

# LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE PRACTICE VS. INTERNATIONALIZATION POLICIES IN JAPAN

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

'Internationalization' is currently one of the major language policy aims in Japan, with the stated objective of improving English abilities on the part of the Japanese so as to enable the country to take a more active role internationally. However, the policy is based on the government's assumption that English is the only important international language, and overlooks the capital resources resident in large minority groups who already speak other important international languages. Among these languages we might include the Spanish and Portuguese brought by Nikkei immigrants to Japan, as well as the Chinese and Korean spoken by groups with a longer history of residence as well as more recent arrivals. The first three fit into the world-wide 'top ten' group of languages numerically, and all four are important languages from an economic point of view. Thus, the policy of internationalization seems to overlook the inherent value of its own minority languages as a mechanism for allowing Japan to internationalize, as well as simply not taking advantage of a linguistic resource which already exists. This paper examines recent language policies in Japan, with respect to how policies and practices aimed at internationalization for the Japanese and language maintenance for minorities in Japan seem to run at cross-purposes instead of in parallel, essentially creating a social tension instead of the greater international linkage that is desired.

Governments often promulgate language policies and undertake language planning in an effort to resolve societal issues which arise from linguistic conflict of interests. Typically, such forays into language policy issues address two functions, status planning and corpus planning. Status planning is a language-external activity, as it attempts to establish status for language or variety of a language in a society or to change the status of an already existing language or variety of a language in a society. Corpus planning, on the other hand, is a language-internal activity, in that it focuses on changing the internal conditions of a language or variety by standardizing some aspect of the linguistic resources available within the language. For example, the development of an orthography, the adoption of vocabulary items from new or foreign sources, and the compilation of dictionaries and grammars, are all examples of corpus planning activities through which the language's resources are expanded and extended in a society (see, for example, Wardhaugh, 2002).

## 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF CURRENT LANGUAGE POLICY IN JAPAN

The contemporary thrust of Japan's language policies is based on four ideological principles; these are standardization, linguistic assimilation, internationalization of the Japanese language and internationalization of the Japanese people.

### 2.1. Standardization

Standardization of the Japanese language has been largely implemented through the public education system. Standard Japanese is used as the medium of instruction for teaching the curriculum in all Japanese public schools, and it is used as the medium for writing all textbooks (Maher, 1997; Noguchi, 2001). Additionally, the *NHK* (that is, the *Nihon Housou Kyoukai* or *Japan Broadcasting Corporation*) occupies an equally important role in implementing standardized language practices throughout the country. The *NHK* determines acceptable usage of language, and disseminates this usage in its broadcast outreach. The language used in *NHK* broadcasting is considered by its audiences to be both correct and as close to the standard as one gets (Carroll, 1995). Listeners are likely to consider, if not emulate, the language forms found in the *NHK*'s usage as the standard to which one would aspire; an example of this may be seen in the number of word accents which have shifted in various areas of Japan towards the standard that the *NHK* uses (Carroll, 1995). The *NHK* has also published a pronunciation and accent dictionary regularly since 1943, texts which hold a reputation as being the most authoritative guidebooks on

standard language use and accents (Carroll, 1995). Considering these outreach functions, the NHK can easily be reckoned as an organization central to implementing corpus planning, given that the result is a change in the internal conditions of Japanese in the larger society through disseminating a standard form of Japanese.

## 2.2. Linguistic Assimilation

There are three types of linguistic minority groups in contemporary Japan: an indigenous group composed of the Ainu and Ryukyuan, an old immigrant group of Koreans and Chinese, and a newcomer group which arrived in Japan after the 1970s as either refugees, family members of the Japanese returnees from China, or migrant workers. The following discussion offers examples of these linguistic minorities, and illustrates how their languages are treated by the current Japanese government.

### 2.2.1. Ainu

Japan has only about twenty native Ainu speakers today, although many people possess receptive knowledge of Ainu; that is, they can understand it but cannot speak it (Anderson & Iwasaki-Goodman, 2001). In order to transmit the Ainu language to the next generation, the Ainu people established their own Ainu language classes in Nibutani in the prefecture of Hokkaido (Anderson & Iwasaki-Goodman, 2001), though Ainu has not yet been taught in the public education system except in universities (Maher, 1997). In Nibutani, it is no longer possible to transmit the Ainu language from parents to their children, because parents only possess receptive knowledge of Ainu; intergenerational language transmission within a family is thus no longer possible in Ainu communities. According to most scholars working in language maintenance and language revitalization (see, for example, Fishman, 1991), intergenerational language transmission is the key to maintaining endangered languages. If this type of transmission does not occur, these languages will simply die out eventually. In order to save such endangered languages from extinction, such heritage languages need governmental intervention in the form of language support. This is undoubtedly the rationale which prompted the *Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA, Bunka-chou)*, an agency of MEXT, to put forward the *Act for the Promotion of Ainu Culture and of the Dissemination and Education of Knowledge about Ainu Traditions (ACA, 2003c)* in 1997. MEXT is the newly re-formulated *Mombukagakusho, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology*. This act aims at promoting the Ainu culture and language, and the ways that the Ainu language should be maintained and disseminated are laid out on the ACA's website (see ACA, 2003c). However, the Ainu people have not been considered as a distinct group by the government, as noted in the Japanese census data; and no figures are available for the current Ainu population (Shibatani, 1990). This fact indicates that the government simply promotes Ainu language revitalization without protection for the Ainu people. The government needs to give support to these people if it truly wishes to protect Ainu from extinction, because Ainu is the unique language spoken by the Ainu people.

