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Fostering Antiracist Engagement in Japanese Language Teaching

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1. Introduction

Japanese language teaching (JLT) is currently situated in a globalized society with an increased amount of diversity of various kinds. Although diversity has always existed historically in human society, the postmodern trend of scholarly work in various disciplines has problematized the assumption that all speakers of a certain language share the same background in terms of race, nationality, culture, sexuality, and other attributes. This also applies to the characteristics of Japanese language speakers. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in the survey results presented by Mori, Hasegawa, Park, and Suzuki (this volume), these forms of diversity are not always reflected in JLT.

One facet of diversity is racial difference. While linguistic difference, as represented by regional dialects or native/non-native speakerness, tends to be noticeable in language teaching, issues of race are often swept under the rug. However, the idea of race is closely linked to language teachers' and learners' beliefs and experiences. To pursue the current project's goal of identifying unconscious biases and exploring how to foster diversity and inclusion in JLT, this paper will focus on issues of race. It will provide some observations of the survey data presented by Mori et al. (this volume), introduce some key concepts regarding issues of race, apply these concepts to the understanding of the data, and address possibilities for antiracist engagement in JLT.

2. Observations

In language education, issues of language—linguistic forms, practices, and acquisition—tend to attract teachers' and scholars' attention. While



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this focus seems natural, communication in a new language requires not only skills to manipulate the target language but also cultural awareness, intercultural communicative competence, and attitudes to negotiating difference. Clearly, language education is concerned with not only language but also diversity of language users. Just as forms of language are multiple, language users come from diverse backgrounds and shape complex realities of human communication. These facets of diversity are manifested in the open-ended comments written by some respondents of the survey.

The fact that many of these survey respondents did not disclose their racial background requires us to only speculate about the link between race and their professional experiences or views. Nonetheless, the following two comments clearly demonstrate problematic instances related to race, language, and nationality.

The first example comes from a self-identified white non-Japanese non-native Japanese-speaking teacher, perhaps teaching in an American university, who recounted own experience of receiving a flabbergasted reaction from a student who could not believe that this teacher was a Japanese speaker (Excerpt 3 in Mori et al., this volume). Another reaction came from an entire class on the first day of the semester, when students failed to recognize that the person who entered the classroom was actually their teacher. These comments illustrate how students held a fixed idea of who is a legitimate Japanese person or Japanese speaker.

The second example is what might be seen as an opposite case, where non-native English-speaking and native Japanese-speaking K–12 teachers of Japanese educated in Japan are marginalized presumably in the United States (Excerpt 7). The commentator points out that they are disadvantaged when advocating their Japanese program since they are perceived as non-American citizens and thus non-voters, lacking English proficiency, and self-promoting the program with ethnocentric motivation. Compared to the first case of a white non-native Japanese-speaking teacher, the problems described here appear to be opposite, but the underlying ideology of language and race is regarded as similar.

3. Issues of Race in Language Education

In contemporary society, race is a topic typically avoided in everyday discourse due to its negative association with racism—an act of immoral disgrace. However, the field of language education, especially teaching English to speakers of other languages, has begun to explicitly explore

issues of race since the 2000s (e.g., Flores and Rosa 2015; Jenks 2017; Kubota 2002, 2015, 2019; Kubota and Lin 2009; Motha 2014). In understanding how issues related to the idea of race affect language education, several concepts need to be clarified. Below, the following topics will be discussed: (1) the concept of race and ethnicity, (2) the concept of racism, (3) intersectionality, and (4) new racism. The understanding of these topics provides us with a conceptual foundation for promoting diversity in JLT.

