

**HANDWRITING AS A SOCIAL ACT: THE RISE AND  
FALL OF AN ANTI-CALLIGRAPHIC STYLE OF  
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NIHEI YOSHIKI (仁平 義明)

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# HANDWRITING AS A SOCIAL ACT: THE RISE AND FALL OF AN ANTI-CALLIGRAPHIC STYLE OF HANDWRITING AMONG JAPANESE GIRLS<sup>1</sup>

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NIHEI YOSHIKI (仁平義明)<sup>2</sup>

(Tohoku University)

The purpose of this paper is to clarify why a special style of handwriting (the anti-calligraphic style, or the girls' roundish letters) had prevailed among girls nationwide in Japan from '70s to '80s.

Two surveys (in 1988 and in 1992) indicated that the anti-calligraphic style (ACS) is on the decline now. The 1988-survey analyzed the association between the use of the ACS and the personality traits of the users. The analysis with 124 female college students revealed that the students who use the ACS currently (or had used) scored higher on the social extroversion scale and on the rathymia (a tendency to seek new stimulation) scale than the students who had never used the style.

The results suggest that the adoption of the ACS by girls was primarily a social act, that is, a sub-culture of Japanese girls.

**Key words:** handwriting, adolescents, sub-culture, identity.

## INTRODUCTION

Handwriting can be regarded as a social act. We can regard handwriting as a vehicle for self-presentation (Loewenthal, 1975). Selection of the style of one's own handwriting can be a means to confirm his/her social identity.

In Japan, unique forms of handwriting have developed by different social groups to assert their specific character. The type of bold writing, called *geba-ji* (the violent letters), used often by radical student groups in '70s is one example, while the stylized writing used in the kabuki billboard another (Fig. 1).

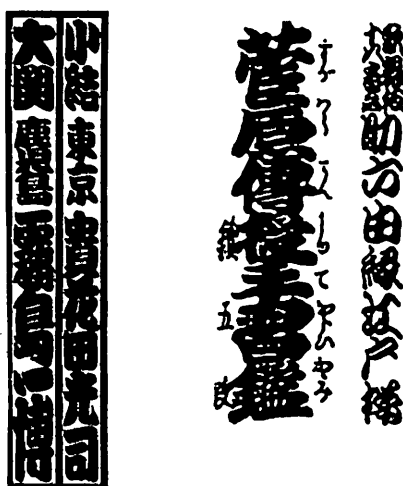
However, in the last 20 years or so, among Japanese female teen-agers, an especially interesting type of handwriting has emerged that demonstrated a drastic deviation from the recommended style of handwriting at school. This writing, commonly called "*manga-ji*" (comic-like letters) or "*maru-moji*" (roundish letters), has come to represent the unique characteristics of the sub-culture of teen-age girls.

In Japanese educational practices, pupils and students are usually recommended to write

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  2. Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University, Kawauchi, Sendai 980-77, Japan.

# 反革命革 掃発迎撃

A



B

Fig. 1. Examples of special styles of handwriting.

- (A) Geba-ji ("Gewalt" letters, or violence letters) style is used by political student groups.
- (B) Kantei-ryu (Kantei-style) is used in posters or bills of Japanese traditional entertainments and a traditional sport (sumo).

in the calligraphy-based style (CBS) even when they write with a pencil or a pen. Calligraphy is taught in elementary schools or in high schools as a compulsory subject. The formal education of calligraphy begins from the third grade of elementary schools. The calligraphy-based style (CBS) retains the traces of calligraphic movements (Fig. 2).

Subsequently, the deviated style (the anti-calligraphic style) among teen-age girls has commanded some critical attention from journalism, as well as from educational institutions, presenting a set of problematics that pertained to the specific teen-age sentiments and values.

