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TEACHING TUESDAY

KOBUN

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While many students of Japanese are familiar with the three writing systems, most are unfamiliar with the classical Japanese language, known as bungo (文語) or kobun (古文). This style of “old writing” is based on a language spoken during the Heian period, but also has some influences from later Japanese.

Written language was only imported to Japan in the 5th century CE, but the combination of Chinese kanji characters with Japanese grammar and inflections was not a good mix. With the development of the predecessor to hiragana, known as manyogana, in the 8th century CE, a new writing combination system mimicking the spoken language of the time was introduced. Eventually known as kobun, it was used to write major works like *Taketori Monogatari* and the *Tale of Genji*. However, by the Meiji Period the spoken language had moved so far away from the written kobun that it became extremely difficult to understand without prior education. With the advent of printing, writers moved closer and closer to a written language that reflected the common spoken language.

Today, kobun is not used that often except in traditional media, especially haiku and waka poems. Kobun is still often taught as early as middle school and is included as a testable material on college entrance exams. Even though it is no longer the primary written language, kobun continues to have a strong impact on Japanese culture and language!