1 The Japanese language

Let me begin by asking a question: how do we define the term, "the Japanese language"? Odds are that those both unfamiliar and fairly familiar with Japan alike will answer at once, "the language that is spoken by people in Japan." And of course, they would be quite right, up to a point.

Pressed for a similar definition of the English language, the answer would require more thought, since English is patently not just the language spoken in England by the English but, like French and Spanish, is spoken in a variety of local forms throughout a great number of countries of the world, legacies of former empires and the commercial and cultural webs spun between countries around the world. Arabic, too, is the official language of over twenty countries and Chinese in one form or another is spoken widely throughout East and South East Asia and in the countries of the Chinese diaspora.

In the case of Japanese, while geography likewise plays a part in definition, the geography is limited to that of the Japanese archipelago. Japan once had an empire too, and Japanese was spoken in its colonies, as we shall see, and to some extent remains so: in the former colony of Taiwan, for example, elderly people who were children during the days of the Japanese empire were brought up to speak Japanese as their first language and speak it still. Yet for most people the definition given above is the first which springs to mind. It is perfectly true, of course, that Japanese is the language spoken in Japan by the Japanese people, but such a definition is much too simplistic. It prefigures Japanese as a monolithic entity, assuming (though not making explicit) that every Japanese person speaks the same kind of Japanese, that nobody outside Japan speaks the Japanese language and that every person living in Japan views the language in the same way. As we shall see, however, there is much more to language in Japan and to the Japanese language.

We might usefully begin by considering what we mean when we speak of a Japanese person. Through analysis of relevant statistics, Sugimoto (2003:1) arrived at the conclusion that a "typical" Japanese would be "a female, non-unionized and non-permanent employee in a small

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business without university education," where typical equates to most representative of trends in today's Japan. This analysis puts paid to the stereotype of the educated male "salaryman" (white-collar worker) working for a large company that most people might envisage when faced with the term "typical Japanese." But how do we define a person as Japanese in the first place? No simplistic answer based on any purported reality of homogeneity of ethnicity, language or sociocultural experience is possible. Rather, our answer must take into account the day-to-day actuality of diversity in Japan. Sugimoto (2003: 185–188), discussing this issue, notes that "some 4 percent of the Japanese population can be classified as members of minority groups," with that proportion rising to around 10 percent in the area around Osaka. He analyses the characteristics of examples of fourteen specific groups within Japan in relation to seven characteristics by which "Japaneseness" may be assessed,[1] questioning the validity of some and demonstrating that different views of what constitutes "the/a Japanese" may be held depending on how those dimensions are interpreted and applied.

Fukuoka (2000: xxix–xxxiv) conducts a similar analysis based on permutations of ethnicity (broken down into blood lineage and culture) and nationality. He arrives at a list of eight theoretical clines:

- "pure Japanese" (Japanese lineage, socialized to Japanese culture, hold Japanese nationality)
- "first-generation Japanese migrants" to other countries (Japanese lineage, socialized to Japanese culture, but hold foreign nationality)
- "Japanese raised abroad" (Japanese lineage, Japanese nationality, socialized to foreign culture), e.g. *kikokushijo* (returnee children)
- "naturalized Japanese" (foreign lineage, socialized to Japanese culture, Japanese nationality), e.g. *zainichi kankokujin/chūgokujin* (resident Koreans/Chinese) who have taken out citizenship
- "third-generation Japanese emigrants and war orphans abroad" (Japanese lineage, socialized to foreign culture, foreign nationality), e.g. the offspring of migrant Japanese who return to Japan to work
- "*zainichi* Koreans with Japanese upbringing," i.e. those resident Koreans who have not taken Japanese citizenship (foreign lineage, foreign nationality, socialized to Japanese culture)
- "the Ainu" (Japanese nationality, different ethnic lineage, socialized to a different culture). Very few would fit this category, given the century of forced assimilation
- "pure non-Japanese" (foreign lineage, socialized to a different culture, foreign nationality), i.e. *gaijin* (foreigner)

For Sugimoto's female worker to be "typical," we would have to go by the numbers and put her squarely into the first category above. Each of

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the other categories, however, represents a sizable chunk of people who either live in Japan or lay claim to one degree or another of "Japaneseness." Many of them speak Japanese as their native language; others speak it as a second or foreign language; and some speak other languages as well. Even those who represent the majority of the population speak and write Japanese differently, depending on age, gender and education.