The use of this style became a social problem in Japan during '80s, because a large

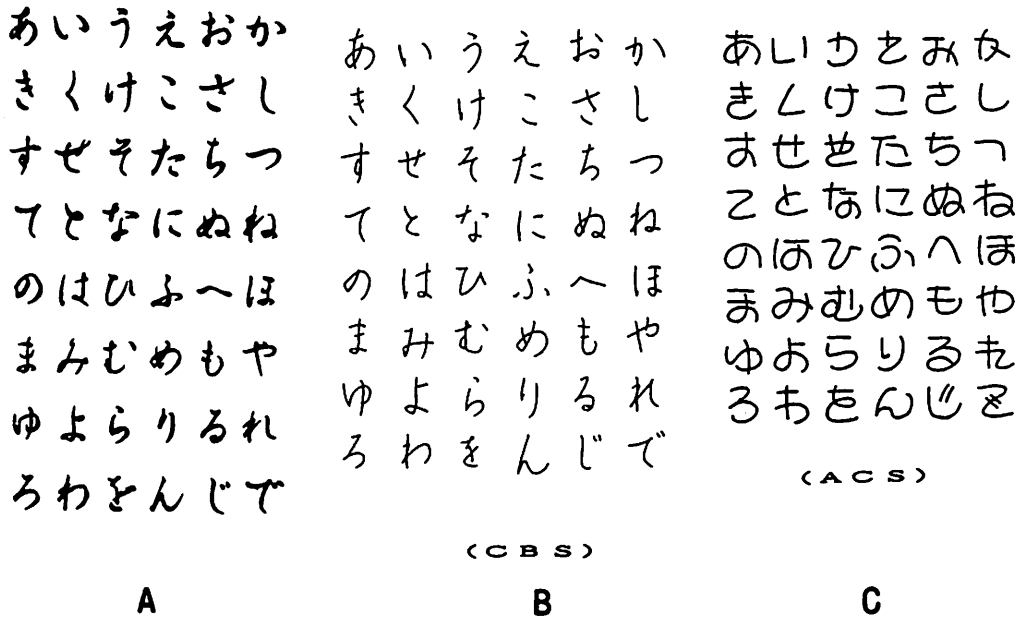


Fig. 2. Examples of handwritings in the anti-calligraphic style (ACS) and in the calligraphy-based style (CBS).

- (A) The characters written with a calligraphic word processor (Fuji Software Co.).
- (B) The characters written in the CBS.
- (C) The characters written in the ACS (from Yamane, 1986).

population of girls had used the anti-calligraphic style in spite of prohibition by their teachers.

And the style became "a submerged culture" of girls, in the sense that they distinguished their private experience from their public appearance, using a different handwriting according to situations. They used the girls' style (ACS) in such private situations as personal letters and diaries. In such formal situations as examinations and notebooks to be submitted to teachers, they used the calligraphy-based style (CBS) which their teachers recommended.

In the present paper, psychological analyses, including the analysis of the motor aspects of the handwriting, will be made to clarify why the girls' style (ACS) of handwriting had prevailed among Japanese girls, and why the use of the style is on the decline now.

## I THE COMIC-LIKE LETTERS, OR THE ROUNDISH LETTERS

The handwriting in the anti-calligraphic style are called "manga-ji (comic-like letters)" or "maru-moji (roundish letters)". The name, the comic-like letters, might have been given because the style was said to be used often in cartoons. The roundish letters was named such, because the contours of written letters were generally roundish. A Japanese journalist, Kazuma Yamane, named the style "the girls' irregular letters", because the style was used almost exclusively by girls (Yamane, 1986). They used this style both in writing "hiragana" (Japanese syllabic characters) and in writing "kanji" (Chinese originated characters).

The ACS has all or the most of the following characteristics (see Fig. 2):

- (1) Both the contours of letters and strokes are transformed uniformly into roundish ones.
- (2) Parts of each character are simplified, losing the trace of the CBS.
- (3) Curves are exaggerated.
- (4) Angles are undermined.
- (5) Each letter is written in a discrete hand, differing from the CBS in which letters are occasionally presented in the continuum.
- (6) Girls who use the ACS uniformly describe the impression of the ACS as "cute".

