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Language Ideology and Its Manifestations: Exploring Implications for Japanese Language Teaching

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1. Introduction

A recent roundtable discussion sponsored by the American Association of Teachers of Japanese took as its starting point the results of an online survey of over 350 Japanese-language educators regarding their perspectives on Japanese language and its culture and teaching (Mori, Hasegawa, Park, and Suzuki, this volume). The survey elicited statements about language use, including some that express overt bias towards native-speakerism, that reflect what is called, in linguistic anthropology, *language ideology*. Language ideology refers to a set of beliefs or feelings held by people in a particular culture, whether explicit or implicit, about language. This commentary will examine how a particular language ideology has affected the quality of foreign language education in general and Japanese language education in particular.

Contemporary Japanese language pedagogy is steeped in the ideological construct of nation building that Japan has been engaged in since the Meiji period. The effects of this ideology can still be felt today. This ideology can be discerned in essentialist images of Japan that are replete in the *nihonjinron* literature and in Japanese language textbooks that promote a monolithic, static view of the language. Postmodern perspectives have been critical of such texts and stress the need to present a more dynamic view of culture that takes diversity within a culture to be the norm. We might benefit from a paradigm shift in foreign language pedagogy that makes the learner the center of the process. It should be the learner who ultimately determines what or how the skill that they possess should be used in whatever shape they manage to acquire it.

Research on language ideology entails several areas of inquiry. These include language use and its basic structure—i. e., what constitutes “the Japanese language”; the ethnography of language use, which is connected



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with how Japanese is spoken; and language contact and multilingualism, which relate to the variety of Japanese language that is used. Each of these areas is relevant to the results of the abovementioned survey. In the following, I would like to explore these issues by focusing on the impact of standard language ideology upon Japanese language teaching.

2. Language Ideology and Japanese

Governmental policies often negotiate between two different types of language ideology: ideologies that see language as a commodity, problem, or right, and ideologies that see languages as intrinsically diverse. The language-related policies that eventually emerge often reflect the compromise reached between these two types of ideology, as seen in many European societies that pick a language to equate with their nation-state, often connecting it with the name of their country. This is called “homogenism.” This term refers to the belief that a nation-state should have a uniform language, with little or no internal variation.

This homogenistic line of thinking has also resulted in the discourse connected with linguistic purism, where languages purge themselves of influences seen as “threatening” to the ideology that supports the structure of a particular language. The idea that there is a standard language is based not on the realities of language use, but on ideas about what language should be. Standard language ideologies often negatively affect the ability of minority language speakers to succeed in educational settings, because a teacher's perception of what constitutes proper language could be biased against the language or dialect spoken by the student. Similarly, the ideas behind language “development” and identifying what a “standard” language should be, also involve the inclusion of certain components that are ideologically motivated by a certain group's ideas of “identity, aesthetics, morality and epistemology,” and processes of exclusion that “erase” deviations from the “norm” (Woolard 1998:3).

These linguistic ideological issues affect Japanese language in general and Japanese language pedagogy in particular. Let us first begin by defining “the Japanese language.” The Japanese government uses two terms for it: *kokugo* and *nihongo*. *Kokugo* literally means “language of our country,” a term used by Japanese people to refer to the language they speak, which is different from *nihongo*, the variety of Japanese that foreigners speak. Gottlieb (2005:15) indicates how the Japan Foundation, in its promotion of Japanese around the world, used the term *nihongo*

instead of *kokugo*, although it was the latter that was taught in the pre-war colonies of Taiwan and Korea.

However, many scholars have tried to promote the internationalization of *kokugo/nihongo* and have argued for doing away with this false dichotomy, stating that many varieties of Japanese should be considered “legitimate,” just as Japanese English should be “recognized” as a variant of the international English language. Kato (2000), who is cited by Gottlieb, for instance, argues that since Japanese is no longer a minority language spoken only by those born and raised in Japan, the time has come to re-evaluate earlier attitudes towards it: to “liberate” it from the preserve of a small, select group of scholars. This means that the ownership of the Japanese language should be spread to all those who learn it, and not just the native speaker. This also means that the onus of communication should rest with the native speaker, who should decipher what is meant by the nonnative speaker in the context of the communication event without being judgemental about it, just as native speakers of English are generally expected to do with nonnative speakers.

