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Japan's Shifting Approach Towards Language

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Abstract

This paper discusses the language use and policies in Japan over the centuries. In particular, it gives an overview of four languages, Japanese, Ainu, Okinawan, and English, and addresses their present status in the country. Additionally, it discusses the use of Japanese and English in education, media and business and Japan's move toward greater communicative competence in the latter language.

Keywords: Japan, language policy, English, report

1. Introduction

Japan has long had a complex relationship with the outside world. Since the classical period of Japanese history (550 – 1185), during which feuding clans united to assert their independence from the Chinese, to modern times, during which the country has held two Olympiads, a World Cup, and placed foreign English teachers in high schools via the JET program, the country has both embraced and resisted foreign influence. Accordingly, the nation's approach towards languages, both domestic and foreign, has been one of inclusion and exclusion. This paper first looks at four languages in particular — Japanese, English, Ainu, and Okinawan — and then addresses the current state of language use in education, media and business.

2. Japanese

Japanese, or *Nihongo*, is the only official language of Japan and is spoken by its citizens, foreign residents and visitors. Since the Meiji Restoration (1868 – 1912), the Japanese government has tied the language to an idealized and oft incomprehensible notion of the uniqueness that is Japan. This “uniqueness,” however, can easily be considered a euphemism

for “exclusion,” as even Nihongo has barriers to entry. A closer look reveals that the language has two forms: Nihongo, the language practiced by and with non-native speakers, and *Kokugo*, the exclusive language of the Japanese people. Because Kokugo incorporates what is hazily described as the “Japanese spirit,” the language cannot be spoken by anyone who is not Japanese (Lee, 1996).

While the language is linguistically unlike any other language in existence (Miller, 1980) – giving some credence to Japan’s notion of its cultural uniqueness – approximately 47% of the words in current use come from Chinese, with most of these entering into use between the 9th and 13th centuries, when Buddhism spread to Japan (Morrow, 1987).

Japan first came into contact with European languages in the 14th to 16th century, and while Nihongo saw limited Dutch and Portuguese loanwords enter the lexicon (“*tempura*,” for example), the language was allowed to develop free of major external influence. This linguistic independence only became more pronounced from 1640 – 1853, during the Edo Period, when Japan instituted a policy of near total isolation from the outside world.

However, with the Meiji Restoration, Japan showed a renewed interest and curiosity in the outside world and displayed a heretofore unseen enthusiasm for foreign technology, politics, art, and language. As a result, English loanwords entered into liberal use. Yet, in the 1930s and 1940s, Japan’s military rule gave rise to fierce nationalist sentiment and Nihongo went into another period of isolation during which loanwords were forbidden, branded by the government as agents of “enemy languages” (Morrow, 1987).

With the conclusion of World War II, however, Japan again looked outward and resumed the adoption of loanwords, a practice which continues to today. This change would seem to spell the end of Kokugo, as well. According to Gottlieb (2012), “a discursive shift is under way in relation to the old ideology that the Japanese language is the exclusive property of the Japanese people” (p. xii). She adds, though, that until Japan’s immigration policy is amended, meaningful change is unlikely to occur.

3. English

English first made its appearance in Japan in the early 1600s when William Adams, immortalized as the protagonist “John Blackthorne” in James Clavell’s novel *Shogun*, became the first English speaker to reach the nation. Linguistically, however, he had little influence on the nation, and, as Japan had entered into a period of near total isolation that would last

until 1868, it would be almost 250 years before Japan saw its first real English teacher, an American adventurer named Ranald MacDonald. In the service of a *daimyo*, or feudal lord, MacDonald was held in captivity and ordered to teach English to 14 emissaries who served as interpreters to Dutch traders. The Japanese attitude toward English at the time could, at best, be described as reluctant.

With the Meiji Era, however, came a true interest in the English language in nearly all levels of society. Not only were the Japanese willing to study English, but they were willing to adopt English words into their own language. According to Morrow (1987), “[A] new attitude of interest and curiosity developed toward the world outside of Japan, and particularly about the west. It is an attitude which persists to the present, and which may account for the rapid assimilation of English loanwords into Japanese” (p. 50). In fact, the affinity for English became so great that in the late 19th century, the first Minister of Education, Arinori Mori, pressed for English to be the official language of Japan (Kubota, 1998).