## II THE ACS AS A "SOCIAL PROBLEM" IN JAPAN

### A. *The conditions of the ACS before 1988*

Investigations by Yamane (1986) showed that the style had started to be used around the year 1974, and suddenly spread among girls nationwide in 1978. According to his extensive survey in 1985, 55.2% of junior high girls, and 47.5% of senior high girls used the ACS. Any regional differences were not found. He also reported that only a small proportion of boys used the style.

Yamane attributed the prevalence of the ACS to the following causes:

- (1) The CBS is not suitable for writing in lateral lines. In contrast to it, The ACS seems to be suitable for writing in lateral lines.

Kyuyoh Ishikawa (1990), an eminent Japanese calligrapher, also pointed out that the ACS is suitable for writing laterally.

- (2) The use of mechanical pencils has increased rapidly from 1975. This accords with the period of the rapid increase of the ACS. The characteristics of mechanical pencils are not suitable for minute control of strokes that the CBS requires.
- (3) The most common impression of the ACS is "cute". This may suggest a cultural paradigm by which the girls feel that "cuteness" is a value.

Yamane predicted that the ACS might further prevail in the 21st century.

### B. *Responses of teachers and the Ministry of Education*

In Japanese elementary and high schools, the CBS has been recommended as the most desirable style. Hence the prevalence of the ACS provoked teachers' critical reactions. They often prohibited their students from using the style. In fact, most of the subjects of my research remembered that their teachers in elementary, or high schools had said that the ACS was not desirable.

Consequently, the use of the ACS became an object of public concern. Japanese major newspapers had often reported the problem of the ACS since early 1980s.

The problem seems to have had an effect on the educational policy in Japan. The Ministry of Education decided to increase the hours of calligraphy lessons in elementary schools from 1992 by 75%. The Ministry of Education increased the hours also in junior high

schools. They explained that the most essential aim of the revision is to let students learn respect for our culture and tradition. However, we may be able to see that the popularity of the ACS had influenced this decision of educational reform.

And the fact that a new style, the ACS, formed a social problem proves an ideological significance of handwriting in Japan.

### III SURVEYS IN 1988 AND IN 1992

#### A. The trend

As a teacher, my own impression, however, is that the use of the ACS is on the decline now among students. In 1988, I had already investigated the use of the ACS with students of a women's college (Miyagi Women's College). To confirm the impression, I performed a more extensive survey in 1992, comparing with the situation in 1988. All the subjects were first-year college students and the majority of them were eighteen years old. In the 1992-survey, subjects from the same women's college were involved.

Figure 3 shows the results. The results indicated that the use of the ACS is on the decline from 1988 to 1992. The subjects who use the ACS currently decreased (from 25.0% to 5.2%), whereas the subjects who had never used this style of handwriting increased (from 34.7% to 51.3%). This change was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(2) = 19.09, p < 0.001$ ).

Yamane (1986) claimed that the primary cause of the popularity of the ACS is use of

