

Are kanji in decline?

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In the post-war period, official language reforms combined with social and technological change have changed the Japanese writing system. Notable amongst the reforms were officially sponsored limits on the number of kanji. Technological change has been accompanied by an influx of loanwords written in katakana. Both these changes have been subjects of considerable dispute. Since the early 1990s katakana words have received official language planning attention and particular attention has been given to katakana use in government White Papers. This study examines longitudinal change in the proportions of the three Japanese scripts of kanji, hiragana and katakana using samples of White Papers on labor published between 1960 and 1997 which were controlled for subject matter to enable valid longitudinal evaluation. Two counts were conducted and the same trends were found for both counts when variation due to format was controlled for. Contrary to expectations, the proportion of kanji increased while hiragana decreased. The proportion of katakana increased, due mainly to an increased use of loanwords, but the overall level was less than expected. Comparisons were made with other Japanese studies and the effects of language reforms discussed.