

# Japanese Language and Literature

*Journal of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese*

jll.pitt.edu | Vol. 54 | Number 2 | October 2020 | <https://doi.org/10.5195/jll.2020.127>

ISSN 1536-7827 (print) 2326-4586 (online)

## Diversity, Inclusivity, and the Importance of L2 Speaker Legitimacy

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### 1. Introduction

Findings from the Japanese-language educators' diversity survey (Mori, Hasegawa, Park, and Suzuki, this volume) confirm that our profession has work to do to improve diversity of Japanese-language educators and become more inclusive. In particular, they indicate that native speaker bias, something extensively studied and criticized in other foreign languages, clearly exists in Japanese-language education and must be addressed. As a profession, we must make a commitment to overcoming native speaker bias with regard to our colleagues, and especially with regard to our students. Creating a professional climate which recognizes the legitimacy of teachers of all backgrounds, irrespective of "native speaker" status, is a necessary and important step. At the same time, it is important to note that this may be insufficient to ensure speaker legitimacy for our students as speakers of Japanese.

In this commentary, I consider the questions raised by the diversity survey in light of what I have learned through my research on native speaker bias, language ownership, and speaker legitimacy. I argue that understanding the role that native speaker bias plays in delegitimizing the speakerhood of second language (L2) speakers is of crucial importance for what should always be our central focus: the students we teach, the classroom experiences we create for them, and how well we prepare them for future Japanese language encounters beyond our classrooms. I strongly believe that our goal as Japanese-language educators should not be merely to improve the Japanese language competence of our students, but rather, to facilitate the development of our students as legitimate speakers of Japanese. We will not succeed in this endeavor if we do not recognize and address native speaker bias in the profession and in ourselves. An



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important extension of that, which this survey and special issue make possible, is to consider how we can become models for our students. We must be mindful of the power of ideological notions such as native speaker bias. If our students are to avoid the trap of thinking of themselves as “second-class” speakers, we in the profession must afford each other the same courtesy in recognizing the speaker legitimacy in each of us, regardless of national, racial, ethnic, or linguistic background—and we must extend that recognition to our students as well.

## **2. Speaker Legitimacy and Linguistic Ideologies**

Linguistic ideologies often emerge as “commonsense” or taken-for-granted notions (e. g., Rumsey 1990, Woolard 1992), and are created and reinforced “in discourse at micro and macro levels, and in institutional as well as everyday practices” (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2002:122). Two ideological concepts that play a significant role in “othering” certain speakers are native speaker bias and language ownership, which function as barriers to legitimate speakerhood. Legitimate speakerhood (Bourdieu 1991) refers to beliefs about who has the right to speak and the right to have the content of their utterances heard, and, conversely, who has the right to evaluate, critique, or censure the linguistic production of others (e. g., Liddicoat 2016; Takeuchi 2018, 2019c). One result of the ideological privileging of native speakers is that legitimate speakerhood is not derived from some neutral linguistic competence or linguistic knowledge, but instead is based on the speaker’s identity and such features as racial, ethnic, or national background (e. g., Kubota 2009, Smith 2015). While legitimate speakerhood is desirable for all speakers, in practice it is restricted to native speakers and denied to non-native speakers, who are continually compared to a native speaker model.

There is an extensive body of work that criticizes the practice of measuring L2 competence according to biased and idealized notions of “native speaker” competence and numerous researchers argue against viewing non-native speakers as “deficient communicators” (e. g., Cook 1999, 2016; Davies 2003; Doerr 2009; Firth and Wagner 1997, 2007; Holliday 2006, 2014; Rampton 1990). Although the vast majority of this research focuses on English as a second language (ESL), with a particular emphasis on L2-speaker teachers of ESL, there is growing attention to the role native speaker bias plays in languages other than English and beyond the experience of teachers (e. g., Doerr 2009, Takeuchi 2018). Findings tend to be fairly consistent across studies and linguistic contexts: First,

native speaker bias is not based on actual differences between native and non-native speakers but is instead based on assumptions about speakers and languages that do not hold up to close inspection (e. g., Cook 1999; Firth and Wagner 1997, 2007). Second, and crucial for this commentary, researchers have found ideological linkage of citizenship and native speaker status (e. g., Doerr 2009, Pennycook 1994/2017) as well as the linkage of ethnicity and native speaker status (e. g., Okubo 2009).