Language is a key aspect of identity formation, both personal and national, and a person's view of "the Japanese language" will vary depending on the nature of that person's interaction with it. To a Japanese person living in Japan the Japanese language will be the native language, spoken from childhood and used daily; exactly what "the Japanese language" means in this context, however, is open to discussion and needs to be viewed in the context of local variation and national policy on language standards. To people outside Japan, Japanese may be a heritage language, the language of their forebears, spoken by emigrant mothers and fathers and passed down to children born in Japanese communities outside Japan. To still others, it is a foreign language which offers the learner the chance to take on a multiplicity of identities, the language of a superpower eagerly studied to improve employment prospects, the means of communicating at grassroots and business level in a rapidly globalizing world.

To a person from one of the countries from which workers flock to Japan to take up menial jobs and send money home, for example, Japanese is the passport to learning to survive in their new country. To those involved with business and smart enough to realize the advantages of language proficiency, Japanese can be viewed as one of the keys to improving their company's prospects in Japan. To exchange students studying at Japanese universities, Japanese is the language through which they make grassroots connections which may stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives. To many in East and South East Asia, Japanese is the language both of an economic superpower and of a former enemy; in the case of Korea, a former colony, the former apparently takes precedence over the latter, South Korea having the largest number of overseas learners of Japanese in the world (Japan Foundation Nihongo Kokusai Sentaa 2000). The list has as many variations as there are individuals involved with the language. In other words, as with any other language, the term "the Japanese language" refers not to something monolithic, unique and unchanging but rather to a multifaceted and constantly developing entity which can have different meanings for different users.

Far from functioning in some kind of linguistic and social vacuum, a language carries its own freight of wider cultural implications for its native speakers and for those who choose to learn to speak it. To understand

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what this has meant in the case of Japanese, we need to examine the major philosophy which has influenced people in the first of those categories: the Nihonjinron view of Japanese language and culture.

The Nihonjinron view of the Japanese language

The ethnocentrist Nihonjinron[2] literature, the dominant trope for Japanese society in schoolbooks and scholarly literature on Japanese society for most of the postwar period, has portrayed the language as static and as somehow uniquely different in important functions from all other languages. Within the Nihonjinron framework, Japan is portrayed as linguistically homogeneous (i.e. Japanese is the only language spoken there), and the Japanese language itself as a uniquely difficult and impenetrable barrier even for the Japanese themselves, let alone others. In this view, race, language and culture are tied together and cannot be separated.

A 1982 book by American scholar Roy Andrew Miller, *Japan's Modern Myth*, took issue during a period at which Nihonjinron literature was particularly flourishing with what he described as the mass of theories and misconceptions that the Japanese had built up around their own language:

> The myth itself essentially consists of the constant repetition of a relatively small number of claims relating to the Japanese language. All these claims share one concept in common - something that we may call the 'allegation of uniqueness'. All these claims have in common the allegation that the Japanese language is somehow unique among all the languages of the world . . . From this essential claim of absolute uniqueness, for example, it is only a short step to simultaneous claims to the effect that the Japanese language is exceptionally difficult in comparison with all other languages; or that the Japanese language possesses a kind of spirit or soul that sets it apart from all other languages, which do not possess such a spiritual entity; or that the Japanese language is somehow purer, and has been less involved in the course of its history with that normal process of language change and language mixture that has been the common fate of all other known human languages; or that the Japanese language is endowed with a distinctive character of special inner nature that makes it possible for Japanese society to use it for a variety of supralinguistic or nonverbal communication not enjoyed by any other society – a variety of communication not possible in societies that can only employ other, ordinary languages. (10–11)