### 2.2.2. Ryukyuan

Similarly, Ryukyuan has not been taught in schools (Maher, 1997; Noguchi, 2001). All Ryukyuan are bilinguals in Ryukyuan and Standard Japanese, but their competence in Ryukyuan differs according to their age (Matsumori, 1995). The older generations are more likely to be fluent bilinguals in both languages, whereas the younger generations are no longer fluent in Ryukyuan, and possess only receptive knowledge of Ryukyuan (Matsumori, 1995). Ryukyuan are obviously in the process of a language shift, from being bilingual to becoming monolingual in Standard Japanese (Matsumori, 1995). This indicates that intergenerational language transmission of Ryukyuan is not being successfully carried out in Okinawa, and Ryukyuan will also become extinct, unless some pro-active language policy is implemented.

### 2.2.3. Korean and Chinese residents

Japan has a large number of Koreans who compose the largest ethnic minority group in Japan. According to the *Ministry of Justice (Houmu-shou)* figures in 2002, 625,422 Koreans resided in Japan as permanent residents in 2001, accounting for 33.8% of the total population of permanent residents who are non-Japanese citizens. Many of them were brought to Japan forcibly before 1945 to work as labourers in mines and factories (Noguchi, 2001). In 1948, the Ministry of Education promulgated an order that all Korean children in Japan must enrol in the Japanese public education system (Maher, 1997), where only Japanese was used as the medium of instruction and where Korean is never taught as a school subject. In order to maintain their language, Koreans established their own

bilingual schools in which students are taught Korean language and history (Maher, 1997). These schools are run by one of two groups, the *General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Souren)* or the *Korean Residents Union (Mindan)*. Souren is a group organized to serve Koreans in Japan who are originally from North Korea, whereas Mindan is a group to serve those from South Korea.

Lastly, there are also some bilingual (Mandarin-Japanese) schools for Chinese permanent residents, which are run by the Chinese communities (Maher, 1997). Graduates of both the Korean and Chinese schools are regarded as unqualified to take the entrance exams for Japanese public universities, because their schools are not credited by the government (Noguchi, 2001). The attitude of the Japanese government toward the maintenance of minority languages basically plays out as non-interference coupled with non-recognition. Those groups who seek to maintain their own language can establish their own schools, but they do not receive accreditation of those institutions from the government (Maher, 1997). In addition, they only receive small financial support from some local governments (see Tani, 1997), and thus must run their schools mostly at their own expense. The expectation of linguistic assimilation is also recognizable in public schools, because here only Japanese is considered as the medium of instruction. Furthermore, MEXT has just developed a *JSL/Japanese as a Second Language* elementary school curriculum for newcomers' children (MEXT, 2003a), aimed at facilitating those children in their acquisition of Japanese, since so many have difficulty studying at school due to their low level of Japanese proficiency. But at the same time, the government does not mention anything about the establishment of language education programs for minority language maintenance, reflecting the fact that MEXT simply assumes the value of such a JSL education because Japanese is the only language of value in Japan. The government is only concerned with developing Japanese skills in newcomers' children by encouraging them to acquire Japanese proficiency, in line with the unofficial but far-reaching view that people who live in Japan must speak Japanese, although Japanese is nowhere declared as an official language in specific legislation, such as the Constitution, the Educational Law, the Citizenship Law, the Broadcast Law, the Alien Registration Law, and the School Law. The School Law is perhaps the most specific, noting that the elementary school is a place where students are asked to develop correct *Kokugo* ability, necessary for their daily life, without defining *Kokugo* as the official language.

### **2.3. Internationalization of the Japanese Language**

The Japanese government thinks that it is necessary to promote the importance of the Japanese language to the world because Japan is one of the world's economically powerful states (National Language Council/NLC, 2000); thus, it has adopted a policy of internationalization for the Japanese language. In order to enhance the internationalization of the Japanese language, the government has decided to undertake three major strategies (NLC, 2000): first, to send information about Japan out into the world in Japanese; second, to promote and support Japanese language education in the world outside Japan; and third, to advance the Japanese language ability of the Japanese people.

