

## **Forms in English Haiku**

### **by Keiko Imaoka**

Japanese haiku have been traditionally composed in 5-7-5 syllables. When poets started writing English haiku in the 1950's, they adopted this 5-7-5 form, thinking it created a similar condition for English-language haiku. This style is what is generally considered "traditional" English haiku.

Over the years, however, most haiku poets in North America have become aware that 17 English syllables convey a great deal more information than 17 Japanese syllables, and have come to write haiku in fewer syllables, most often in three segments that follow a short-long-short pattern without a rigid structure. This style is called by some "free-form" haiku. In this essay, I will discuss the linguistic circumstances that necessitate shorter English haiku to be more loosely structured than Japanese haiku.

### **5- AND 7-SYLLABLE RHYTHMS IN THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE**

The 5-7-5 syllable rhythm in Japanese haiku is not the matter of arbitrary choice that it may appear to be to a non-Japanese haiku writer. Various combinations of 5 and 7 syllables have dominated the Japanese literary scene for most of its history, tanka (5-7-5-7-7) being the most prominent example. To most Japanese, words phrased in these configurations have a remarkably mnemonic, at times haunting quality, so much so that many war and political propaganda have utilized this form :

hoshigarimasen(7) katsumadewa(5) : "we want nothing till we win (the war)"

kono dote-ni(5) noboru-bekarazu(7) keishichou(5) : "Do Not Climb This Levee - The Police Department"

Likewise, many Japanese aphorisms and proverbs as well as song lyrics, including translations, take similar forms :

owariyokereba(7) subete yoshi(5) : "All's well that ends well" \*

hotaru-no hikari(7) mado-no yuki(5) :

"the light of fireflies, snow by the window" [lyrics corresponding to

"should auld acquaintance be forgot(8) and never brought to mind(6)?" in Auld Lang Syne] \*\*

Because of these rhythmic structures, Japanese haiku and tanka can be memorized with little or no effort, which is one of the major reasons for the longevity of these literary forms. On the other hand, there is no such inherent mnemonic quality to 5-7-5 English haiku, which are indeed difficult to commit to memory. Moreover, there is no discernible rhythmic structure to such an arrangement, due to the disparate length of English

syllables. (The mnemonic quality of 5-7-5 Japanese phrases is much closer to that of metered rhymes in English.) These factors combined with the fact that English carries significantly more information per syllable than Japanese indicate that using the 5-7-5 form does not necessarily provide an analogous condition for writing haiku in English.

This is not to say, however, that all who write in 5-7-5 should stop doing so. I believe that 5-7-5 English haiku as a derivative of Japanese haiku has its place in the world of poetry, just as 5-7-5 Chinese haiku is another such derivative, seemingly containing about three times as much information as a Japanese haiku.

## **THE LENGTH AND FORM OF ENGLISH HAIKU**

Today, many bilingual poets and translators in the mainstream North American haiku scene agree that something in the vicinity of 11 English syllables is a suitable approximation of 17 Japanese syllables, in order to convey about the same amount of information as well as the brevity and the fragmented quality found in Japanese haiku. As to the form, some American poets advocate writing in 3-5-3 syllables or 2-3-2 accented beats. While rigid structuring can be accomplished in 5-7-5 haiku with relative ease due to a greater degree of freedom provided by the extra syllables, such structuring in shorter haiku will have the effect of imposing much more stringent rules on English haiku than on Japanese haiku, thereby severely limiting its potential.

## **THE FLEXIBILITY OF JAPANESE GRAMMAR**

There are two major linguistic factors that make the Japanese language more flexible, and thus easier to fit into a rigid form such as 5-7-5. Both of these factors derive from the fact that the grammatical units in Japanese are largely independent, and are relatively free to move about within a sentence.

### **1. RELATIVE FREEDOM OF WORD ORDER**

The English language owes much of its grammatical simplicity to the fact that the word order plays a major role in determining the relationships between words and phrases (subject, object, etc.). In such a language, words and phrases cannot be moved about freely without changing the meaning of a sentence. For example, within a sentence such as "Mother gave it to the kitten," the words cannot be rearranged without altering the meaning.

In the Japanese language, however, because of the presence of grammatical particles (joshi)\*\*\* that are suffixed to nouns and mark their syntactic relationships, word units become independent and can be moved about more freely within a sentence or a clause without affecting its meaning. As a result, the above sentence can be rearranged in many ways in both spoken and written Japanese without altering its core message.

