

The concept of kotodama as a fragment of Japanese linguocultural code

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Abstract. The purpose of the article is to study the concept of Kotodama, based on the Kotodama belief, and to analyze the role of this phenomenon in the Japanese linguoculture. In the course of the study, we reveal its origin, evolution and present status. The linguocultural and axiological approaches enable us to represent the main characteristics of Kotodama as an essential part of the Japanese language and culture.

1 Introduction

From ancient times there has always been a respectful attitude towards the word or the symbol in different cultures and traditions. The Holy Bible says, «In the beginning was the Word», and it was the God, who said it the first. Therefore, primarily the word was supposed to be a sacred entity, endowed with the power of creating things.

It is also believed that the combination of sounds “Om” or “Aum” in Sanskrit radiates Divine Vibrations, produces healing energy and has a variety of sacred meanings, depending on the starting point of interpretation.

It is a well-known fact that the Korean Alphabet *hangul* is recognized as a cultural heritage of Korea, whose high status is emphasized by the celebration of the Korean Alphabet Day on October, 9 every year.

The Japanese tradition of the gentle and respectful attitude to the word dates back to the ancient times, when the Kotodama belief was born.

According to the Shinto Religion every object of nature was worshipped, the word had a soul which was called *Kotodama* (there are two ways to write it in Japanese Characters: 言霊 or 言魂). Due to the Shinto beliefs, *Kotodama* has a magical power to change or create the reality.

2 Origins of the concept

The first references to *Kotodama* were found in the corpus of the Japanese poetry 万葉集 *Man'yōshū*: “Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves”, which goes back to the second half of the 8th century.

As specified in *Man'yōshū*, *Kotodama* appears to be one of the exclusively positive and glorious characteristics of Yamato (the old name of Japan), which is connected with Shinto Gods 神 *Kami* and the Emperor (the descendant of *Kami*).

Thereby, the origin of the idea, as well as the phenomenon of *Kotodama*, had been born and evolved on the territory of Japan and particularly in the Japanese language long before the Chinese characters were borrowed.

Originally emperors, priests and poets were supposed to utter the *Kotodama*-words, because in those times people believed that *Kotodama* lived in *Norito* prayers, *Emperor's orders* and poems *Waka* (和歌, which means “the Japanese songs” and represents the traditional Japanese poetry). It is also important to note that both prayers and Emperor's orders were put in a poetic form.

Consequently, the main features of spoken words, endowed with *Kotodama*, are [1]:

- 1) the words uttered by Shinto Gods *Kami*;
- 2) the words passed to the people inhabiting the territory of Yamato;
- 3) the words used for performing Shinto rituals, in Emperor's acts and speeches, in poetry;
- 4) the words of prayers, addressed to the Shinto Gods, Buddhas or people;
- 5) the words have a special magic power, which can influence the recipient, and even can make the Emperor live longer.

Due to the passage of time, the belief in the magic power of the word didn't fade away, but grew stronger, and even turned into the 言霊学 *Kotodamagaku* “The teaching of a word's soul”.

Nowadays the problem of *Kotodama* draws the attention of both Japanese and foreign researchers. The popularity of studying *Kotodama* is usually explained by the uniqueness of the Japanese language, territorial limitations and the originality of the Japanese worldview that is closely connected with the Shinto beliefs.

3 Evolution of the concept of Kotodama and Kotodamagaku

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The term *Kotodama* was firstly used in the classical literature of the Nara Period (710-784). Famous Japanese ethnologist, folklorist, literary scholar and educator Origuchi Shinobu represented three stages of the change in the meaning of *Kotodama* in his studies (1927, 1935, 1943) [2, 3, 4].

The ancient interpretation sends us back to the Divine Powers, which were depicted in the prayer rituals *Norito* and related to the Shinto beliefs and Shinto Gods *Kami*. Then there was the first change in the meaning of *Kotodama* – the *Norito* prayers were believed to be spiritual, full of souls and spirits, dwelling there. At the final stage syllables, words, language and speech get souls and spirits as well [5].

Afterwards, the developing of the concept of *Kotodama* was studied by Linguistics that considers *Kotodama* as a verbal action, where as soon as the word is uttered it is materialized. Probably, there is a connection with the ancient ritual actions *ことあげ* *kotoage* «materialization of a word» which included the process of praying to Gods, uttering special words and transferring their souls into the real life.