The first strategy, to send information about Japan out to the world, has been implemented with the NHK's cooperation. The NHK's willingness to cooperate with this policy is seen in its business plan for 2003, where NHK clearly states that it broadcasts news and other information about Japan in English AND Japanese towards the world in order to enhance mutual understanding between Japan and other countries (NHK, 2003).

The second strategy is to promote and support Japanese language education in the world beyond Japan itself. In order to promote the educational enterprise, both MEXT and the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA) cooperatively engage in training Japanese language teachers, providing financial assistance for the *Japanese Language Proficiency Test* and *Japanese Language Teaching Competency Test*, improving Japanese language educational facilities, offering scholarships to pre-college students in Japanese language institutes, implementing programs that send Japanese public school teachers overseas as Japanese language teachers, and building databases for Japanese language education (ACA, 2003b).

The third goal, to advance the Japanese language ability of the Japanese people, is conducted by the ACA through a campaign aimed at using correct Japanese. This promotion is essentially an exercise in corpus planning, attempting to change the internal conditions for Japanese by demonstrating the norms for correct Japanese. In order to implement this successfully, the Agency has embarked upon projects such as organizing workshops for parents and children aimed at encouraging them to use correct Japanese, conducting surveys about how the Japanese people see their language, publishing books about Japanese and distributing them in educational institutions, releasing

videos which demonstrate correct Japanese, organizing meetings where various problems related to Japanese are discussed, and arranging meetings where reports from the NLC are examined (ACA, 2003a).

#### 2.4. Internationalization of the Japanese People

The rapid progress of globalization has led the Japanese government to hold the view that foreign language education programs in Japan must be improved (MEXT, 2003c). In particular, the government considers English to be the single most important language for the Japanese, since English has become the common international language, not only helping people from different linguistic backgrounds to communicate with each other but essentially connecting Japan with the rest of the world (MEXT, 2003d). The expectation is that by having a high level of English proficiency, the Japanese can gain the world's understanding and trust, make their presence in the world known more significantly, and further their national development (MEXT, 2003d). However, due to insufficient English ability, many Japanese are said to be restricted in exchanging their ideas with foreigners, so that their ideas may not be evaluated appropriately (MEXT, 2003d). In order to improve this situation, the government has resolved that the Japanese must acquire good English communication skills (MEXT 2003d); in line with this resolution, last year MEXT (2003b) announced the implementation of an *Action Plan to Cultivate the Japanese with English Abilities*, aimed at improving the level of English language education in the next five years.

In 2002, the Japanese government had already implemented the new Courses of Study as the standard curriculum, aiming at enhancing children's ability to learn fundamental subjects (MEXT, 2003c) and especially emphasizing the cultivation of students' English ability. This curriculum also provided schools with flexibility in teaching content, moral education, and special activities, so that schools are even allowed to set specific content in each subject based on the particular needs of the children in their school district (MEXT, 2003c).

In the Courses of Study, foreign languages, particularly English, are encouraged to be taught in lower secondary, upper secondary, AND elementary schools. For example, in elementary schools, a *Period for Integrated Study* under the Courses of Study has been implemented, and foreign language conversation can be taught as a subject for international understanding (MEXT, 2003d). As a matter of fact, about 50% of elementary schools have now adopted English conversation activities as a subject for international understanding (MEXT, 2003d). In order to support English study at the elementary school level, MEXT (2003b) has prepared a teachers' manual and has implemented a teacher training system. At lower and upper secondary schools, foreign languages have become compulsory subjects, emphasizing the cultivation of communication skills (MEXT, 2003b). MEXT (2003b) also provides secondary school English teachers with both domestic and overseas training programs, in order to improve their teaching skills and English ability. Additionally, in 2002 alone, 5,676 people from overseas were hired through the *Japan Exchange and Teaching/JET Programme* to engage in foreign language teaching at schools as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) (MEXT, 2003b).

The policy is detailed here to demonstrate that the international frame of reference is only concerned with the acquisition of English competence. It is obvious that English has status in Japan, and in fact, English has been given status for a long time. The effect of such status planning was clearly recognized early on in Japanese society, even before the implementation of the policy of internationalization. Yamamoto (2001) shows this in her survey of how Japanese university students perceive bilinguals in relation to their specific languages. The results illustrate that over 73% of the students perceive a bilingual as one who is a fluent speaker of both Japanese and English, but not of Japanese and other minority languages such as Chinese and Korean (Yamamoto, 2001). This perception has been generated by the implementation of a language education program, in which only English has been taught as a school subject for a foreign language in public schools. The new language policy of internationalization is really an exercise in status planning and simply continues the status already given to English in Japanese society.