Miller demonstrates (while at the same time debunking) the manner in which this myth constructs an indissoluble link between the country's language and race, culture and even morality, and functions to keep the linguistic barrier between Japan and the outside world unbreached. "It is the myth that argues that there is a need for foreigners to learn the

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Japanese language but also simultaneously claims that the Japanese language is so uniquely difficult that it is all but impossible for anyone to learn it, whether Japanese or foreigner." (20) Dale (1985:60–61) likewise takes issue with the manner in which, in the Nihonjinron tradition, perfectly ordinary Japanese words have been loaded with ideologically constructed "nuances" which can be understood only by Japanese, so that attempts by foreigners to translate are doomed to failure. He speaks of this practice as "an academic metadiscourse, implicated with intertextual reverberations of uniqueness, that raises a semantic bamboo curtain between Japan and the outside world."

Outside academic circles, the view of the Japanese language as a barrier both in Japan and in the world at large remained robust throughout the twentieth century, even well after the Japan Foundation[3] began its efforts to promote the study of Japan overseas in the 1970s. To draw just a few statements at random from the wealth of popular literature on Japan over this period: "his language is extremely difficult; it is a formidable barrier to complete interchange of thought with the foreigner . . . this language barrier, believe me, accounts for nine-tenths of the Asiatic mystery" (Clarke 1918: 3–4); "the Japanese language looms as a never-never land which few dare to explore. It simply is not a tourist's dish. Moreover, anybody who has acquired by some gruesome brain manipulation the faculty to speak Japanese realizes how futile were his efforts. His difficulty in communicating with the Japanese has merely grown in depth" (Rudofsky 1974: 156–157); "language difficulties are one of the major sources of misunderstanding between the Japanese and other peoples" (Wilkinson 1991:244).

And yet: millions of non-Japanese can testify to the fact that they are able to speak, read and write Japanese, a reality which confounds the Nihonjinron claims of race and language being one and indivisible and of the Japanese language being uniquely difficult and impenetrable for foreigners. Spoken Japanese is actually no more difficult than French and much easier than German. Learning to read and write takes longer, of course, owing to the nature of the script, but many people manage it not just successfully but outstandingly well (Dhugal Lindsay, for example, the young Australian marine scientist living in Japan who recently became the first foreigner to win a prestigious Japanese-language haiku prize, or Swiss-born author David Zoppetti, who won Japan's Subaru Literature Award for a novel written in Japanese). The Nihonjinron myth of linguistic homogeneity in Japan, too, has been challenged by recent studies, notably Maher and Macdonald (1995), Maher and Yashiro (1995) and Ryang (1997), all of whom deal with language diversity in Japan, as we shall see in Chapter Two.

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What, then, is "the real story" about language in Japan? This chapter will discuss the varying ways in which the term "the Japanese language" can be interpreted. We will begin by looking at who speaks Japanese in the world today and why, and will then turn to a discussion of some of the major characteristics of Japanese and the manner in which some of them are changing.

Who speaks Japanese in the world today?

Japanese today is spoken by most of the 126.5 million people in Japan. The main areas where it is spoken outside Japan, following earlier periods of limited Japanese diaspora, are the west coast of North America, Hawaii and South America, although many people of Japanese descent living in those areas no longer speak their heritage language. In other countries, Japanese is learnt as a foreign language and during the Japanese economic boom of the 1980s became one of the top languages of choice for students with their eyes on a career involving working in a Japan-related business, either in Japan or in their home country.

Weber (1997, cited in Turner 2003) lists the number of secondary speakers of Japanese (defined as those who use the language regularly or primarily even though it is not their native language) as eight million. This figure, going by his definition, seems unlikely to include the two million students of the language worldwide identified by a 1998 Japan Foundation survey published in 2000. The number of overseas learners has greatly increased since the 1970s, actually doubling between 1988 and 1993, as a result of the activities of the Japan Foundation and of governments such as state and federal governments of Australia since the 1980s, all of which have devoted policies and funding to increasing the number of people learning Japanese. Much of this increase, however, including the late 1980s *tsunami* of learners, was predicated on Japan's status as an economic superpower, which meant that the primary motivation for studying Japanese was job-related rather than intrinsic curiosity in a majority of cases.

