Japanese Lacquer Art and Lacquered Furniture: two Multilingual Facetted Microthesauri

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Abstract: Japanese lacquers (nurimono) of the Edo (1603-1868) and Meiji (1868-1912) periods belonging to the broad category of civil furniture and furnishings (dōgu, okuzai) offer both a wide and varied range of morpho-functional typologies and diverse, complex and subtly differentiated manufacturing techniques and decorative expressions. The original Japanese terminologies in both fields are very rich and interesting: in fact, they have been used throughout the past centuries to denominate distinct objects and processes, by identifying their features and peculiarities. Such abundant terminological patrimony forms the best foundation for exact, congruent and fine documentary descriptions, but it is not easily mastered unless it becomes organized within the framework of highly formalized conceptual structures, namely hierarchical lexicons or thesauri.

1. Introduction

Museum curators and art historians must face various descriptive problems while cataloguing Far Eastern decorative art objects and handicrafts, not only because they often fail to have suitable comparisons in the West, but also because they have very seldom been described systematically. Yet, their original names, as well as the traditional descriptions of their morpho-structural features and manufacturing techniques, are most important not only to clearly identify and define their essential characters and properties, but also help to denote their historical, aesthetic and stylistic meanings. It is widely recognized that the descriptive contents of the catalogue constitute a very relevant part of the documentary representation of art items and their meanings. Admittedly, the documentary effectiveness and utility of the catalogue depend upon the constant, exact, coherent employ of highly defined univocal terms, the meanings of which should be clearly pre-interpreted and pre-de-term-i ned. Therefore, the construction of instruments for the control of the documentary descriptions could be indispensable for domains that do not benefit from well-spread and acknowledged descriptive rules and conventions. To properly describe Japanese nurimono, art objects meant for performing daily functions and activities, beautifully decorated by means of intricate techniques of coating and decoration, we need to understand their primary contextual integrity: the latter is conceived as the whole combination of pragmatic and conceptual meanings that constitute the actual and virtual representations of a certain item within the context of its original civilization. The
primary item is a compound of general and specific, open and implied, explicit and implicit meanings, that can be brought to light and ordered through the integrated analysis and organic interpretation made possible by hermeneutics.

1.1. Choosing the Instruments for the Documentary Description and Scrutinizing the Available Sources

In our chosen fields, the self-evident need consisted in preparing instruments of vocabulary control in which the original patrimony of knowledge and experience could be interpreted, made understandable through possible semasiological equivalences, ordered and represented systematically. This kind of instruments could only be multilingual thesauri. Two thesauri have been constructed, using **Japanese** as the source-language, while **Italian** and **English** are the two target-languages:

- Japanese Civil Furniture and Furnishings;
- Materials and Techniques in the Art of Lacquering.

Actually, English has been regarded as the main intermediary language between the original patrimony of knowledge and its spreading through the Western studies: in fact, much of the specialized literature in the West is either written in British and American English, or translated and at least summarized into English from the original books, essays and articles published during the past forty years by German, French, Danish, Swedish, and recently also Hungarian, scholars. Moreover, some important and well known Japanese books and exhibition catalogues on lacquers (nurimono) published during the last twenty years contain summaries, abridged catalogue-entries and, more rarely, technical glossaries and indexes in English. But unfortunately, the fundamental Japanese works are still untranslated, and practically all of the scholarly books, specialized essays and articles by relevant Japanese authorities are available only in the original version.

On the other hand, the Italian contribution to the research, study and diffusion of knowledge on nurimono is now at its very beginning, and the compilation of the two thesauri is meant to lay the ground from which further studies can develop in the near future among the Italian scholars: points of main reference are not only the lacquers in the Museo Chiossone in Genoa, but also some unknown collections, only recently re-discovered, never seriously studied and catalogued before.

1.2 Semasiological Equivalences and Denominative Attributions

The interpretative attempt implies the research of possible semasiological equivalences, which really be structurally congruent and understandable within a general frame of concepts and ideas. Needless to say, such a research implies crucial reflections about the relative comparability between certain conceptual and pragmatic meanings in different civilizations, as well as compelling reasonnings on the general structures of ideation and the various articulations of fundamental functions in diverse cultures. These reflections do not form the aim and clue of the present work, yet they have been its constant tuning-keys. There-
fore, the Italian and English renderings cannot usually be exact equivalents of
the source-descriptors: they often represent de-nominative attributions, aiming
to attain the distinct definition of objects and processes, i.e. clear de-term-inations
suitable for employ in the documentary descriptions.