Since there was a belief that uttered words could make a destiny, the rituals of *kotoage* were avoided and such manipulations were forbidden [6].

Besides, according to Toyoda's research the ancient Japanese did not distinguish between two meanings of the word *こと* *koto* 1) “words” and 2) “things”. Consequently, the belief in *Kotodama* implied that the name was actually equal to the event, which happened when the word was uttered [7].

In the current research the problem of defining the status and role of *Kotodama* and the influence of *Kotodamagaku* on the evolution of Japanese and Japanese Linguistic tradition is still relevant. For example, the research of Kazuya Hara is devoted to specifying the role of *Kotodama* in Japanese Communication (Kazuya Hara, 2001-2002). The various examples of the implicit role of the *Kotodama* belief in communication show that the influence of this belief really exists and is expressed in different ways, both verbal and non-verbal. On the one hand, *Kotodama* is understood as a superstition, which causes obstacles to the freedom of speech, on the other hand, “using words carefully, tactfully and considerably” is important and highly appreciated [5].

Russian researcher V.A. Matveenko studies *Kotodama* in terms of hermeneutics as a way of the Japanese worldview. It is quite an interesting vision of the problem, which reveals a close connection between the concept of *Kotodama* and the Japanese language. As a result of the research the author concludes that the lack of distinction between words and actions leads to *the linguistic transparency of being*. Thus, language is considered to be a metaphysical act, which creates the possibility of the persistent formation of being in the world and the human presence in it [6].

So, in scientific circles there are different and sometimes completely controversial theories which demonstrate the concept of *Kotodama* as a reflection of

ancient Shinto beliefs, a superstition or illusion, or a metaphysical entity of the Japanese language.

4 Model of linguocultural code

On the basis of the linguocultural approach the term “code” is understood as a system of the worldview categorization which exists in interactions between archetypal and mythological characters and become implemented in the language by axiological concepts, phraseological units, paremiological expressions and precedent texts.

It is also important to define this term from the semiotic point of view, which helps to reveal the following features of the code as a structure [8]:

- the code is a dynamical structure that is related to the other codes and allows one to get the access to the codes of different levels;
- it is a multilevel system;
- a metamodel, providing the key to interpretation of different layers of a code;
- the code is inexhaustible, namely, it is impossible to reach its deepest invariant level, to penetrate into the essence of its phenomenology.

The components of the code might be represented by the axiological concepts of the different levels of the language.

5 The concept of *Kotodama* as a fragment of code

From the perspective of *Kotodama* studies of both Japanese and foreign researchers the words and expressions, which are supposed to contain *Kotodama*, are divided into several groups.

5.1. *Imikotoba* “substitute words”

The first group refers to one of the oldest layers of the Japanese language – *忌み言葉* *Imikotoba* “substitute words”. The existence of words, which are prohibited to pronounce aloud, is explained by the ancient belief that animals, fish and birds could speak and understand the human language.

Therefore, instead of the forbidden names of game animals, hunting weapons, fishing gears, as well as the names of hunters and fishermen, the Japanese used *imikotoba*. For example, *けだもの* *kedamono* “a hairy creature” (used instead of the “animal”), *うみさち* *umisachi* “sea luck” (instead of “fishing rod”), *やまさち* *yamasachi* “forest luck” (instead of hunting weapon), *とりのあそび* *tori no asobi* “bird amusement” (instead of fowling) [9].

The groups of substitute words *Imikotoba* are numerous and not limited to the category of hunting, fishing and names of game animals. The other categories include the following varieties of words: numerals, the names of Gods, priests, emperors, as well as some words, related to travelling, death, blood and impurity.

5.2. Numerals

It is worth mentioning that the beliefs related to numerals are relevant at present and exist in everyday life of Japanese.

Thus, for instance, the names of numbers 四 *shi* “four” and 九 *ku* “nine” are considered to bring bad luck, because they are homonymic to the words 死 *shi* “death” and 苦 *ku* “suffering”. For this reason, a Japanese hardly would pick up a comb left by someone. The name of the comb in Japanese くし *kushi* is homonymic to both suffering and death, and, consequently, is supposed to bring bad luck [5].