The Director of the Japan Foundation's Urawa Language Institute, Katō Hidetoshi, suggests that the total number of learners of Japanese worldwide is likely to be around five million, given that the most recent survey figure of two million referred only to those studying at the time of the 1998 survey and did not take into account those who had figured in earlier surveys. Once those studying informally or learning to speak on an experiential basis are also added in, perhaps a total of ten million people are now able to speak Japanese as a foreign language (Katō 2000: 3).

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What kind of Japanese do they speak?

The standard form of Japanese, designated as such by the National Language Research Council in 1916 and spoken and understood throughout the country, is called *hyōjungo* and is based on the speech of the Tokyo dialect, in particular the dialect of the Yamanote area of the city. Standard Japanese is used in writing and in formal speaking situations. In casual interaction, however, people usually speak a variant called *kyōtsūgo* (common Japanese). This is close to Standard Japanese in all its main features but not as formal; it includes contractions, for example, and people living in regional areas might include expressions from their local dialect (Neustupný 1987: 158–160). Regional dialects, which were accentuated by the political segmentation of Japan during the feudal period, do remain, and some of them are quite markedly different from those of other areas. However, the overarching use of the standard language throughout Japan overcomes any communication difficulties this might cause. The Japanese taught to overseas learners is uniformly standard Japanese; those few books meant for non-Japanese which have been published on dialects are for personal interest rather than formal study.

Standard Japanese

Today, a visitor to Japan who can speak the language takes it for granted that they will be understood anywhere in the country, but this was not always the case. To understand just how important the development of the standard language was to what we now think of as modern Japan, we must consider the language situation in pre-modern Japan, i.e. until the Meiji Restoration in 1868. During the period during which Japan was unified under the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1867), Japan was divided into upwards of 250 autonomous domains called *han*,[4] each ruled by its own feudal lord, or *daimyō*. The military rulers in Edo (today's Tokyo) kept a very tight control on the feudal lords of each region in order to prevent challenges to their authority. Except for a very few categories of people, such as the *daimyō* themselves on their mandatory periods of travel to Edo, religious pilgrims and wandering entertainers, travel outside one's own domain was forbidden. The linguistic consequence of this was that local dialects flourished, unaffected by more than occasional contact with passers-through from other places who spoke a different dialect.

Until the middle of the Tokugawa Period, the lingua franca of these times, at least among those in a position to travel and therefore to need a lingua franca, was the dialect of Kyoto, which was then the capital. This was widely perceived as the "best" form of spoken Japanese because of the

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upper-class status of its speakers; although power had begun to shift to the east some time before, with the earlier Kamakura Shogunate, Kyoto remained both the city where the emperor lived and the centre of culture. Around the middle of the eighteenth century, the language of Edo, seat of power of the Tokugawa military rulers, became a second contender for lingua franca. Over the preceding 150 years, Edo had begun to develop its own distinct culture and its language then began to exert an influence on other parts of Japan (see Twine 1991: 210–213).

In 1868, however, with the overthrow of the Tokugawas and the restoration of the Emperor Meiji to power, things began to change rapidly. In order to create a unified modern state, the better to fight off the perceived threat from colonizing western powers after Japan was reopened in 1854, statesmen and intellectuals began to put into place during the last three decades of the nineteenth century the required infrastructure: a modern press, an education system, a postal system, an army, transport and communications systems such as railways and telegraphs, and much, much more. By about the middle of the 1880s it became clear that a standard form of both spoken and written Japanese was needed, not only to play an important unifying role in enabling communication between citizens from one end of the archipelago to the other but also to form the basis for the future development of a modern written style based on the contemporary spoken language. The modern novels which began to appear in the 1880s used the dialect of Tokyo as the basis for realistic portrayals of modern life; thus, their adoption of educated Tokyo speech strengthened the claims of that particular dialect as the matrix for the standard language by modeling it in the novel.