2. Features of the Source-Descriptors and Choice of a Suitable Classi-
ification System

The original Japanese names or source-descriptors have been firstly collected
and filed in their kanji or ideographical written forms, and then transcribed in
roman letters (rômaji) according to the Hepburn system. The renderings in West-
erm languages were also collected and registered as they were found in the vari-
ous sources. Kanji nouns usually have the shape of compound-words (jukugo), or
character-compounds (kan-jukugo). The simplest kind of kan-jukugo is formed,
as a rule, by two ideographical units, namely a denominative semantheme, pre-
ceded by a determinative semantheme.
This implies that a given denominative semantheme, preceded by different de-
terminative units serving as qualifiers, forms several compound-words, often
covering a wide range of variant meanings within the precincts of a certain se-
monic field. So to speak, a sort of natural facetted structure appears to be an
intrinsic feature of the Japanese kan-jukugo lexicon, and this is obviously an
interesting advantage under the point of view of classification. Under these cir-
cumstances, the facetted classification seems to be the most suitable system for
the chosen subject fields.
This peculiar feature of the *kan-jukugo* can be very usefully exploited, for in-
stance, while hierarchically ordering sub-types and variations of objects under a
certain model type. *Example*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A1c.C.a</th>
<th>TANSU</th>
<th>笼笥</th>
<th>Drawered Chest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tim-tsg</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stipo a Cassetti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1e.C.al</td>
<td>CHADANSU</td>
<td>茶篋笥</td>
<td>Tea Chest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sti-ts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stipo da Tè</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1c.C.al.a</td>
<td>TABI-CHADANSU</td>
<td>旅茶篋笥</td>
<td>Travel Tea-Chest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>var-tss</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stipo da Tè da Viaggio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.1 Polysemy, Homography, Multiphony, Homophony

These phenomena are not relevant in our chosen fields, but possible misinterpre-
tations depending upon them are prevented by the attribution of a univocal al-
phanumerical notation to each term (see below, § 4.).
The high degree of polysemy essentially inherent in the ideographical language units implies the existence of partially homograph compound-words not sharing any extent of synonymy. *Example:*

A2d.E.b tim-tsg **FUSEGO** 付せ籠 Clothes Perfume Cage
Tim-tsg Gabbia Profumiera per Vestiario

A2c.A.d tim-tsg **JIKIRÔ** 食籠 Ornamental Box for Sweets Scatola Portadolci Ornamentale

Partial homographies concerning the denominative components of some *kan-jukugo* might at times denote some degree of morpho-structural similarity or morpho-functional affinity between objects belonging to distinct classes and/or subclasses. *Example:*

A2b.B.c tim-tsg **KENDAI** 見台 Reading Stand Leggio

A2d.A.m tim-tsg **KYÔDAI** 鏡台 Dressing Stand Stipetto Portaspecchio

A1e.B.a tim-tsg **TÔDAI** 灯台 Stem Lamp Lampada a Stelo

Partial homographies concerning the determinative component of some *kan-jukugo* might indicate that different objects share a common functional pertinence or belong to the same class and/or subclass. *Example:*

A2b.C.a tim-tsg **BUNCHIN** 文鎮 Paper Weight Fermacarte

A2b.B.a tim-tsg **BUNDAI** 文台 Formal Writing Table Tavolinetto-Scrittoio Ornamentale

A2b.A.a tim-tsg **BUNKO** 文庫 Document Case Scatola Portadocumenti

By *multiphony* it is meant that two or more different kun (Japanese) and on (Chinese) readings may exist and be in use for one and the same *kanji*. *Example:*

