unfamiliar with the country's way of life.

> ゆうは<u>アメリカの社会</u>の状態を，何も知らなかったに等しい。

As in the second time *shakai* was used in Example 4, it is referring to everything about the country: its social conditions as well as its social order. *Amerika no shakai* could be paraphrased as *kuni no shakaiteki joukyou* (国の社会的状況) here. Thus, it would be appropriate to use the word *society* in the translation. Other possibilities would be simply *America* or *the American way of life*. As in the second use in Example 4, I decided to stay close to the original in my translation:

At the time, Yu had known almost nothing about **American society**.

Conclusion

Although *shakai* was selected for use as the equivalent of the English term *society* during the Meiji Period, its usage today diverges from *society* in two important ways. First, its usage is more limited than *society* in that it does not include students, housewives, and retired persons, while *society* includes all these groups. Second, at least as seen in Kometani Foumiko's novella *1,001 Fires Raging*, it can be used to refer to a broader range of phenomena—including ethnic groups, cultures, countries and social conditions at a specific time period—than *society* can. The English term is most often used when referring to conditions and the social order of an entire country and everyone in it.

While this study focused mainly on data from one work of fiction, it is hoped that it illustrates how even rather strictly defined academic terms that are seen as equivalents in two languages may diverge in meaning and usage over time. Further research into whether the wording used when *society* is translated into Japanese might shed more light on this matter.

Notes

1. This paper is based on portions of a presentation I made to a seminar organized by the English Linguistics and Literature Graduate School Research Group of Kansai University on September 8, 2008.
2. 『語源由来辞典』. 社会. Accessed January 2, 2014 at http://gogen-allguide.com/si/syakai.html.
3. Wikipedia Japan, 社会, 語源. Accessed January 2, 2014 at http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/ 社会.
4. My English translation of this work was published by Dalkey Archive Press under the title *Wasabi for Breakfast* in 2013.
5. Page numbers refer to the page in the original Japanese novella on which the passages appeared.

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