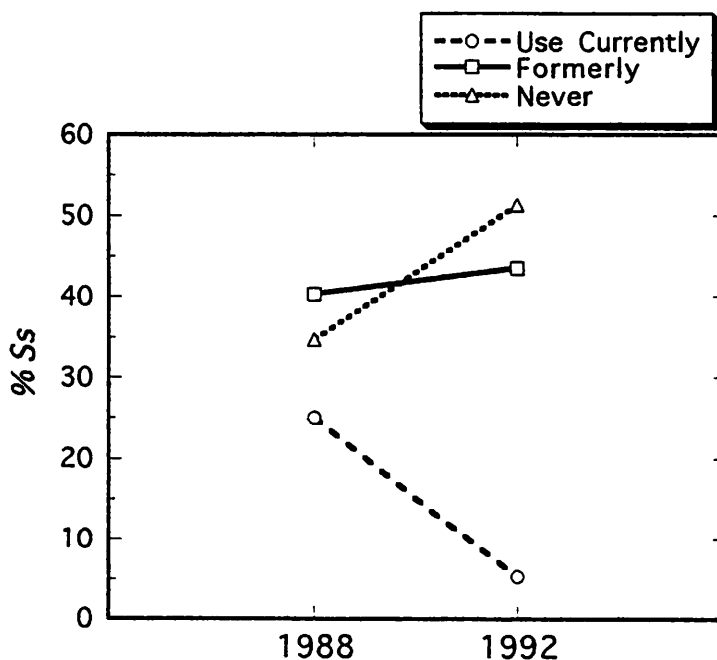


Fig. 3. Changes in the percentage of users of the ACS from 1988 to 1992 (surveys at Miyagi Women's College).

mechanical pencils. However, the present results did not support the explanation. Since the use of mechanical pencils itself has been increased (Statistics by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, 1990), this theory does not explain the decrease in the proportion of girls who write in the ACS.

Moreover, "the mechanical pencils theory" cannot explain either why few boys use the ACS. Boys might feel that the impression conveyed by the style does not suit them.

#### *B. When do they start and stop to use the ACS?*

The 1992-survey was performed with subjects from two populations, Miyagi Women's College and Tohoku University. One hundred and fifteen students of Miyagi Women's College served as subjects, and 112 female students and 324 male students served as subjects at Tohoku University. In total, 561 served as subjects.

The proportion of girls who had formerly used the ACS or girls who use it currently did not differ significantly between the girls from two populations.

Of 237 girls, 5.1% use the ACS currently. 38.8% had used it. The rate of the girls who have never used the style was 60.7%. Of 324 male students, 1.2% reported that they use the ACS currently, and 6.8% reported that they had formerly used it.

The modal year in which girls had started to use the ACS was the 5th grade of elementary schools (Fig. 4). All the girls who use currently (or had formerly used) had started to use the style by the end of 2nd grade of junior high schools.

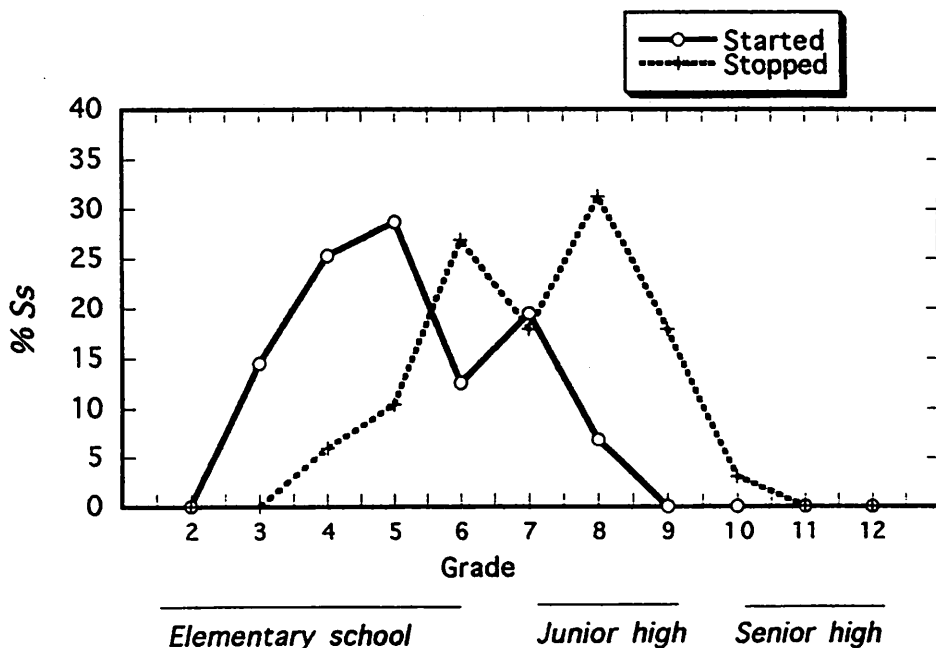


Fig. 4. The beginning and the end of the use of the ACS (From the 1992-survey).