On the opposite, the numbers 三 *san* “three”, 五 *go* “five” and 七 *shichi/nana* “seven” are believed to bring good luck in the Japanese linguoculture. The number 三 *san* “three” has a sacral and magical meaning. A plenty of religious and everyday rituals are usually performed three times. The Japanese put a 五円 *goen* «five yens» coin into the purse to attract good luck since it sounds the same as ご縁 *goen* “good luck”/ “life-changing ties”, and also is related to the expression 縁がある *en ga aru* “to be on a lucky streak”.

Beyond that, the annual holiday 七五三 *shichigosan* “seven-five-three” plays a part of a significant landmark event for the children of three, five, seven, which celebrate the coming-of-age ceremony.

The number 八 *hachi* “eight” also refers to the “lucky” numerals, since the silhouette of it looks like an open fan, which is the symbol of growth, progress and prosperity.

5.3. Traditional syllabary Iroha

Not only words and numbers, but also syllables are believed to keep some magic power. Thus, the Japanese phonetic alphabet serves as a striking example demonstrating the possibility to create powerful words.

The first Japanese phonetic alphabet was made at the beginning of the 9th century. The syllables are arranged in the order いろは *Iroha* and, as a result, form a well-known poem, which includes every syllable of the alphabet and helps to memorize it:

いろはにほへと	<i>I ro ha ni ho he to</i>
ちりぬるを	<i>Chi ri nu ru wo</i>
わかよたれそ	<i>Wa ta yo re so</i>
つねならむ	<i>Tsu ne na ra mu</i>
うゑのおくやま	<i>U wi no o ku ya ma</i>
けふこえて	<i>Ke fu ko e te</i>
あさきゆめみし	<i>A sa ki yu me mi shi</i>
ゑひもせす	<i>We hi mo se su</i>

The translation of this poem into English by Professor Ryuichi Abe reads as:

“Although its scent still lingers on
the form of a flower has scattered away
For whom will the glory
of this world remain unchanged?
Arriving today at the yonder side
of the deep mountains of evanescent existence
We shall never allow ourselves to drift away
intoxicated, in the world of shallow dreams”.

The poem allows not only to keep in memory Japanese syllabary, but also to become acquainted with the nature of a human being in the light of the Japanese worldview. This poem represents the ideas of Buddhism, such as the opposition of “doing – undoing”, illusiveness and temporality of a human being, evanescence and brevity of life.

Moreover, it is worth drawing attention to the word いろ *iro* “flower” in the very beginning of the poem, because it has a variety of meanings: “color”, “love”, “passion”. Consequently, there is a possibility to understand and interpret the poem in different ways, which implies the existence of simultaneous parallel interpretations.

The syllabary *Iroha* is considered to be a culture forming text, and there are certain reasons for that. As we mentioned above, the children were taught to memorize the alphabet with the help of the poem where the things were enumerated in the sequence of い、ろ、は... *I, ro, ha...* “one, two, three...”. This way of the *Iroha-order* is very popular and is used in the dictionary entries, games, in which Japanese created poems close to rituals (Steiner, 2008). Another game is based on a set of cards, called いろはカルタ *Iroha karuta*, which consists of cards with pictures and parts of proverbs in the traditional Japanese syllabary order.

As a word いろは *Iroha* has the meaning “the basics” or “the fundamentals” in Japanese, and the expression いろはのい *Iroha no I* stands for “the most basic element of all”.

Beside the traditional order of the Japanese alphabet, there was also a number of pangrams, known as 手習歌 *tenaraiuta* “training songs”. Probably, the most popular among them is 「あめつちのうた」 *Ame tsuchi no uta* “The song of the heaven and the earth”:

あめ	つち	ほし	そら
<i>Ame</i>	<i>tsuchi</i>	<i>hoshi</i>	<i>sora</i>
やま	かは	みね	たに
<i>Yama</i>	<i>kaha</i>	<i>mine</i>	<i>tani</i>
くも	きり	むろ	こけ
<i>Kumo</i>	<i>kiri</i>	<i>muro</i>	<i>koke</i>
ひと	いぬ	うへ	すゑ
<i>Hito</i>	<i>inu</i>	<i>uhe</i>	<i>suwe</i>
ゆわ	さる	おふせよ	
<i>Yuwa</i>	<i>saru</i>	<i>ofuseyo</i>	
えのえ	を	なれ	みて
<i>Eno</i>	<i>yewo</i>	<i>narewite</i>	

A rough translation into English reads:

“Heaven, earth, star, sky,
Mountain, river, ridge, valley,
Cloud, fog, mudhouse, moss,
Person, dog, top, end,
Sulfur, monkey, grow!