This then brings us to another site of language ideology, which is the notion of speakers of the Japanese language. Identifying who is a “typical Japanese” person is rife with ideological problems. Sugimoto (2003:185–188), in his influential analysis of the *nihonjinron* discourse, concludes that a typical Japanese is “a female, non-unionized and non-permanent employee in a small business *without a university education*” (emphasis mine) and not the “white collar male with a university degree.” While this definition goes against the grain of a popular image of a typical Japanese person, it excludes at least seven other categories of people who live in Japan and use Japanese regularly but are not considered Japanese. Fukuoka (2000:xxix–xxxiv) lists them as “first-generation Japanese migrants”; Japanese raised abroad; “naturalized Japanese”; “third-generation Japanese emigrants and war orphans abroad”; “zainichi Koreans with Japanese upbringing but who have not taken Japanese citizenship for which fluency in Japanese is mandatory”; “the Ainu”; and the *gaijin* or the “pure non-Japanese.” This then makes it clear that the ideology that promotes the idea of a native speaker of Japanese, or any other language for that matter, privileges a certain variety of the language and rests on a foundation of inclusionary and exclusionary policies. Gottlieb also argues that not only do these “non-Japanese” people use Japanese on a daily basis in Japan, but that the in-group that is considered

“typical Japanese” “speak and write Japanese different from the standard language, depending on age, gender and education” (Gottlieb 2005:3).

The concept of a “native speaker” also involves the Japanese language ideology regarding what these speakers are expected to speak. The erasure of language varieties, and consequently, of the peoples who speak them, has enabled a long evolutionary process towards a standard Japanese language. This happened in four stages in Japan’s history according to Doerr (2015). The encounter with the Western countries in the Meiji period led to the first wave of the suppression of language varieties that Japan felt were incompatible with its goals of modernization and the promotion of a unified Japanese state. These attempts at standardization led to the imposition of the Tokyo dialect on the rest of the country through strict government educational policies that included measures such as *hōgen kyōsei* (correct the dialects) and *hōgen bokumetsu* (eradicate the dialects) (Ramsey 2004). In the post-war period, where attempts were made to “democratize” Japan, these repressive measures disappeared, but the desire to maintain national unity manifesting in the standardized linguistic structure continued to stay strong, especially after the devastating psychological blow that Japan experienced after its loss. It was only in the 1970s, when rural revitalization processes seemed to emerge as one of the national goals, that linguistic varieties and their acceptance became mainstream. This continues till the present day, where dialects are no longer seen as being “backward” and are even promoted in the media and the internet as marks of one’s heritage and not as something to be ashamed of. However, the power dynamics of the standard language and dialects hasn’t been erased, which has resulted in many Japanese being speakers of “dual languages”—standard in public and dialect in private (Doerr 2015, Heinrich 2012, Okumura 2016, Twine 1988). It is this Tokyo-based standard Japanese that forms the basis of Japanese language teaching materials used in Japan and overseas. This very practice has also reaffirmed the linguistic capital associated with the standard language.

3. Language Ideology and Pedagogy

Japanese language pedagogy is also replete with ideological issues. One of the areas in which these issues manifest is the educational context in which this pedagogy is carried out, both in the United States and Japan.

In U. S. foreign language departments, we see a privileging of monolingualism, as argued persuasively by Valdés and others (Valdés et al. 2003). Foreign language instruction is carried out in an all-pervasive

ideological atmosphere that emphasizes the study of English and an ambivalence Americans have felt towards the study and teaching of foreign languages (Lambert 1986; Tucker 1990, 1991, cited in Valdés et al. 2003). Foreign language learning and teaching is carried out in the context where citizens have imagined themselves to constitute a nation that is Christian and monolingual, and immigrants are expected to give up their old identities and assimilate (Anderson 1991). Valdés et al. (2003:7) describe the context as follows:

Popular and scholarly beliefs about monolingualism and bilingualism in the US context are part of a multilayered linguistic culture that brings together ideologies of nationalism (one state, one language), standardness (a commitment to linguistic purity and correctness), and monolingualism (assumptions about monolingualism as the normal human condition).