### C. Learning of calligraphy and the ACS.

A fair proportion of Japanese parents send their children to private teachers or private schools ("juku"s) of calligraphy. Of the 1992-survey, about half of the students reported that they had ever learned calligraphy in addition to the formal education (55.9% for female, 48.3% for male students).

Learning calligraphy, however, could not prevent girls from using the ACS. Of the girls who use the ACS currently or had formerly used it, 56.2% had learned calligraphy outside of school. This percentage did not differ from that of the subjects who had learned calligraphy outside of school and had never used the ACS (55.9%).

Then, most users of the ACS might have at least two styles of handwriting. In fact, 80.6% of the current users or the users in the past reported that they use (used) the ACS or the CBS according to situations.

## IV EVIDENCE THAT USE OF THE ACS IS A SOCIAL ACT.

In the 1988-survey with 124 students of Miyagi Women's College, the students had a personality test, the Yatabe-Guilford Personality Test (Tsujioka et al., 1955). The test was applied only to clarify the relationship between the use of a handwriting style and personality traits.

As described above, the subjects were divided into three groups; (1) the subjects who use the ACS "currently" (the most persistent users,  $N=31$ ), (2) the subjects who had "formerly" used it ( $N=50$ ), and (3) the subjects who had "never" used it ( $N=43$ ). In two out of 12 scales of the personality test, statistically significant differences were found among the subjects' groups. The scores of the traits <Social Extroversion> and <Rhathymia> (a trait to seek new stimulation) were noted least in the "never" group, and most in the "currently" group (Fig. 5). That is, the higher the score of the social extroversion scale or of the rhathymia scale is, the stronger the tendency to use the ACS ( $F(2, 121)=5.35, p<0.01$  for Social Extroversion, and  $F(2, 121)=4.01, p<0.01$  for Rhathymia).

The significant association of the use of the ACS with "Social Extroversion" suggests that the use of the style was caused by girls' need to join the peer group of "cute girls". In other words, the use of the ACS is considered to be a means to confirm her identity as a member of a group that shares the characteristic of being "cute". And the significant association with "Rhathymia" (a tendency to seek new stimulation) suggests the girls adopted the ACS as a mode of following fashion.

The significant contributions of personality traits to the adoption of the ACS can be said to reveal that handwriting is primarily a social act.



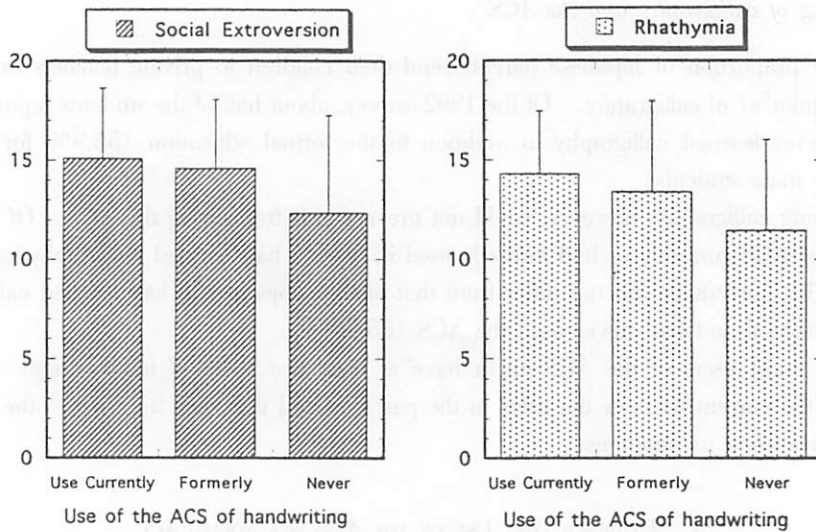


Fig. 5. Personality traits which contribute to the use of the ACS (The 1988-survey at Miyagi Women's College).