3.1. Race and Ethnicity

Scientists agree that almost no racial difference exists among people in biological terms since most human genes are shared in common (see Kubota and Lin 2009). However, perceived racial differences based on bodily appearances and associated characteristics of groups of people have a social reality (Bonilla-Silva 2018). In this sense, race is a socially constructed category that not only constructs everyday beliefs and discourses but also deeply affects social structures in which people live, work, and study. A notion that often overlaps with race is ethnicity. Whereas the socially constructed idea of race evokes phenotypical difference, ethnicity, typically understood as a sociological construct, distinguishes groups of people based on cultural characteristics, including ancestry, language, religion, lifestyles, and customs (Kubota and Lin 2009).

While the identification of socially constructed racial or ethnic groups appears to be simple according to the above explanation, it is much more complex in reality. One's racial background is sometimes a matter of individual identity, especially in the cases of multiracial people or cross-racial adoptees. The same complexity applies to ethnicity. To take the example of *nikkei* as an ethnicity, *nikkei* Americans may view Mexican or South American *nikkeijin* living in the United States as culturally different, even though they may share the same *nikkei* ethnic heritage (Tsuda 2012). Racially identifying people based only on physical appearance is problematic. Similarly, ethnically categorizing people merely in terms of perceived cultural heritage is problematic as well.

3.2. Racism

Racism can be understood as “discourse, knowledge, and social practices that, by means of inferiorization, denigration, marginalization, and exclusion, construct and perpetuate unequal relations of power between

groups of people defined by perceived racial difference” (Kubota 2019:1–2). In everyday experience, racism typically evokes individual denigration, which can be called individual racism. This is often observed in racial microaggressions, defined as intentional or unintentional verbal or behavioral indignities that communicate hostility and insults to a racialized individual or group (Sue 2010). For instance, a comment intended as a compliment—“You speak Japanese very well”—can be taken as condescending or offending by a fluent non-native speaker of Japanese from non-Japanese background. This resonates with Excerpt 4 in Mori et al. (this volume), in which a non-native Japanese-speaking teacher was offended by her peer teacher’s (well-intended) explanation of *untensuru* with gestures.

Racism is also observed in systemic inequalities at an institutional level. Examples include underrepresentation of people of color among elected officials or overrepresentation of children of color in special education classes. The underrepresentation of racially and ethnically non-Japanese teachers in Japanese language programs exemplifies institutional racism. The field of JLT in North America obviously needs to overcome this problem.

Yet another form of racism is epistemological racism—biases deeply ingrained in our knowledge system, influencing which perspectives are considered to be more legitimate than others in history, literature, art, and other academic knowledge (Kubota 2019). The mainstream knowledge and perspectives taught in North American schools and universities are typically dominated by the Eurocentric perspective, reflecting settler colonial hegemony. Epistemological racism in the JLT context is represented by the perceived superiority of Japaneseness as seen in *nihonjinron*, a discourse underscoring the uniqueness of Japanese culture (Mouer and Sugimoto 2009).

These three forms of racism are interrelated with each other, reproducing systems of injustice, including hierarchies among racialized groups, unequal relations of power, and mechanisms of domination and subordination.

3.3. Intersectionality

Racism negatively affects groups of people who are viewed as racially inferior, while it perpetuates the privilege of the racial majority group. However, social injustices are not produced only by racism; rather, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and other prejudices intersect with each

other to produce complex patterns of discrimination, significantly influencing individual experience, public discourse, and social structures. In conceptualizing intersectionality, Hancock (2011) argues that social categories such as race, gender, language, class, sexuality, and nationality do not compete with each other to form oppression but they intersect. Yet, the way in which they intersect is not like physically fixed streets but rather like rivers that flow through a canyon, representing the dynamic interactions between the social statuses of different groups.

To apply intersectionality to JLT, non-native Japanese speakerness in North American Japanese classrooms, for instance, typically signifies inferiority. However, non-native speakers do not always experience exclusion, discrimination, and marginality; rather other social statuses—gender, institutional position, and race—may offer privilege. This also implies that a certain category, such as whiteness or Japaneseness, does not have a fixed universal status of power. Its power may or may not be recognized in a particular relation of power. For instance, a white non-native Japanese-speaking American citizen may be a more preferred candidate for a Japanese teaching position at an American high school due to her English proficiency, teaching credentials (ability to teach another subject), and citizenship (Kubota 2009). In JLT, Japaneseness or whiteness as a racial category intersects with other categories, such as native speakerness and nationality, and exercises its power differently in specific contexts.