Hackberry brunch! Keep getting more familiar!”

This poem includes a list of the components and elements, forming the Universe, supposedly, implies the symbolic meanings, and includes the educational aspect of how the world is organized.

Thus, until the end of the Second World War and the introduction of a new modern syllabary order 五十音

goju: on “50 syllables”, the phonetic alphabet *いろは Iroha* follow the principles of symbolization, sacralization and syllable order for easy memorizing.

According to the researcher’s opinion, until recently the poetic-metaphorical method using rhythmical pangrams has been the dominating way of the syllabary order in Japan. Such way of the arrangement was reasonable, meaningful and conveyed both thoughts, senses and the ideological depth of the worldview [10].

5.4. Proper names and toponyms

Further in our research, we consider the category of proper names, which are supposed to contain *kotodama* and a large fragment of the linguocultural code.

Since ancient times to the present day, the characters in the names were believed to bring good luck or bad luck. These beliefs are traditionally related to the vision of the things and symbols that could provide good luck and protect from the bad one. A talisman, an amulet or as it called in Japanese *お守り Omamori* has also another name *縁起物 Engimono* “A thing, bestowing fortune”.

In the process of choosing a name for a newborn, the Japanese usually pay attention to the meaning of characters. Therefore, the dictionaries of proper names play a significant role in the Japanese Lexicography.

As for the toponyms, the great majority of the Japanese geographical names consist of the characters, which are believed to bring good luck, and at the same time, confirm the idea of the magical power of the words and their influence on the life and prosperity of the place. One of the most popular characters used in the names of toponyms is *富 tomi* “wealth” [11].

Apparently, abundance and prosperity lie at the root of successful growth and development of any geographical object. There is a number of well-known names, such as: *富士山 Fujisan* “the Mount Fuji”, *富山県 Toyamaken* “the Prefecture Toyama” etc.

Besides, the most widespread characters for naming geographical objects are the following:

- *福 fuku* “good luck, happiness, well-being” (e.g.: in the names of Prefectures *福岡 Fukuoka*, *福島 Fukushima*, *福井 Fukui*);
- *和 wa* “peace, harmony” (in the names of such places as *和歌山 Wakayama*, *和光 Wako*, *和泉 Izumi*);
- *豊 yutaka* “abundant” (in the names of the towns *豊田 Toyota*, *豊川 Toyokawa*, *豊岡 Toyooka*).

Moreover, to strengthen the positive meaning of the toponyms, people repeated or added a “good” character to the name, e.g.: *大* “big”, *新* “new”, *上* “up”, *高* “high”, *喜* “delightful, joyful”.

On the opposite, “bad” characters were avoided in naming geographical objects: e.g.: *下* “down”, *北* “the north”, *死* “death”, *禍* “misfortune”, *病* “illness” etc. However, it was possible to change a “bad” name. The name of the city *シコツ Shikotsu*, which in the Ainu language meant «A big lowland», was homonymic to *死*

骨 shikotsu “death and bones”. As a result, in 1805 the city was renamed to *千歳 Chitose* “A thousand years”.

Actually, the idea of renaming is related to the fact that a lot of cranes lived there. It is also a well-known fact that a crane is a symbol of a long life in the Japanese culture, and it can be proved by the proverb: *鶴は千年、亀は万年 Tsuru wa sennen, kame wa mannen* “A crane lives a thousand years, a tortoise lives ten thousand years” [12].

The river in the Chitose City got the same name *千歳 Chitose*, but the name of the lake remains the old one, although it is written in different characters *支笏 Shikotsu*. In olden days, there were frightening legends about the ghosts, who lived in the lake, and the place itself was notorious for suicides [13].

Nowadays municipal governments still get requests for renaming geographical objects and discuss these questions at the same level as other important issues [11].

5.5. Prohibited words and set expressions

Since the earliest times the Japanese traditions have recommended using words carefully and tactfully, especially on special occasions and big events.

At weddings people avoid such words as *離れる hanareru* “to break up”, *別れる wakareru* “to separate”, *終わる owaru* “to finish”, *切れる kireru* “to become torn”, *失う ushinau* “to lose”, *避ける sakeru* “to avoid”, *捨てる suteru* “to throw away”, *去る saru* “to leave”, *帰る kaeru* “to return”, *返す kaesu* “to give back”, *断つ tatsu* “to cut off”, *ほころびる hokorobiru* “to come unstitched”, *解ける tokeru* “to come untied” etc.