1) haha-ga koneko-ni sore-o ageta mother/to the kitten/it/gave

- 2) haha-ga sore-o koneko-ni ageta mother/it/to the kitten/gave
- 3) sore-o koneko-ni haha-ga ageta it/to the kitten/mother/gave
- 4) sore-o haha-ga koneko-ni ageta it/mother/to the kitten/gave
- 5) koneko-ni sore-o haha-ga ageta to the kitten/it/mother/gave
- 6) koneko-ni haha-ga sore-o ageta to the kitten/mother/it/gave

Furthermore, if I were to add the word "yesterday" to the sentence, the available options in English would be "Mother gave it to the kitten yesterday," and "Yesterday, mother gave it to the kitten." In each of the above six Japanese versions, however, "yesterday (kinou)" can be inserted anywhere there is a space (including the beginning of the sentence), except at the very end, without significantly altering the meaning, thus multiplying the number of options by a factor of four. Therefore, "Mother gave it to the kitten yesterday" can be expressed in Japanese in twenty-four (6 x 4) different ways. Some of the alternatives are smoother than others, of course, but the least smooth is still as natural as "Yesterday, mother gave it to the kitten." Here, I will only elaborate on #1 to demonstrate the four possible alternatives.

Mother gave it to the kitten yesterday.

(1) haha-ga koneko-ni sore-o ageta + kinou :

kinou haha-ga koneko-ni sore-o ageta  
 haha-ga kinou koneko-ni sore-o ageta  
 haha-ga koneko-ni kinou sore-o ageta  
 haha-ga koneko-ni sore-o kinou ageta

In other words, noun phrases and many adverbs in the Japanese language can be placed almost anywhere within a sentence except that the verbs or verb phrases (including negations) must come at the end. In more complex sentence structures than the one in the above example (i.e., two or more sentences joined by conjunctives), the same degree of freedom holds within each clause. While one option may be superior to others in poetic terms, having a multitude of alternative expressions at one's disposal allows a Japanese haiku poet far more freedom within the 5-7-5 structure than is available in English.

Moreover, in Japanese, some of the grammatical particles and the subject of a sentence can be omitted depending on the context, which gives the language further flexibility.

## 2. RELATIVE EASE IN SEGMENTATION

This relative independence of grammatical components also results in the ease in dividing a phrase into 5-7-5. In the above example, the six Japanese versions of "Mother gave it to the kitten" can be segmented anywhere there is a space. Therefore, if they

were to occur within haiku or tanka (though very unlikely, since they are so unpoetic!), there are three equally plausible locations each sentence can be divided, whereas "Mother gave it to the kitten" offers fewer options. Likewise, in the case of "Mother gave it to the kitten yesterday," each of the twenty-four possible Japanese sentences can be divided wherever there is a space (four locations).

Thus there are more places where a Japanese phrase can be divided without disrupting its meaning. If English had the same degree of segmentation flexibility as Japanese, the following haiku,

across the arroyo  
deep scars  
of a joy ride

Keiko

can be rewritten to approximate the 3-5-3 form as

across the  
arroyo, deep scars  
of a joy ride

without affecting the meaning. As it is, doing so sacrifices too much in the flow of words and interferes with the image. Since Japanese haiku are written on one line, with no spacing between the segments, there is no danger of disrupting the flow in this manner. It is merely an artifact borne of the linguistic differences between the two languages and of the three-line convention of English haiku that makes the former appear as if it does not have a classic form. The type of unnatural line breaks seen in the latter is a problem associated with the 3-5-3 (or other short) form, whereas the 5-7-5 form is long enough to accommodate natural line breaks dictated by the English grammar, due to a greater degree of freedom provided by the extra syllables.

Thus we are in a bind, a catch twenty-two. If one wishes to have the brevity and the fragmented quality of Japanese haiku in English haiku, 17 syllables are too long. On the other hand, if a rigid structure is desired, 11 syllables are too short. One must choose between the two. The choice depends on which of the two factors a poet considers more important to haiku. The majority of contemporary English-haiku poets have let go of the tight forms in favor of brevity to develop the mainstream North American haiku.