Infatuations fade, however, and in the buildup to and duration of World War II, Japan's militaristic government forbade English to be spoken. Yet, with Japan's surrender and American occupation, English once again came into favor, entering the curriculum in high schools and universities throughout the country, and as a testament to Japanese capriciousness, the country would flirt again, in 1947 and 1950, with making English an official language (Kubota, 1998).

From the late 1940s to the mid 1970s, Japan held a mostly pragmatic view of English – it was a way to do business with the outside world and a vetting tool for national university entrance examinations. As Morrow (1987) says, “The present popularity of English is due in large measure to Japan's economic prosperity, the need for foreign-language skills which industrialization has brought about,” adding, “the methodology which is used for teaching English in schools is aimed at preparing students for university entrance examinations” (p. 50, 57).

Beginning in the mid-1970s, however, Japan began to see English as a way to market itself to the world. Under the policy of *kokusaika*, or “cultural internationalization,” it instituted broad language reforms, one of which resulted in English being used in a much more communicative way. Thus, ability to interact in English became as important as grammatical proficiency on paper-based tests. As a result, in 1985, the Japanese government launched the JET program, employing native English speakers as assistant language

teachers in high schools throughout the country (Hagerman, 2009).

Presently, English study is mandatory from elementary school through high school – and further available to kindergarten and nursery school students at *eikaiwas*, or private language schools.

Finally, English has been spoken as a *native* language on the Ogasawara Islands, a remote island chain 620 miles south of Tokyo. While Japan has governed the islands since 1968, they were originally settled by a sailor from Massachusetts named Nathaniel Savory, and though his English-speaking descendants still occupy the islands, Nihongo has become the lingua franca (Fackler, 2012; Mihalicek & Wilson, 2011). English has no legal status, and with the number of native speakers shrinking to about 200, English has earned the distinction of being an endangered *native* language in Japan (Fackler, 2012; Mihalicek & Wilson, 2011).

4. Ainu and Okinawan

Japan can also count Ainu and Okinawan among its native languages, though their use has been on a decline for over a century. The provenance of the Ainu language is both unclear and controversial. As no written records of the language exist, scholars have been at a loss to explain just how and where it developed. Theories have varied widely. For example, while some linguists have hypothesized that the language is of Indo-European origin, others have theorized that it may have come from American Indians in a sort of “reverse migration” from North America to Asia. Still others believe that Ainu might be related to Altaic languages of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, such as Hungarian and Turkic (Hallen, 1999).

What isn't in question is that Ainu is presently a moribund language and has been endangered for decades. According to Paul, Simons, & Fennig (2013), the majority of Japan's 20,000 to 200,000 ethnic Ainu only converse in Japanese, and in the enclave of Nibutani (Hokkaido) which had roughly 100 speakers in the early 1980s, only 15 used the language on a daily basis.

Part of the reason for the decline of the Ainu language can be attributed to the 1899 Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act, an ironic bit of legislation that forced the Ainu to assimilate into Japanese society and speak only Japanese. Recently, though, the Japanese have begun paying attention to the plight of the Ainu language. In 1997, Japan passed the Ainu Cultural Protection Act to preserve the Ainu language and culture in earnest, and

while revitalization efforts are underway and schools in Hokkaido now teach Ainu as a second language, efforts have been described as “halfhearted” (Hagerman, 2009).

Like the Ainu people, the Okinawans, in 1879, were annexed and forced to assimilate. As a result, Japanese has become the predominant language on the island chain, used in media, business, and education. Though a moribund language, Okinawan has a reasonable chance of revitalization due to: (1) heightened interest by the Japanese people in the region's culture; (2) a rich written history; (3) a large speaker population; and (4) a nascent secessionist movement (Curry, Hijirida & Serafim, 2009; Fackler, 2013).

According to Curry et al. (2009), “Most Okinawans under the age of 45 are monolingual in Japanese, and while those roughly 45 to 75 may understand and use some Okinawan (generally preferring Japanese), it is mostly those 75 and older for whom Okinawan is a living language” (p. 10). It's the secessionist movement, however, that has recently lent the most vitality to the Okinawan language. In 2012, a private language school opened and on weekends dozens of Okinawan speakers get together to trade stories about the region's military history (Fackler, 2013).

