

Looking for the future of the Japanese language

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Recently, there has been a growing awareness that the process of globalization is an extremely complex phenomenon operating at several levels of social life. The dynamics are particularly opaque when it comes to the question of language, the core of culture.

While many of us have apprehensions about aggressive globalism, many others remain unconvinced by the arguments against globalism based on the general value of diversity, the value of languages as expressions of identity, as repositories of history, and so forth.

In view of the fact that the need for cross-national or cross-cultural communication is already a reality, the question to be asked is not as simple as diversity versus globalization, but how to achieve cross-cultural communication while preserving diversity.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, being aware of this paradox, had a conference on "Language as a Human Problem" in the summer of 1973¹. In the conference Dell Hymes encouraged linguists to research various sociolinguistic phenomena, such as lingua franca, pidgins and creoles, standardized languages, and multiple repertoires, as historical solutions to the problem.

¹ See *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Language As a Human Problem* issued as *Daedalus* Vol. 102, No. 3, 1973.

This paper takes note of the recent trends in East Asian governments to seek solutions in the adoption of English as a second official language and examines the effectiveness of such policies in particular with reference to the Japanese case.

On January 18, 2000, the prime minister's commission of Japan proposed among other things to require all public institutions to produce their publications in both English and Japanese, and to ultimately adopt English as a second official language. Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun has reportedly expressed his strong support for English as Korea's second official language. Also, Taiwan is attempting to make English its official language.

Is English as a second official language really the solution? What would happen to inherited languages if English obtains a high status as an official language?

The answers to these questions may vary from language to language depending on the historical and cultural background of the language.

The focus of this paper is Japan and Japanese. I will discuss three significant points that the planners of the future of the language for the Japanese people must seriously and carefully consider if Japanese is to remain the primary language of Japanese people.

Firstly, there is a distinct possibility that the status of Japanese within Japan will diminish precipitously once English is given an official status.

The prime minister's commission, having been set up after the economic bubble burst in the 90's, expresses a strong sense of crisis regarding Japan's current situation and its future. It states emphatically how essential it is for Japanese to master "global literacy," which means information technology (IT) tools, such as computers and the Internet. This in turn links to the idea of official English since English is currently the international lingua franca dominant in IT.

Although the Official English proposal has not been put into practice due to the untimely death of the prime minister, it has left a tremendous impact on the mind of the Japanese people. In 2002, the Ministry of Education and Science revised the program of education in such a way that English would be taught at the elementary school level, and it began to train teachers. Also private English conversation classes for children are mushrooming.

The commission's report does not make explicit its negative attitude towards the Japanese language. However, when it states how important it is for Japanese

individuals to obtain the ability to express themselves creatively and imaginatively and proposes at the same time adopting and promoting English as a second official language, it is sending the message that Japanese is not a language for creative and imaginative expression. David Crystal (2000), investigating various cases of language death, points out that negative attitudes in government policy toward a language are a strong factor in language death (p.).

We are reminded of the socio-political climate of early Meiji time. In 1872 Mori Arinori, the first minister of education of Japan, wrote a letter to W. D. Whitney, a Yale philologist, in which Mori describes the Japanese language with phrases such as “inadequate,” “too poor” and “meager,” and he states that Japan, therefore, must adopt English as the national language, that English would have to be taught in schools as the future of the “Empire” to the gradual exclusion of Japanese. This idea was shared by many colleagues of Mori who were eager to catch up with the West.

It is clear that many leaders of the modernization of Japan, i.e. Westernization, developed a negative attitude towards their own language. In 1889 Mori, who was viewed by many Japanese as too much of a proponent of Westernization, was assassinated by an extreme nationalist. Yasuteru Otani (1998), looking back at the history of English language education in Japan since the Meiji Restoration, recognizes the “servile-arrogant” cycle as a recurring pattern in Japan: Japanese are sometimes servilely pro-English, but at other times they become excessively arrogant towards English. He describes the official English proposition of the prime minister’s commission presented in 2000 as the servile attitude of the fourth cycle, meaning their attitude towards Japanese is negative.

Therefore, if English is actually adopted as a second official language and becomes dominant in increasingly wider contexts of public communication, the Japanese language will be weakened through language replacement according to Crystal's theory.