## **THE UNDERLYING STRUCTURES OF THE CLASSIC JAPANESE HAIKU**

As demonstrated above, 5-7-5 segmentation is not a division based on content as we think of it in English. Strictly in terms of content, the classic Japanese haiku are composed of two major parts of varying lengths, such as 5-12, 12-5, 8-9, 9-8, 7-10, and 10-7, in the generally decreasing order of prevalence, with the first two being the most prevalent. Here are some examples from the great masters (with a literal translation by

the author) :

yuku haru-ya (5) tori naki uo-no me-ni namida (12) - Basho

spring passing -

birds cry, tears in the eyes of fish

neko-no meshi shoubansuru-ya (12) suzume-no-ko (5) - Issa

sampling the cat's food -

a baby sparrow

ware-to kite asobe-ya (9) oya-no nai suzume (8) - Issa

come play with me -

you motherless sparrow

uguisu-no naku-ya (8) chiisaki kuchi akete (9) - Buson

uguisu singing - (uguisu : a nightingale-like bird)

with the small mouth open

A close observation of "free-form" English haiku reveals that they are composed of two major segments. The majority of them are divided after the first or the second line and the rest near the middle, and thus they are in accord with the underlying structures of the classic Japanese haiku.

In writing short English haiku, the decision as to where the division falls is based mainly on the dictates of English grammar and the poetic merits of given expressions. To limit short haiku to those that can be fitted into a rigid three-part structure is to severely limit the type of ideas that can be expressed in this style.

### **THE MATTER OF KU-MATAGARI (SEGMENT-STRADDLING)**

Besides the two linguistic considerations and the varying underlying structures described above, there is yet another factor adding freedom and flexibility to contemporary Japanese haiku. Although a majority of contemporary Japanese haiku are still written in the classic 5-7-5 form, a significant number of them make use of what is called ku-matagari (segment-straddling), where a word straddles two segments. Many haiku that appear to be, and can be read aloud as 5-7-5 are actually 7-5-5, 8-4-5, 5-9-3, 5-8-4, etc. This technique is more frequently used by the poets in the avant-garde schools, and only those schools seem to allow more than one straddling within one haiku.\*\*\*\*

Although the popular use of ku-matagari is a relatively recent phenomenon, I have come across some examples in a comprehensive collection of Issa's haiku. Here is one example :

dou owaretemo (7) hitozato-o (5) watari-dori (5) - Issa

hunted mercilessly

migrating birds still  
fly over towns

In English haiku, it is simply not conceivable to break a line in the middle of a word just to serve the form. The reason why ku-matagari is feasible in Japanese haiku is because 5-7-5 rhythm is rooted so deeply in the Japanese psyche that the readers are able to keep track of the form despite the lack of a break where one is expected, as well as because of the aforementioned fact that the Japanese haiku are written on a single line with no spacing. If they were written on three lines as English haiku are, there would be an awkward situation of having to split a word across two lines.

In short, writing within the rigid structure of Japanese haiku is made possible by the remarkable malleability and redundancy of the Japanese language which allows for a multitude of options in expressing a single thought. In languages such as English and its relatives whose grammars are heavily dependent on word order, haiku must and will take a much different form from that in Japanese. By concerning ourselves too much with the outward form of haiku, we can lose sight of its essence.

## FOOTNOTES

\* owariyokereba(7) subete yoshi(5) : "All's well that ends well" Which came first? The Japanese proverb or Shakespeare's? Who knows? Most likely, they were independently conceived, since the idea expresses a universal human sentiment.

\*\* hotaru-no hikari(7) mado-no yuki(5) : "the light of fireflies, snow by the window" [lyrics corresponding to "should auld acquaintance be forgot(8) and never brought to mind(6)?" in Auld Lang Syne] -- two of the Japanese syllables span two notes. These are the first words of the lyrics sung to the tune of Auld Lang Syne by Japanese school kids at the time of graduation. The lyrics are inspired by an old Chinese poem. Incidentally, we all grew up thinking this and many other Western tunes were written and composed by Japanese; i.e., Home Sweet Home, Glory Glory Hallelujah, Oh My Darling Clementine, I've Been Working On The Railroad; the list goes on. The Japanese lyrics tend to be totally different in content from that of the original. This is because the lyrics have been entirely rewritten since literal or even figurative Japanese translations simply cannot be fitted into the tune. The Japanese lyrics are well integrated into the tunes, and are sung with one or more syllable per note.

\*\*\* kaku-joshi (case particles)

-wa, -ga, -mo, (-no) : subjective case; -wa and -ga are often abbreviated

-o, -ni, -e, -to, -kara : objective case; -o is often abbreviated

-no : possessive case

Example: kare

kare-wa : he

kare-ga : he

kare-mo : he too

kare-no : he (in archaic grammar)

kare-o : him

kare-ni : him; to him; by him

kare-kara : from him; by him

kare-e : to him

kare-to : with him

kare-no : his

\*\*\*\*Ku-matagari is used more extensively in contemporary Japanese tanka.