3.4. New Racism and Cultural Racism

In everyday discourse, people tend to avoid being constructed as racist by denying that they are or that their intentions are racist. This is seen recently in the U. S. President Donald Trump's public denial of being racist regarding his tweets, in which he demanded four progressive congresswomen of color go back to their own country if they did not like the United States.¹ This denial is a rhetorical strategy to shield one's prejudice while allowing its expression (Bonilla-Silva 2018; van Dijk 1992). Not only is the contemporary discourse of racism characterized by such denial of racism, it also justifies racial inequalities by avoiding racial explanations altogether, which in effect becomes color-blindness. For example, claiming that everyone is equal in our society and thus the inability to access higher education is due to one's lack of effort, without recognizing enduring systemic inequality among different racial groups, signifies a color-blind view. Bonilla-Silva (2018) considers this to be *new*

racism as opposed to old-fashioned overt expressions of racism. The avoidance of labeling racial injustices as racism is performed by replacing the racial explanation of human difference with cultural difference, leading to *cultural racism* (Bonilla-Silva 2018; van Dijk 1992).

Cultural racism is observed in the past-present continuity in the case of Japan. In short, from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century under Imperial Japan, the discourse of Japanese superiority over the colonized Asian subjects exploited the notion of ethnicity with a cultural undertone. Specifically, describing the Japanese in terms of pure “Japanese race” was not tenable due to the historical mixed-blood heritage of the Japanese people (Oguma 1995; Sasaki 2013). Thus, the claimed superiority of Japanese ethnicity functioned to maintain the racist order by legitimating the assimilation of the colonized, while restricting the colonized people’s legal rights to be naturalized as Japanese. Today’s racism, as seen in hate speech against people of Korean heritage, and even the discourse of *nihonjinron*, seems to carry a legacy of this cultural racism.

It is important to note that the flip side of Japanese racism against Asian people is a higher recognition granted to white people and culture from Euro-American heritage. This is observed, for instance, in the preference for white native speakers of English for teaching English in Japan. The critique of teaching *eikaiwa* (English conversation) as a racist practice, offered by Lummis (1976) more than 40 years ago, still applies to many institutional practices today (Kubota 2011; Rivers and Ross 2013; Yamada 2015).

4. Race in JLT

JLT is typically founded on an essentialist understanding of Japanese language and culture (Kubota 2003, 2009, 2014). The kind of Japanese language to learn is usually considered to be the standardized variety based on Tokyo dialect, while the Japanese culture to learn tends to be stereotypical and superficial cultural products, practices, and communication styles, which are to be explained through cultural values and perspectives, such as *uchi/soto*, a group orientation, and strict adherence to social hierarchy. Also essentialized is who the “owners” of the language and culture are. The following formula represents a general belief: Japanese people (race and nationality) = Japanese language = Japanese culture. Underlying the essentialist concept of Japanese language and culture is racial difference.

Clearly, this formula excludes non-native Japanese speakers from other racial or ethnic backgrounds, as exemplified in the case of the white American teacher of Japanese in Excerpt 3. The American student's misrecognition of the legitimacy of this teacher as a Japanese language professional also implies their denial of their own legitimacy as L2 speakers of Japanese, causing symbolic violence—a form of power that normalizes oppression to the extent that it becomes an unchallenged reality for the oppressed (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Their reaction—perhaps unintentional and thus so ingrained—also reflects institutional racism as observed in the underrepresentation of non-native Japanese-speaking teachers from diverse racial backgrounds, as well as the epistemological racism that excludes Japanese learners' linguistic and cultural practices and perspectives as equally legitimate to Japanese native speakers'.