5. Language in Education

Japanese is the only compulsory language in public primary and secondary schools, meaning that those citizens who wish to get an education for free must do so in Japanese. There are, however, private schools that offer instruction in heritage languages, for example English, Korean, and Chinese. However, students at such schools must take the University Entrance Qualification Examination to attend Japanese universities, something that public-school students are exempt from. As a result, many of Japan's resident minorities are enticed to attend Japanese public schools and learn in Japanese. A consequence, says Hatori (2005), is that “heritage languages and ethnic identities are being lost” (p. 48).

At the university level, Japanese language proficiency is mandatory and all foreign students are required to achieve a requisite score on either the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) or newer Examination for Japanese University Admission (EJU).

While the role of Nihongo in Japanese education has been steadfast, that of English has been much less consistent. Despite English education being viewed as a valuable tool toward university acceptance and commerce with the outside world, in actuality, it has been considered something of a failure (Morrow, 1987). Test of English for International

Communication (TOEIC) scores for Japanese students, for example, ranked as the worst in the world in both 1998 and 1993 (Okuno, 2007). Due in part to this lackluster performance, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), drew up an Action Plan to cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities.”

MEXT overhauled the educational system, establishing oral communications classes and mandated that all English teachers in junior and senior high school undergo training every five years and meet certain proficiency “targets.” Further, in 2002 the ministry launched the Super English Language High School (SELHi) program, in which students at 169 secondary schools immersed themselves in English, which was taught as a second language rather than a foreign language. After a seven-year run in which SELHi students’ standardized English test scores outperformed those of non-SELHi students, the program came to a successful conclusion (Yamaoka, 2009).

While such a test-centric approach to learning has persisted for generations, *kokusaika* has brought about incremental changes to the way English is viewed and taught in the classroom. Prior to the mid-1970s, the Japanese primarily viewed English as a “golden ticket” to gain admission to foreign and domestic universities or conduct business with the outside world, resulting in classes which were prescriptive and form focused. These days, however, communicative language instruction has become *de rigueur* in most universities, and Japanese educators recognize the need not to just perform English, but to utilize it.

6. Language in Media and Business

While there is no present language policy in Japanese media, most print and broadcast media are in Japanese. The expatriate community, meanwhile, is served by English news sources such as the *Japan Times*, NHK news in English, and the Armed Forces Radio Network. Despite Japanese and English language media being plainly delineated, the former is rife with code switching and English loanwords, sometimes to the befuddlement of Japanese citizens. The Council on the National Language, a government body, addressed the issue in 2000, recommending that loan words be used with “much care.” However, the body has no power to enforce any such recommendations (Hatori, 2005) and use of loanwords in media has continued unabated. In fact, a lawsuit was filed in the early 2000s against NHK by an elderly Japanese citizen who has claimed “mental distress” at having to process all of the Anglicized words on NHK broadcasts (McCurry, 2013).

Regarding business, Japanese is the *de facto* language for nearly all companies in Japan, and foreigners who intend to work in Japan are often required to take a standardized exam called the Business Japanese Proficiency Test (BJT). Native Japanese speakers at Japanese companies, on the other hand, are often required to take the TOEIC test, and in order for them to move into management, or be eligible to work outside of Japan, they must achieve a minimum score (typically 600-730) (R. Sasaki, personal communication, July 10, 2018).

However, with globalization and *kokusaika*, English is becoming more popular as a working language in Japanese companies. For example, Rakuten, a large Tokyo-based Internet company with over 9,000 employees, made English its official language in 2012. According to company CEO Hiroshi Mikitani, the “Englishization” of Rakuten will help the company operate smoothly in the global marketplace and think within an “international framework” (“Rakuten’s English drive”, 2012).

7. Conclusion

For centuries, Japan has had a polar approach to its four prevalent languages, Nihongo, English, Ainu and Okinawan. The former has long been the official language, yet at one time, there was government debate about whether to replace it with English, which itself has emerged and retreated over the centuries as a favored foreign language. Also, while use of Ainu and Okinawan has been on a steady decline, there’s evidence of reversal as Japanese are beginning to take an interest in the country’s minority cultures. Finally, language policies in relevant areas of society, namely education, media and business, have worked to protect Nihongo while simultaneously promoting and attenuating the use of foreign languages, principally English.

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