A2c.F.el sti-ts **KAKU-ZARA** 角皿 Square Dish Piatto Quadrato

A2d.A.q tim-tsg **SUMIAKA-BAKO** 角赤箱 Red-Edged Cosmetic Supply Box Scatola da Trucco ad Angoli Rossi
Homophony, i.e., one and the same reading for different ideographical language units, is quite a peculiar feature to Japanese and Chinese languages, that has been exploited for literary and popular puns since times of old. In our fields, however, problems of homophony are not particularly relevant, and usually concern the determinative semanthemes in different kan-jukugo. Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUMIKA-BAKO</td>
<td>角赤箱</td>
<td>Red-Edged Cosmetic Supply Box</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUMI-SASHI</td>
<td>墨指し</td>
<td>Inkstick Grip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUMITORI</td>
<td>炭取り</td>
<td>Charcoal Scuttle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Focusing on the Primary Contextual Item

As a matter of fact, meanings take shape and constitute themselves contextually: objects and processes appear and live together with their names within the texture of civilization, and since their very first appearance they are intrinsic parts of the same texture from which they originate. There should be no doubt, then, that objects and processes are best described by their original names, and that the original “object-and-name” and “process-and-name” items represent the primary contextual unities that have to be taken under consideration in view of a systematic classification. What I call “unity” appears to my concern as the original contextual integrity of a certain item: that is, the relative order of meanings, general and specific, open and implied, which are at the same time conveyed both factually and virtually by a certain object and its name, i.e. by material and abstract, explicit and implicit representations. In the specific domain of artifacts, names become fully understandable and transparent only if interpreted and seen through the essential features, properties and functions of the factual objects, while the latter reveal their deepest meanings and variegated links within the broader context of civilization when we look at them through the actual and virtual concepts represented in and by their names. We might say that the contextual integrity of a given item, under an hermeneutical approach and for a documentary intent, can be attained only when the main articulation of general and specific meanings and the relative order of concepts have been explained, made understandable and representable. It is assumed that pragmatic and conceptual meanings are unevenly distributed in the concrete object or process, and in their names: in fact, meanings are conveyed partly by the factual objects or concrete artifacts, partly by their names, the latter being considered as forms of virtual and conceptual representations.
Consequently, their interpretation should not only be parallel, but also mutually integrated (see below, § 3.1.1).

3.1 Seeking for the Components of the Primary Contextual Item

Concrete objects and technical processes are bearers of the pragmatic meanings of certain primary items and, as such, they are regarded as the material components and representations of certain primary items. Objects and processes might be seen as morpho-structural, functional subsidiary extensions of the human body and its activities, as means devised for perfectly performing certain functions and for accomplishing certain needs. Their intrinsic characters and essential properties consist of structure and shape, size, format and measurements, kind of material and manufacturing techniques.

Objects’ and processes’ names bear and represent the conceptual meanings of certain primary items: therefore they might be regarded as instruments for thinking. One should observe that names usually refer to their objects and processes through the selective enunciation of certain features: this is what could be called a “thematization of meanings”. By the enunciation of certain “thematized meanings”, names implicitly hint also to some sort of virtual order (neither explicit nor self-evident, but all-the-way potentially existing). So we might say that names are selective and thematized, virtual and conceptual representations of the objects and processes to which they refer. In fact, by selecting certain meanings, some features are “thematized” (explicitly declared), while other features are necessarily dropped, excluded from the enunciation, i.e. driven behind or merged into the virtual background. The “thematization” is particularly evident in the written ideographical forms of the kan-jukugo, that intrinsically retain a strong pictorial, visually telling figurative capacity. The determinative components of the kan-jukugo usually carry the “thematized” meanings, that mainly denote “real content”, “virtual content”, “destination”, “function”, “size”, “shape”, “structure”, “appearance”, “similarity”, “colour”, “matter”, and only more rarely personal and geographical names.

In short, we might say that each name simultaneously
- bears foreground meanings, that are explicit and “thematized”;
- hints to background meanings, that are implicit, pertaining or referring to an implied order of general and/or specific concepts and functions.

3.1.1 One Example of Contextual Analysis

The example of “object-and-name” contextual analysis, chosen to demonstrate the steps guided by hermeneutics, is very telling, as it draws attention on the shodō, the Far Eastern and Japanese “Way of the Brush”, and on the concrete implements by which the kanji are traditionally written. The interpretation will also reveal the contextual order of explicit and implicit meanings expressed by the “object-and-name” item.
The literal meaning of the compound word *suzuri-bako* is "inkstone (suzuri) case (hako)". Inkstones are used for grinding and diluting ink.