Secondly, in planning the future of our language, we need to remember that languages are constantly changing and that Japanese is no exception: It is particularly important to hear the silent voices of the social minorities in resistance against the values implicit in the language. Japanese has a particular aspect which has been changing but not with sufficient rapidity.

At the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan underwent a revolutionary change from the most rigidly hierarchized feudal society (so-called vertical

society) to a modern society, which was in principle democratic (“horizontal society”). This social change naturally had to be concurrent with linguistic changes accommodating interpersonal relationships of modern society.

The process of creating a new variety, which is now called “Standard Japanese” began soon after the change in the basic political institutions. As most linguists agree, however, language can change only gradually. Therefore, when a society experiences an extremely radical change, as in the case of the Meiji Restoration, the process of language change lags behind the social change. After a century of efforts to standardize the language, Japan finally has a good language of its own, as some critics of the official English proposition say. But this should not mean that the language adequately conveys the meaning of what people wish to express. At the base of the language, “the principle of verticality (Chie Nakane 1970), which has been inherited from the language of the feudal period, is very much in operation, constantly placing women and younger speakers in subordinate positions and thus depriving them of the capability of full expression.

In the famous historical sociolinguistic study of second person pronouns of European languages, Brown and Gilman (1960) put forward the theory that languages of the world have been shifting their emphasis from the power semantic to the solidarity semantic, allowing people to speak as equals.

My study of Japanese pronouns in the long-term historical perspective clearly shows that Japanese is also part of this global shift even though the changes are not as conspicuous as in other languages, yet.

During feudal times, there were more than one hundred forms attested to in existing documents. Those words had to be properly used according to the feudal hierarchy. During the modernization period, many of them became archaic or completely obsolete. Contemporary Japanese has only about a dozen in use. There is strong evidence that the global shift towards linguistic democratization is occurring in Japanese as well although the power semantic is still dominant compared with other languages.

It would be useful to bring attention to this language shift, which is a form of global transformation that is felt at the grass-roots level, and distinguish it from the top-down globalization manifested in the government policies adopting English as an official language.

The current Japanese predicament can be elucidated by saying that globalizing forces from opposite directions have not been adequately addressed.

Japanese women have made many proposals to make Japan more inclusive and egalitarian. Younger speakers have been expressing spontaneously and subconsciously their negative attitude towards the Japanese, particularly the principle of verticality, derived from tradition.

The prime minister's commission did not take into consideration the presence of this development. If Japan really wants to empower its people as individuals as stated in the commission's report and enable them to communicate among themselves as equals, it should attempt to find ways to facilitate their globalizing language shift before adopting English as a second official language and be open to discussing the possibilities of change.

Thirdly, the prime minister's commission seems to be very much concerned that English language teaching in Japan has not been successful. (Some people think that Japanese are poor learners of foreign languages.) Many people, including foreign scholars, such as E.O.Reischauer, and Japanese educators have repeatedly stated that Japanese foreign language instruction leaves a great deal to be desired.

It cannot be overlooked, however, that the problem is not just learning foreign languages, but also mastering "communicative abilities," in other words abilities to think independently, express ideas clearly, and interact effectively with purpose.

In my view, such abilities can be best developed in the education of their own language, Japanese. How can Japanese speakers begin to learn to communicate in a foreign language if they are not freed from feudal constraints, if they are not encouraged as individuals to "think creatively and imaginatively?"

Japanese people would find it easier to learn English or any other foreign language when they become confident in expressing themselves in their own language.

In conclusion, I suggest the following:

1. to create an open environment which encourages discussion on language policy, involving language educators and researchers without political interference from above.

2. to conduct more field work and find the gap between currently authorized rules for the use of Japanese and the actual practice of communication to assess the need for change.
3. to improve Japanese language education placing greater emphasis on “communicative competence.”

My study is about one particular case, Japan and Japanese, to show potential problems of the hasty adoption of English as a second official language in response to what the American Academy of Arts and Sciences characterized as a “human problem to be overcome.” It seems that we need case studies of the official English policy from the perspective of our concern with the preservation of diverse languages. Maintaining and growing the power of inherited languages is one way of enhancing “global literacy.”

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