This discourse directly condemns the public support of non-English languages and supports the view that the bilingualism of indigenous and immigrant groups is problematic. This is also institutionally reflected in structures of foreign language teaching, where inadequate time is spent in teaching the language (4–5 hours per week, compared to the hours that students spend in science, music, theatre, etc.), the relatively low linguistic competencies of foreign language teachers, and a lack of agreement about effective pedagogies (Valdés et al. 2003). As a result, students typically do not become proficient in foreign languages.

The dominant monolingual ideology has also been evident in how foreign languages are taught in the United States by setting idealized native speakers of the standard language as models to follow (Kramsch 1997, Valdés et al. 2003). In the context of Japanese language education, it is important to note that since the “native speaker of Japanese” is defined by the discourse of *nihonjinron* discussed above, only those who conform to the concept of a native speaker defined by this ideological norm are hired by departments promoting the study of Japanese. Japanese language pedagogy is still surrounded by the aura of the ideology of the theories of *nihonjinron* that privilege the knowledge and intuition of native speakers of Japanese. Gottlieb (2005) and Heinrich (2005) along with Kubota (2003) and Matsumoto and Okamoto (2003) give an excellent description of what this *nihonjinron* ideology entails in discourses that explain what Japanese language is and how Japanese people use it. Such ideological orientations bleed over to the Japanese language textbooks that

then make essentialist claims about the Japanese people. According to Gottlieb (2005:4):

[T]he ethnocentrist *Nihonjinron* literature ... has portrayed the language as being static and as somehow uniquely different in important functions from all other languages. Within the *Nihonjinron* framework, Japan is portrayed as linguistically homogenous (i.e., Japanese is the only language spoken there) and the Japanese language itself as a uniquely difficult barrier even for Japanese themselves, let alone others.

Gottlieb debunks this image by giving examples of people like Dhugal Lindsay, who won the prestigious Japanese language haiku prize, or the Swiss born author David Zopetti, who won Japan's Subaru literary award for a novel written in Japanese.

The diversity in how Japanese is used in Japan and elsewhere and by whom has not been highlighted in the context of language education. Therefore, learners of Japanese also privilege the native speaker model and often discredit the competencies of nonnative speakers of the language. According to Valdés et al. (2003:8), learners tend to feel that they have been “deprived” of something valuable that they are owed if they are “relegated” to being taught by nonnative speakers, even if the latter may have spent a considerable amount of time mastering and teaching the language. This observation seems applicable to the case of Japanese as well.

4. Language Ideology and Japanese Language Textbooks

Another area in which the language ideology manifests itself is the content of the pedagogy itself. Japanese language textbooks meant to promote the study of this seemingly “impenetrable” language also perpetuate this essentialist mythology. Heinrich (2005), who analyzes various textbooks used widely in Japanese language teaching institutions, argues persuasively that ideological orientations toward the Japanese language create barriers that make it difficult for foreign learners. His analysis looks at the content of some popular textbooks in use at that time and show how they promote the essentialist idea of a Japanese speaker who manifest qualities that are hard to understand and emulate. While the textbooks that Heinrich analyzes might be considered slightly dated, newer texts also abound in stereotypes that create a picture of the Japanese people typical of the *nihonjinron* discourse.

For instance, in the latest edition of *Genki* (Banno et al. 2011a, 2011b) or *The First Japanese Textbook for Foreigners in English* (Miyazaki, Kurita, and Sakamoto 2009), or in *Japanese for Young People* (AJALT 2012) and *Kyō kara hanaseru! Nihongo daijōbu* (Sun Academy Nihongo Center 2015), we see statements that perpetuate a distorted image of the Japanese people. To begin with, all these texts have a very singular depiction of the Japanese people that does not indicate any variation. Even when they are talking about family, it is usually a heterosexual family or an idealized family with grandparents, parents, and children all living together. While it is necessary to know the terms for different family members, it is important to depict varieties in Japanese family structure, such as single parent families, same-sex families, or even families that have no children, etc., to avoid misconceptions of what a traditional Japanese family is and that they do not vary all that much from the American norm.

Similarly, Kubota (2003) discusses the National Standards of 1999 along with Peterson's *Adventures in Japanese* (1998, 1999, 2000), and Matsumoto and Okamoto (2003) analyze Jordan and Noda's *Japanese: The Spoken Language* (1987), Miura and McGloin's *An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese* (1994), Mizutani and Mizutani's *An Introduction to Modern Japanese* (1977), Tohsaku's *Yookoso* (1994), and Tsukuba Language Group's *Situational Functional Japanese* (1991), all of which promote stereotypical depictions of the Japanese people.