## V MOTOR ASPECTS OF THE ACS

### A. Characteristics of the ACS in the motor aspects

Firstly, in calligraphy, minute control of upward and downward movement of the brush is necessary especially in the starting and ending of strokes (Kao, 1986; Nihei, 1991). The traces of that way of control remain in the CBS. The ACS, on the other hand, reduced the necessity of the three-dimensional control of strokes.

Secondly, writing in the CBS requires differential control of contours for each character. In the ACS, each character is written as if the motor memories of the characters are output in a common circular frame ("window"). Thus the control of contour of characters are easy in the ACS movement. For example, small and large circles in the CBS tend to be unified into large ones in the ACS.

As a result, learning of the style is easy in the ACS. In fact, 83.5% of the female subjects reported that learning of the ACS was easy. In 1985, in a report given in to me, a female students called the style as "the Messiah of those who had a poor hand".

Unpublished data by Nihei confirmed the above characteristics. Figure. 6 shows the examples of the analysis of writing movements in the CBS (Fig. 6a) and in the ACS (Fig. 6b), using a digitizer connected with a computer. The examples indicate that velocity of writing movements is generally lower in the ACS than in the CBS, and that a leap movement in the CBS is changed into an overt bold stroke in the ACS.

### B. "Bi-styled" writers

According to the theory of generalized motor programs (Schmidt, 1975), the variant

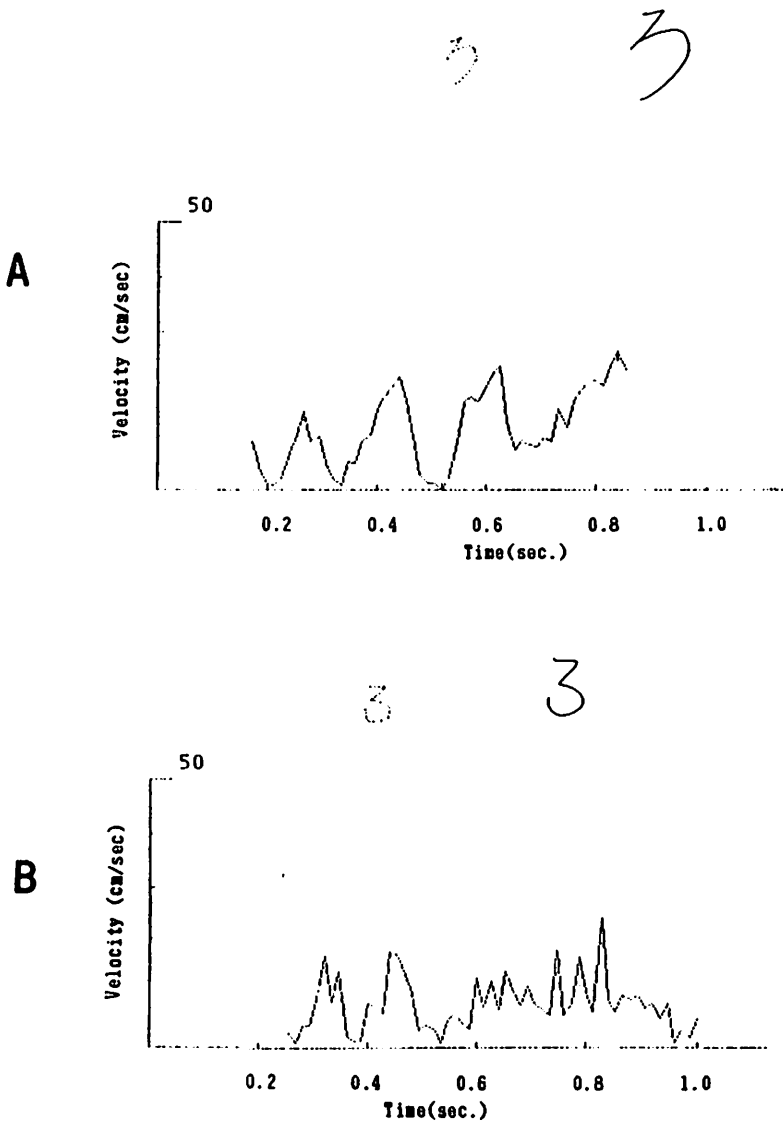


Fig. 6. Examples of analysis of handwriting movements in the CBS (A) and in the ACS(B).  
The written character is a hiragana "ろ (/ro/).