The next group of words and expressions, containing *Kotodama*, includes set expressions and phrases, which should be used in definite communicative situations. Such kinds of expressions are typical for speaking etiquette, because they are easy to produce and provide a number of set expressions among which the speaker can choose the most suitable one.

Besides, such set phrases are easy to recognize and understand, helping the speaker save face and avoid awkward situations like bluntness in speech. For example, at the end of the working day Japanese people usually use the following expressions: *お先に失礼します。Osaki ni shitsurei shimasu*. “I’m sorry for leaving earlier (than you)” (literal translation), *お疲れ様です。Otsukare sama desu*. “Thank you for your today’s work and cooperation” (literal translation). The content of these phrases not only recommends and demonstrates colleagues’ politeness to each other, but also adds a shade of gratitude and apology to a formal good-bye.

According to the Japanese researchers, proverbs also keep some magic power, and the word “proverb” itself in earlier times was equal to the meaning of the word *呪言 dzyugon* “spell” [14].

The proverbs about beliefs and superstitions are striking examples of the concept of *Kotodama*: *茶碗を箸で叩くと貧乏神が来る Chawan wo hashi de tataku*

to *bimbo*: *kami ga kuru* “If you tap against the bowl with the chopsticks, the God of poverty will come”; 米をこぼすと、火事になる *Kome wo kobosu to, kaji ni naru* “If rice is spilled, the fire will start”; 秋なすは嫁に食わすな *Akinasu wa yome ni kuwasuna* “Don’t give your bride the eggplants picked in fall” (otherwise she won’t have children).

6 Main characteristics of Japanese as a fragment of linguocultural code

Careful and sensitive attitude to the word usage as far as minimalism are considered to be a sign of good manners in the Japanese Linguoculture. That is why set expressions and colloquial phrases are usually formulated in a short laconic manner. Ellipsis and incompleteness of sentences are also typical for colloquial everyday speech. The latter means that the recipient reads between the lines, guesses what the speaker has said and reacts properly, namely, according to the expectations of the speaker.

The core features of the Japanese language, which may be considered as the characteristics of the Linguocultural code, are expressed by such key words as 曖昧な *aimaina* “ambiguous, uncertain, elusive” and 微妙な *bimyouna* “delicate, subtle”.

Actually, the representatives of the other linguocultures often complain that Japanese phrases are ambiguous and difficult to understand. However, on the other hand, Japanese are never confused communicating with each other. However, the informational gap, which is a significant obstacle for a European, turns into an opportunity to create a comfortable communicative space which is so much appreciated by Japanese. This phenomenon implies the mutual care about each other which lets the listener read between the lines and guess the meaning of an untold message.

As for the second feature, the word 微妙な *bimyo: na* has the homonymic variant 美 妙 な *bimyo: na* “beautiful, refined”, which may serve as one more important characteristic of Japanese. Firstly, because in Japanese there are large groups of words, called 美化語 *bikago* “beautiful words” (the words, which denote politeness and are used with prefixes of politeness) and 上品な言葉 *jo: hinna kotoba* “refined words”. Secondly, the Japanese language is closely connected with the Japanese culture, which is rich in aesthetic categories and the sense of beauty.

The sublime art of communication is the non-verbal one which also may be considered the significant feature of the Japanese Linguoculture. It may be described by the set expression 以心伝心 *Ishindenshin* “From heart to heart communication”. This phrase implies creating the unified comfortable space for the speakers, co-existing in harmony, on the same wavelength, when it becomes possible to understand and feel each other without any words.

7 Conclusion

Summing up, 言霊 *Kotodama* “a soul of the word” is a unique phenomenon, originated in Japan and still existing in the Japanese culture due to the maintenance and continuity of traditions. In a narrow sense *Kotodama* is defined as a term related to the ancient Shinto beliefs. In this case, we limit its scope to *Norito*-prayers, Emperor’s orders and traditional poems *Waka*.

However, according to the current studies, it is necessary to consider the concept of *Kotodama* widely, as it lets us observe its influence on the origins and evolution of the Japanese language and culture. Seeing a word as a precious gift, understanding its importance and tangibility, respecting the speaker, avoiding bluntness in communication – all these features of the Japanese language remind us that the word really has a soul.

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