### 3. AN ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC ASSIMILATION AND INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE JAPANESE PEOPLE

Two of the four current language policy stances, namely, linguistic assimilation and internationalization of the Japanese people, can be said to not create linkages, but rather cause tensions within the society. A useful way of approaching these policies is by analyzing them through Ruiz's (1984) three concepts of *language-as-problem*, *language-as-right*, and *language-as-resource*, since these approaches help to clarify the underlying ideology of a language policy, as well as what is necessary for a government to improve its language policy. The orientation of

language-as-problem focuses on identifying and solving language problems, the orientation of language-as-right considers language as a basic human right, and the orientation of language-as-resource encourages raising the status of subordinate languages and attempting to solve tensions between majority and minority communities by making the majority community recognize minority languages as a resource for the entire society.

### **3.1. An Analysis of Linguistic Assimilation**

In line with a policy of linguistic assimilation, MEXT's JSL curriculum to help Japanese acquisition by Japanese-Brazilian children suggests that the government acknowledges low levels of Japanese competence by these children as a language problem in Japan, basically a language-as-problem perspective. At the same time, MEXT does not recognize the other language problem that these children have, namely, the maintenance of their mother tongue.

From both educational and psychological points of view, the loss of L1 is not beneficial for the children and their family. The Japanese government might consider adopting the language-as-resource perspective, recognizing the other language problem that Japanese-Brazilian children face, their mother tongue maintenance. This frame of reference instead views linguistic minorities as linguistic resources within Japanese society, so that Japanese-Brazilians who possess Portuguese proficiency can be seen as an asset for the entire society. After all, Portuguese is the fifth most widely spoken language in the world; with 168 million speakers (Baker & Jones, 1998) and designated as the official language for Portugal, Brazil, and some African countries like Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, and Sao Tome & Principe (Baker & Jones, 1998). Portuguese is certainly an international language. Brazil is rich in natural resources (World-Atlas, 2003), and is already a primary trading partner for Japan. Fortunately, Japan has a large contingent of fluent Portuguese speakers among its Japanese-Brazilian linguistic minority. By acknowledging their language as a resource instead of a problem, Portuguese and JBs both have their status raised in Japanese society, and students are now encouraged to learn Portuguese rather than abandon it.

In sum, recognition of and support for such minority languages as resources enables the government to work toward resolving language problems rather than creating them, thus creating linkages rather than exacerbating tensions.

### **3.2. An Analysis of Internationalization for the Japanese People**

Internationalization of the Japanese people is also designed through the same language-as-problem perspective, because it aims at solving communication problems between the Japanese and people who do not speak Japanese in international business settings. The government regards low levels of English proficiency by the Japanese people as a language problem, so that this policy is aimed at making them able to achieve successful communication in global settings by improving their English ability. The government regards English as the only important international language and thinks it sufficient that the Japanese are proficient only in English. However, having English proficiency does not guarantee successful communication with other people from different cultural/linguistic backgrounds, and ideally, internationalization should mean that the Japanese could communicate successfully with people who are from different cultural/linguistic backgrounds in many languages. But neither does the policy of internationalization recognize the existence of other important languages spoken natively in Japan, nor does the government encourage teaching minority languages in public schools, even though 73% of linguistic minority students in public schools speak top ten international languages, such as Portuguese, Spanish, or Chinese, as their mother tongue (MEXT, 2004). Nor are there Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) for Portuguese and Spanish, though there are 11 for Chinese, in contrast to 5,600 ALTs for English (MEXT, 2002). Achieving true internationalization for the Japanese people is best approached through the language-as-resource perspective, which also encourages raising minority language status, and by implication, an appreciation of cultural, linguistic, and societal diversity.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The Japanese government appears to have subscribed to the language-as-problem approach to resolve its two pressing language issues, the role of language in the integration of newcomers' children into Japanese society and the role of language proficiency in Japan's internationalizing window on the world at large. The government

would be well served by adopting the language-as-resource perspective in lieu of the language-as-problem perspective in its approach to considering new language policies and implementing relevant planning in the current decade, capitalizing on what it has and creating linkages between mainstream Japanese society and its minority constituencies. Ironically, the same language-as-resource perspective underwrites the establishment of better linkages between Japanese society and other national groups in a more refined sense of 'internationalization'.

In the case of Japan, one does not even have to apply the contentious language-as-right perspective (cf. MacMillan, 1998; May, 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2001; UNESCO, 2003), which focuses on mother tongue maintenance of immigrant children as a moral obligation under the assertion that language rights are basic human rights. Japan's salient minority groups already speak important international languages, as for example, the Spanish and Portuguese brought by Nikkei immigrants to Japan, as well as the Chinese and Korean spoken by groups with a longer history of residence, as well as more recent arrivals. They either fit into the world-wide 'top ten' group of languages numerically, or are important languages from an economic point of view. Tweaking the linguistic perspective into a better alignment with national interests is a win-win situation, one which alleviates certain domestic social tensions at the same that it fosters the international linkages that are desired.

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