patterns of handwriting for a character are generated from an abstract (non-specific) motor memory (a generalized motor program). Variations in slant lines, size of characters, and writing speed are produced by specifying the parameters of an abstract program (e.g., Schmidt, 1982). However, the generalized motor program theory did not suppose that characters in such quite different styles as the ACS and the CBS can be produced from a common motor program.

Most of the users of the ACS reported that they changed style of handwriting according to situations. Then, they must have two motor programs for writing a character in two different

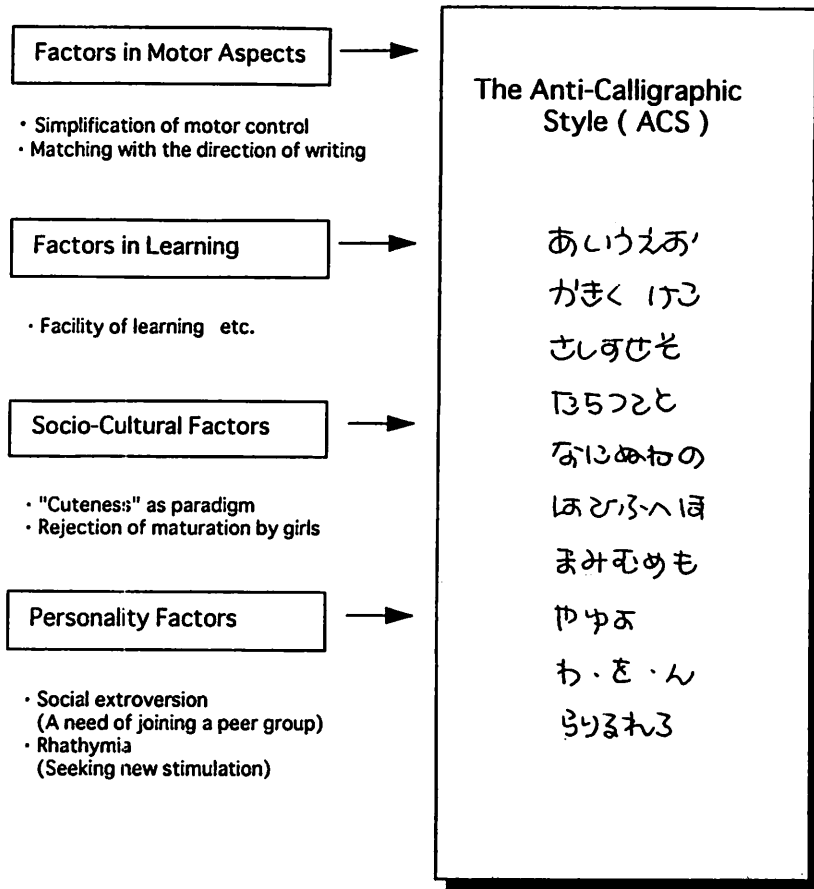


Fig. 7. Factors supposed to contribute to the use of the ACS.

styles. The issue of the bi-styled writers must be an interesting subject of further research on motor control.

## VI FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE USE OF THE ACS

As we have seen so far, several factors were supposed to contribute to the use of the ACS (see Fig. 7). Although we do not have enough space here to discuss the socio-cultural factors, investigation on the socio-cultural background of it must be necessary to understand thoroughly why the style had prevailed in Japan's '80s, and why it is on the decline now.

The times might have made girls wanted "cuteness" which the ACS offered, instead of "grace" which the CBS has. Yamane (1986) correctly pointed out that the use of the ACS represented "a new culture of women". Since it is a culture, it prevailed in a specific society in a specific historical period, and destined to disappear with changing cultural tastes.

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