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Language Ideologies and L2 Speaker Legitimacy: Native Speaker Bias in Japan.

By **Jae DiBello Takeuchi**. Bristol/Jackson: Multilingual Matters, 2023. 172 pp. \$39.95.

Reviewed by

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In recent years, foreign residents have become an increasingly visible and growing part of the population in Japan causing related issues of social integration, cultural adaptation, and intercultural understanding to move into the forefront of public discourse. Conversations from political policy to classroom pedagogy reflect Japan's gradual shift from a historically homogeneous society toward one marked by greater cultural diversity. This is the complex and dynamic background to which Jae Takeuchi's recent publication, *Language Ideologies and L2 Speaker Legitimacy*, is well-positioned to contribute.

The question at the core of this book is a longstanding and deceptively simple one: How are learners of Japanese perceived and integrated into Japanese society? Various iterations of this question have been asked for decades—perhaps even centuries—whenever Japan has entered periods of increased foreign contact. From encounters with early Christian missionaries to postwar occupation, and now an aging population and increasing immigration, Japan has often been characterized as a society where foreigners struggle to find full and legitimate acceptance. Takeuchi's contribution to this question is to consider how, in salient aspects of language use such as honorifics or dialects, learners of Japanese encounter “native speaker bias” and how this bias poses a challenge for them to integrate and feel accepted into Japanese society.

Takeuchi's particular question is increasingly urgent in contemporary society. The tension is striking: Japanese remains a highly popular



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language for learners but sees low rates of proficiency and regular use (anecdotally, for instance, Japanese is the fifth most popular language on the Duolingo language learning app [Duolingo, 2024], but the 31st language for global population of regular L2 speakers [Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2025]). This disparity points toward a situation in which many learners want to access Japanese society and culture, but relatively few do so successfully—highlighting the unique position of Japanese as a case study for understanding social integration among foreign language learners. It is thus critical to examine the frictions that learners encounter in developing linguistic and cultural proficiency in order to help learners reach higher levels of proficiency, and Japanese society at large better understand how to navigate the ever-greater intercultural presence in Japan.

Takeuchi's timely and in-depth study tackles this issue by moving from abstract theorizing to offer a solid ethnographic and empirical understanding of the situation faced by Japanese learners residing in Japan. Drawing from personal experience, extensive interviews with foreign residents in Japan, and some illustrative analysis of real-world conversations, this book centers on the two interrelated ideas of *native speaker bias* and *speaker legitimacy*. Its central thesis is that the tendency to treat native speakers as the ideal or “true” speakers of Japanese (native speaker bias) is responsible for creating a situation in which learners find it difficult to be recognized as legitimate users of Japanese and ratified participants in Japanese society (speaker legitimacy). Takeuchi's framework thus brings a fresh and needed perspective to a lengthy body of scholarship on the social dynamics of foreigners in Japan by focusing on the realities of L2 learners of Japanese as they directly navigate the challenges of linguistic and social integration.

Within a context of increased foreign presence in Japan, this book will be relevant not only to linguists and teachers of Japanese, but to those interested in the social challenges Japan faces today. Though it is written as a technical research monograph, it should have practical applications as well. L2 learners of Japanese will find insights into the often-unspoken assumptions they make about aspects of language (honorifics, gendered speech, and dialects) that are challenging, not for grammatical complexity but for how they interact with social contexts in ways that are often unfamiliar. Instructors of Japanese will also find support in this volume for developing teaching approaches and materials that will better prepare students to participate in Japanese society. As instructors also carry native speaker bias, if implicitly, into classrooms, this volume helps to bring light

to the issue which should, in turn, help instruction to be more conscious of it. Japanese native speakers may also benefit from a deeper and clearer understanding of the experiences of foreigners who are increasingly their neighbors and colleagues.

The book's central concept of *speaker legitimacy* makes explicit a situation that has long been discussed in academic and public venues: Japanese learners are often "othered" by being positioned as outsiders who require simplified Japanese and other accommodations, even when their actual competence suggests otherwise. Pervasive ideologies that the Japanese language is "too difficult" and Japanese culture is "too different" for foreigners to apprehend create a social division between real speakers (i.e., native, L1 speakers) and foreign outsiders (i.e., L2 learners) that can be difficult to breach.

Theoretically, the study builds upon existing scholarship on *native speaker bias*, or the widespread belief that first-language speakers are the ideal, and thus second-language speakers are inevitably marked as outsiders. This bias has been studied in language teaching contexts and language policy conversations. Here, Takeuchi uses it to deepen understanding of L2 speakers' experiences living and participating in Japanese society.

Methodologically, the study is primarily ethnographic. It combines semi-structured interviews guided by questionnaires, participant observation with detailed field notes, and recorded conversations including couples consisting of Japanese native and Japanese learner partners. The data are analyzed qualitatively, using thematic coding for interviews and interactional sociolinguistics for conversational examples. The discussion is deepened by the author's own experiences as a foreigner in Japan, providing an enlightening interpretive lens.