We also observe that these texts abound in stereotypical pronouncements about how Japanese people use their language. Heinrich (2005:218) gives some great examples of these *nihonjinron* statements, such as *Nihongo Journal* that states "Japanese often avoid directness in making requests" or discusses how the Japanese people are more prone to using the passive voice.

Matsumoto and Okamoto's 2003 article, through similar examples, shows that Japanese textbooks abound in statements that essentialize and exoticize the Japanese. They also include counter examples to show that there is variety in the way Japanese use their language and stress the need to include these alternatives as well.

5. Towards Critical Pedagogy

As we can see, Japanese language pedagogy is steeped in an ideology that conceives of Japan as a monolithic culture: an ideology that does not reflect the realities of life in Japan. In order to move away from such

essentialist images of Japan, texts which incorporate postmodern perspectives critical of essentialism, and which take diversity within a culture to be the norm, might enable a paradigm shift in foreign language pedagogy (Kramsch 1997:1). This shift, as mentioned earlier, makes the learner the center of the language-learning process. This would mean developing a critical approach by both native and nonnative pedagogues to concepts such as *target language*, *native* and *nonnative speaker*, *Standard Japanese*, *accent* and *error* (Tollefson 2007:32) and adopting sensitivity to what the learner manages to accomplish within the limited time that she has in the classroom and outside of it.

By way of solution, we might consider, for instance, a pointer for the English language classroom suggested by Cook (1999:199–200). Cook proposes that one could reverse the roles of the ignorant L2 learner and omniscient native speaker frequently seen in the textbooks by making the native speaker the ignorant one being educated in the sights and customs of the home country by L2 learners. In this way, L2 learners do not feel denigrated by their portrayal in the textbooks. This approach can be applicable to Japanese language pedagogy as well.

For instance, in chapter 9 of *Genki 1* (Banno et al. 2011a), we might want to replace the dialogues of Takeshi with those of Mary, who would be telling Takeshi all about *kabuki*, since it is she who is majoring in Japanese (208). This might be closer to what the reality is in Japan, where foreigners are the ones who throng to sites of traditional arts and sports even more than the Japanese themselves. Similarly, in chapter 14 of the *First Japanese Textbook for Foreigners in English* (Miyazaki et al. 2009), we can have Sean take Nikolas to Akihabara and show him the sights, since Japanese pop culture has become increasingly popular amongst foreigners (162).

In textbooks and in class one could present famous L2 speakers who have overcome difficulties learning the language and have been respected as bilinguals in their own right, rather than actors and movie stars of the target culture who are not known for their linguistic skills. For instance, in chapter 24 of *Kyō kara hanaseru! Nihongo daijōbu* (Sun Academy Nihongo Center 2015) we can depict a nonnative speaker, who mirrors the composition of the L2 learner, making the presentation in Japanese rather than a non-human character with the appearance of a penguin (177). Or, in chapter 19 in *Genki 2* (Banno et al. 2011b), we can replace the “Boss” with a wide variety of characters who reflect L2 learners of diverse backgrounds, who are meeting their Japanese junior employee (164). This

would allow L2 learners feel that they do not have to be in a subordinate position in a Japanese learning environment.

Finally, one could treat nonnative speaker teachers as equals in foreign language classrooms. Nonnative speaker teachers can be deployed in all of the various levels of the language learning process in the classroom so students will not feel that mastering the language is out of their reach, a feeling fostered by the prioritization of the native speaker as instructor. It might help if nonnative speakers' input were more widely used in the design and structure of textbooks rather than relying heavily on native speaker authors' judgments. The nonnative speakers' perspectives on what language structures might be easier for learners and in what order these structures should be introduced, as well as how nonnative speakers should be represented in the textbooks, I believe, will help improve the outcomes.

6. Conclusion

The dominance of the native speaker discourse has been so pervasive that it is hard to imagine a paradigm change in which we move from a teacher-centered perspective to a learner-centered one. The illusive target of trying to reach what a native speaker is able to do in a limited period is a daunting one. Not only is the math difficult, the absence of a political will makes it harder. However, if the abovementioned recommendations were to be incorporated in Japanese language pedagogy, it would be a modest step toward making the Japanese language classroom a more inclusive space for all involved.

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