Conversely, deep-rooted racism in North America positions Asians, including people of Japanese heritage, as the racialized Other. Especially in K–12 schools, where the majority of teachers are white native speakers of English, Japanese-language teachers from Japan are often institutionally disadvantaged not only in racial and linguistic terms but also with regard to credentials (Kubota 2009). To borrow Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), the cultural capital (one's socially and culturally valued knowledge, skills, and dispositions) held by a native Japanese-speaking teacher is recognized in a certain field (e.g., an institution of higher education with an established Japanese program) but not in another field (e.g., white dominant American K–12 schools). The examples from the survey mentioned earlier appear to show contradictory experiences for Japanese and non-Japanese teachers in North America. However, they share an underlying ideology of linguistic and cultural essentialism which intersects with racist assumptions about legitimate language users and cultural bearers.

5. Toward Antiracist Engagement in JLT

In globalized society, where not only linguacultural diversity but also human diversity (e.g., race) has become the norm, foreign language education can no longer cling to the traditional approach that assumes the homogeneity of language, culture, and language users. Promoting diversity in JLT means critical engagement in not merely language and culture but also antiracism, which acknowledges different forms of racism and the intersectionality of race with other human attributes that form

context-dependent relations of power. Below, I offer suggestions for antiracist engagement.

First, JLT professionals should recognize that institutional and epistemological forms of racism exist and make efforts to eradicate them. Institutionally, the racial diversity of instructors, along with the diversity of other categories such as language, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, should be affirmed and promoted. To achieve this goal, preconceived ideas about the legitimacy of a teacher—the aforementioned ideological formula equating race/nationality with language and culture—need to be challenged. The requirement for employment should prioritize professional qualifications and integrity, as well as linguistic competence, not measured by native speakerness which indexes Japanese race/ethnicity/nationality, but rather professional competence. Epistemologically, instructional contents and materials must be diversified to foster students' broader understanding of Japanese language, culture, and language users. Focusing only on mainstream Japanese people, culture, and perspectives silences the histories of oppression, resistance, and resilience shared by Ainu, Okinawans, *zainichi* Koreans, and other minoritized groups in Japan, as well as those belonging to the Japanese diaspora overseas. JLT for fostering intercultural competence in the globalized world should raise learners' critical awareness of how power dynamics reproduce a taken-for-granted national narrative about Japan and how it can be challenged.

Second, teachers should exercise hyper self-reflexivity (Kubota and Miller 2017), a genuine and sustained form of critical reflexivity to constantly question their own shifting status of marginality and privilege within such power dynamics. This is especially important with the growing racial and linguistic diversity of students in North American classrooms. The teacher's dispositions and approaches to diverse groups of students either perpetuate or challenge dominant ideologies and power hierarchies. For instance, as a native Japanese-speaking professional originally from a Japanese mainstream background, I ponder my varied contextual status in relation to diverse groups of students and colleagues from different racial and linguistic backgrounds within a historically shaped power hierarchy. Moreover, the status of JLT as a profession in the settler colonial society of North America requires us to critically understand the ideological construction of Japanese people in North America as "immigrants," instead of "settlers" who, together with other settlers, have exploited native people's land and resources to socially and

economically thrive (Kosaka 2008). Just like Koreans under Japanese imperialism were deprived of their rights to choose citizenship, Native people under North American colonialism were not given a choice for their citizenship. Antiracism in North American JLT must naturally question the power relation between native speakers and non-native speakers, which indexes Japanese versus non-Japanese. However, it should also challenge the broader issue of settler colonialism and scrutinize the complicit role of Japanese language, culture, and people.

To conclude, JLT as part of a broader educational project to promote knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for engaging various kinds of difference must invite students and teachers to explore the notion of difference critically. This includes recognizing the complexity of race and racism and critically engaging in antiracism. Such engagement would contribute to the advancement of equity, diversity, and inclusion in JLT.

NOTE

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/16/us/politics/trump-tweet-house-vote.html>.

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