Factual and concrete specimens of *suzuri-bako* always come in the shapes of covered containers (figure 1a) actually keeping inkstones (figure 1b). Therefore the name represents a thematization of the real content of what is usually meant by *suzuri-bako*.

Typically, a Japanese *suzuri-bako* does indeed contain also a number of other writing implements, and not solely a *suzuri*. In fact, in an old professional drawing (figure 1b) we can recognize, besides the *suzuri* (centre), a water dropper (top centre), an inkstick (bottom centre), and small side-racks for brushes (right), awl and paper-knife (left).

These implements are typical and usual inset-contents, as they regularly take part in the *shodō* practice. Moreover, their in-setting appears expressly designed,
and clearly conforms to a certain morpho-structural and functional pattern. Such an object can be defined a model type (tim), i.e. a characteristic, exemplary specimen, endowed with certain fundamental concrete features (structure, shape, com-position, inset-contents) to suit certain functions. Therefore, the mentioned implements factually represent meanings that, although not “thematized” by the name suzuri-bako, pertain to the contextual order of concepts and functions existing in the background. So to speak, they are “obvious” recalls.

5) Still, we have to understand why the suzuri has been selected as the “thematized”, foreground meaning. In the Far East, four are the treasures of the scholar’s writing desk: brush, paper, inkstick and suzuri. But, while the first three are consumption materials, the suzuri is both a lasting tool and a revered piece, often passed from master to disciple for generations. Then, the suzuri is not only durable and stable, but also eminent. While the other implements dissolve, the suzuri keeps staying.

6) The attribution of English and Italian semasiological equivalents to the source descriptor is a consequence of the contextual analysis. The English specialized literature demonstrates a widespread and prevalent use of the exact equivalent “Inkstone Case”. On the contrary, the Italian exact equivalent “Scatola per Pietra da Inchiostro”, would find neither recall nor appeal to the average knowledge. Therefore, the chosen rendering “Scatola da Scrittoio”, represents a de-nomina-tive attribution, i.e. a de-term-ination aiming to attain a distinct definition of the object and of its main pragmatic and conceptual meanings.

4. Formalization and Codification of the Facets and Subfacets

The attribution of a univocal alphanumerical notation helps to keep each term individually distinct and separated, and also prevents possible misinterpretations of the kan-jukugo in rōmaji transcriptions (see above, § 2.1). Moreover, through the attribution of a notation, we are able to represent the relative position and level of each term within the conceptual hierarchy: the notation is in fact a formalized, conventional representation of the general and specific, open and implied, explicit and implicit meanings carried by each term. In other words, by attributing a notation we build-up a formalized representation of the primary contextual integrity of “object-and-name” and “process-and-name” items, while at the same time we apply contextually determined English and Italian de-nomina-tive attributions. The contextual analysis also enables to bring to light the ordering structures of the chosen fields and the sequence of their constituting concepts: these can be qualified as general (broad facets) and specific (subfacets), and represented by conventional, taxonomic-like headings. The systematic displays of both thesauri are illustrated and followed by indexes of the source descriptors (notation, rōmaji, kanji)
Japanese Civil Furniture and Furnishings

The 477 source-descriptors (432 preferred terms and 45 non-preferred terms), systematically ordered by:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Facets</th>
<th>Broader Term</th>
<th>Generic Broader Term</th>
<th>Broader Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Subclass</td>
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</table>

<node label> <Generic Type> <generic morpho-functional affinity structure>

Broader Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Broader Term</th>
<th>Plurality of Objects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Materials and Techniques in the Art of Lacquering

301 source-descriptors (222 preferred terms and 79 non-preferred terms), systematically ordered by:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Facets</th>
<th>Broader Term</th>
<th>Generic Broader Term</th>
<th>Broader Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group of Species</td>
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<node label> <generic technical affinity structure>

Broader Terms

<table>
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<th>Specific Broader Term</th>
<th>Plurality of Techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Narrower Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Narrower Term</th>
<th>Single Techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Essential Bibliography


E. Husserl, *La crisi delle Scienze Europee e la Fenomenologia Trascendentale*, Milano 1961