A related concept is language ownership, described by Wee (2002:283) as “a metaphor for reflecting the legitimate control that speakers may have over the development of a language.” Native speakers are the de facto owners of a language, and questions of who counts as an “authentic” or legitimate speaker can lead to struggles over language ownership (O’Rourke and Walsh 2015). These researchers demonstrate ways that non-native speakers seek out ownership of their L2. Conversely, Parmegiani (2010, 2014) describes self-imposed limitations by L2 speakers who adhere to the belief that “speakers can only be considered legitimate owners of *only one* language that is established once and for all at birth” (2014:686, emphasis in original). Parmegiani’s solution is to advocate for “a notion of language ownership that is much more open, fluid and decentered” (2014:686) and she argues that an “inclusive understanding of language ownership” is most appropriate for multilingual speakers. In Parmegiani’s view, language ownership should be based on “a linguistic repertoire that can always be expanded” (2010:376). The take-away here is clear: multilingual speakers can and should be owners of each and all of the languages they speak.

### 3. L2 Speakers of Japanese

My research focuses on L2 speakers of Japanese and how they describe their beliefs about Japanese speech styles. My research participants include L2 speakers of Japanese who live and work in Japan (generally long-term) and L1 speakers of Japanese who are the coworkers, friends, significant others or family members of L2 speakers (Takeuchi 2015, 2018, 2019a, 2019c).<sup>1</sup> More recently, I have examined the beliefs and perceptions that Japanese-language teachers hold about *keigo*, the system of Japanese polite language (2019b). A primary motivation in each of my projects is to develop a better understanding of linguistic ideologies about Japanese language and how those ideologies impact L2 speakers. The L2 participants in my research are no longer involved in educational contexts, but any of our students could follow similar paths after they graduate and

leave our classrooms. Thus, I have come to believe that findings from these participants have important implications that can be incorporated into Japanese-language classroom practice. To that end, I introduce some findings from my work that are particularly relevant to the question of speaker legitimacy.

A common theme in my findings has been L2 speakers' lack of confidence in their Japanese language abilities and in their right to make use of the various speech styles Japanese offers. Their concerns are particularly notable because most of them speak Japanese at a high level and have been using Japanese daily in their professional and private lives for ten or even twenty years. Nevertheless, they report uncertainty about their speech style choices, their ability to implement those choices, and also about their accents when speaking Japanese. In addition, several L1 participants are similarly critical of L2 accents, and I have come to believe that this hyper-critical attention to accent adds to L2 speakers' uncertainty and acts as a deterrent to their language use, with negative impacts on their Japanese language interactions.

I also see a tendency (in both L1 and L2 participants) to associate language competence with nationality, similar to that found in the research described above. One way language competence is connected to nationality is revealed in the view of some L2 participants that they do not have the "right" to use certain speech styles, including regional dialects, slang, highly casual speech and highly honorific expressions. It might be easy to think of this as a learning issue (e. g., to conclude they just need more practice), or to assume that these more complex features are not important if the speaker is still able to communicate the intended message. However, it is in the use of just these kinds of speech styles that speakers begin to express their identities and to use Japanese in ways that go beyond transactional message-exchange. In short, these complex features and varieties are crucial to speakers being and becoming themselves in Japanese. Perhaps this is why many of my L2 participants report that they want to be able to use Japanese in all of its complexities and varieties. For many L2 speakers, it is that very complexity that drew them to Japanese in the first place. However, the persistence of ideas that "Japanese is spoken by Japanese people" acts as a barrier to acquiring and using fluent Japanese: When L2 speakers who do present a measure of fluency are told, as many of my participants are, *日本語が日本人より上手* (you speak Japanese better than a Japanese person) or *日本人より日本人らしい* (you are more Japanese than the Japanese), it sends the message that one cannot

be a fluent speaker of Japanese while also being (visibly) non-Japanese. Such comments are almost surely intended to be complimentary. Notwithstanding good intentions, negative consequences arise from such comments because they focus on the form of the utterance and call attention to perceived gaps between the linguistic form and the speaker's identity. Such attention comes at the expense of the speaker's communicative and interactional intent. The L2 speaker is thereby positioned as someone whose speech is vulnerable to comment and assessment, while the L1 speaker is positioned as someone with the "rights and privileges" to comment on and evaluate the speech of L2 speakers. The experience can be deeply othering.