The book is organized into seven chapters which provide an in-depth exploration of the issues of speaker legitimacy within the venue of speech styles. Chapter 1 introduces the core concepts and situates the study in the existing literature while outlining the context and stakes for Japanese society. Chapter 2 then sets up the design and methodology of the study. The strongest part of the book is then laid out over Chapters 3-5, which examine speaker legitimacy within three linguistic domains: honorifics, gendered language, and dialects. These three domains are well-studied venues where social ideologies are especially salient, and with which learners are known to struggle. Each chapter gives a thorough literature review and detailed description of the linguistic feature, documents L1 and

L2 use of it, and then presents the actual voices of language learners from interviews and relevant observational examples. For honorifics, Takeuchi shows how ideologies frame legitimate use and how learners respond to these expectations. For gendered language, she demonstrates how social norms are imported into L2 pedagogy, shaping how learners anxiously monitor their language for appropriateness and thereby making it difficult to act more authentically. For dialects, she then shows how learners wrestle with the choice to adopt or avoid variations, and what this signals about ownership and legitimacy. Chapter 6 then broadens the discussion to illustrate how L1 speakers view learners, and how they may implicitly reinforce native speaker bias even when trying to be supportive. Chapter 7 concludes by discussing the cost to learners when they are not treated as legitimate speakers.

This book succeeds not only as a work of scholarship, but as an important social commentary and practical resource for educators, students, and foreign residents in Japan. Takeuchi captures the experience of foreign residents in Japan vividly, and in a way that is relevant to contemporary challenges. It is theoretically grounded and methodologically precise, leading to a product that sheds light on the linguistic and social complexities faced by foreigners in Japan.

The ethnographic approach is particularly well-suited to the topic, and the number of participants is quite large for interview-based ethnographies (many studies might only interview a dozen participants or less, while Takeuchi interviewed twenty-seven). This gives the author a tremendous amount of information to draw from, leading to an expansive but nuanced picture of language ideologies and practices. While the process for selecting “representative examples” to illustrate the author’s core arguments could have been explained more explicitly to help the reader understand why they were selected and in what ways they represent the larger population of Japanese learners, the thematic coding nevertheless revealed major recurrent patterns which are then supported with relevant conversational excerpts.

The theoretical strength of the book lies in the aforementioned notion of speaker legitimacy. This idea reframes ongoing academic conversations about native speaker bias by getting more precisely at the question of *why*. Much prior research (including, if I may, my own) has looked at the experience of Japanese learners for the purpose of documenting how they navigate the situations they find themselves in upon arrival in Japanese society, and how they make the best of complex social dynamics and

constraints. Takeuchi expands this by introducing a critical examination that diagnoses the underlying cause of *why* learners face *those particular* challenges—that cause is, of course, native speaker bias. Thus, where prior work has uncovered the challenges and learner responses to those challenges, Takeuchi takes the next vital steps toward identifying causes and looking for solutions, thereby “advocating for all L2 speakers to be, simply, speakers” (Chapter 1).

Given the methodological and empirically faithful analysis, the volume is able to offer compelling applications. It will help learners of Japanese better understand the dynamics that shape their experiences and reception in Japan. It will inform pedagogy, encouraging instructors to recognize the implications of prescriptive models for teaching language and helping them to better prepare students for engaging with Japanese society. Importantly, the book is within the reach of such an audience. Although a research report, it is written in a way that clearly explains key concepts, thus enhancing the likelihood that it will be accessible and useful for those who are most likely to benefit.

This book will certainly motivate further advances in the field. In revealing more of the underlying processes in the specific experience of learners in Japan, it speaks to broader issues in language ideology, identity, and social integration. It demonstrates how language ideologies operate in non-Western contexts, the consequences of native speaker bias for language learners, and suggests how we might move toward greater legitimization of all speakers—issues that will only become more prominent as the world becomes more global.

More specific to Japanese language and culture, this book focuses on three long studied areas of linguistic interest and well-known difficulties for learners: honorifics, gendered speech, and dialects. These areas are, of course, logical places to start. In addition to sentence-final particles, these linguistic features represent a major portion of the literature on Japanese sociolinguistics and pragmatics and, therefore, a central focus of most prominent curricula in Japanese as a foreign or second language. It will be useful to extend this analysis in to other venues as well, particularly as native speaker bias is very likely to show in other linguistic (e.g., address terms, affective markers, or speech act performances) and non-linguistic domains (e.g., embodiment, gesture and gaze, conversational and turn-taking organizations, or even public signage and text) as well.

Finally, as the issue of native speaker bias is also present, and at times pronounced, among instructors of Japanese, Takeuchi’s argument might be

further expanded to consider specific teaching applications, how to address Japanese instructor perspectives, and how non-L1 Japanese instructors can also come to be viewed as legitimate speakers and, indeed, teachers of Japanese.

In conclusion, *Language Ideologies and L2 Speaker Legitimacy* is highly recommended for those interested in understanding the specific experiences of learners in Japan as well as those interested more generally in issues of intercultural contact and integration. It thinks clearly and critically about what it means to “speak a language” and to be recognized as such. For this reason, the volume is especially suggested for instructors of Japanese as they consider how to teach Japanese in ways that will help students to feel they can learn and become valid speakers of Japanese. The discussion of pedagogical implications in Chapter 7 will be especially useful. Overall, this volume yields relevant insights, not only for those studying Japanese, but for anyone interested in how language, identity, and belonging are negotiated in intercultural contexts. Takeuchi’s study is a timely, thoughtful, and welcome contribution to an important and complex social reality.

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