The act of commenting on someone else's speech is something we in the profession do as a matter of course in our roles as Japanese-language educators. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the power imbalance that is brought to the forefront when one speaker corrects or otherwise comments on the speech of another. There is an inherent tension between the aims of language instruction and the goals of advocating for speaker legitimacy. Language educators evaluate and correct the language production of our students, and learners naturally rely on that important feedback to improve their language skills. However, our goal should not be only to correct or evaluate learners' linguistic output, but also to affirm their speaker legitimacy. Moreover, students begin learning Japanese because of their interests in the language and cultures of Japan and they persist in learning when they see the possibilities for their own Japanese-language selves. Our job as language educators is to foster their efforts, not to "put them in their place" as non-native speakers.

#### **4. Conclusion: Imagining the Absence of Native Speaker Bias**

We may not expect students to master all aspects of Japanese right away, or perhaps ever, but we need to ensure that students get the message that they *can* speak Japanese and have every right to do so. The Japanese-language teacher is often the first Japanese-speaking interlocutor that a student has. We set the expectations that learners have for themselves and their Japanese development and, crucially, for how they see themselves as speakers of Japanese. We must see in each of our students a legitimate speaker of Japanese. If we do not, students are less likely to see themselves that way. Essential to the goal of speaker legitimacy for our students is for L1 Japanese-language teachers to recognize L2 colleagues as legitimate speakers. At the same time, L2 Japanese-language teachers must see

ourselves as legitimate speakers. In short, all Japanese-language teachers can act as models for our students, demonstrating the legitimation of speakers regardless of linguistic background. In doing so, we will also begin to address another concern raised in the diversity survey, namely the shortage of Japanese-language teachers – when students see themselves as speakers of Japanese and are ratified as such, they are more likely to want to make Japanese language a part of their professional lives as well.

We must also consider how we can best encourage the positioning of L2 speakers as legitimate speakers of Japanese without tying legitimacy to linguistic competence based on an idealized native speaker. One way to do this is to ensure that we represent the diversity of Japanese language varieties and speakers in the linguistic examples we include in our teaching materials; this will help counter the tendency to measure correctness against that idealized native speaker model. Similarly, it is important to ratify students' communicative attempts and to be careful about how correction and feedback are handled. For example, we should always approach students with kindness and treat linguistic mistakes as something that occurs as a matter-of-course, rather than as a language failure. We can also lessen native speaker bias by avoiding correction that is based on assessing the degree to which students' output is "native-like." Such adjustments to correction and feedback practices will facilitate another goal I have for my own teaching, namely, to help our students become "fearless" so that their Japanese language use will not be inhibited by lack of confidence or uncertainty. L2 Japanese-language teachers can and should strive for fearlessness with our Japanese in all kinds of contexts, including some mentioned in the diversity survey such as emails with colleagues, academic presentations and so on. If L2 teachers can embody this fearlessness and L1 teachers can affirm it, together we can model legitimacy for our students.

In thinking about my goals for my own research and teaching, I often wonder: what would it look like for L2 speakers to be legitimate speakers of Japanese? What would the absence of native speaker bias look like? In imagining the answers to these questions, we can begin to see a way forward, for the profession, for ourselves, and for our students.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> L2 speaker participants were L1 speakers of English. More than half were from the U.S. while the rest were from other English-speaking countries. Most were

white, with a smaller number of African-American and Asian-American participants. Participants' ages ranged from twenties to fifties, and their Japanese abilities ranged from lower intermediate to advanced. Almost all L2 participants were long-term residents of Japan and many had been living in Japan for ten years or more.

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