The active co-operation of the intellectual elite of a speech community is required for the standardization of its language (Garvin 1974: 71). From the mid-1890s, men such as Ueda Kazutoshi (1867–1937) adopted a centralist approach to the issue of standardization, forming interest groups and lobbying for a government-supported approach. When eventually the National Language Research Council, Japan's first language policy board, was formed in 1902 as the result of their efforts, one of its tasks was to conduct a survey of the dialects in order to settle upon one as the standard. There was already by this time substantial support for the choice of the Tokyo dialect: the Ministry of Education had stipulated in 1901 that the Japanese taught in schools would be that of middle- and upper-class Tokyo residents and subsequent textbooks had therefore begun to disseminate this throughout Japan. It was only a matter of time before the standard was formally defined in 1916 as the Japanese spoken by the educated people of Tokyo, specifying the speech of the Yamanote district.

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While school textbooks disseminated the written form of the standard, the most influential organization in spreading the spoken form was Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corporation) through radio and, later, television. NHK is a public broadcasting organization but not a state organ; it places considerable importance on its role as a modeler of correct language, issuing pronunciation dictionaries and other language-related publications and from time to time conducting surveys on aspects of language. The advent of national broadcasting in the 1920s presented a fortuitous opportunity to model the recently adopted standard in spoken form for listeners throughout Japan. Today, the heavy television viewing habits of the Japanese ensure that exposure to the standard is constant (Carroll 1997: 10–11).

Dialects

The presence of a standard language, of course, is little more than a communicative convenience and does not mean that no layers of linguistic diversity exist in addition: quite the opposite, the fact that there is a need for a standard acknowledges that they do. Regional dialects continue to flourish, and dialectology is a strong field of research in Japan. An interesting Perceptual Dialect Atlas which offers insight into how Japanese people living in different areas perceive both the use of the standard language and the characteristics of various dialects is maintained online by linguist Daniel Long of Tokyo Metropolitan University.[5] Respondents native to eight different areas of Japan were asked to indicate in which areas they thought that standard Japanese was spoken. The results from respondents from the Kanto area around Tokyo show that they believe standard Japanese to be spoken only in the central part of Japan, from a core in Tokyo reaching across to the west coast and diminishing as it goes. Hokkaido (but not the other major islands of Shikoku and Kyushu) is included as a standard-speaking area in their perceptions, though at a fairly low rate. This research also elicited perceptions of which areas use the most pleasant and the least pleasant speech, and which areas are seen to use a specific dialect. Again looking at the responses from the Kanto group of respondents, the results are highest for the area in and around Tokyo, tapering off to less than 20 percent in the rest of the country, while a higher proportion of Kansai respondents nominated the Kansai area (in western Japan, around Osaka) and its surrounds, across to the west coast.

Leaving aside the Ryukyuan dialects in Okinawa Prefecture, the major categorization of dialects is into eastern Japan, western Japan and Kyushu, although Kyushu may be subsumed into western Japan (Shibatani

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1990: 196). Dialects vary in terms of lexical items (including, of course, the names of items specific to that particular region, such as particular local foods and drinks): one example is the use of *bikki* instead of the standard *kaeru* for "frog" in Miyagi dialect and *ango* for the same thing in Chiba Prefecture's Chikura dialect. Verbal inflections will usually differ as well: in Osaka dialect, for example, *mahen* is used instead of *masen* in the negative inflection, while in Nagoya *janyaa* replaces *de wa arimasen* for "is not" and in Fukuoka *n* is used instead of *nai* for negative verbs, e.g. *taben* for "don't eat," which in standard Japanese would be *tabenai*. Particles vary too: in Miyagi dialect, *–ccha* is added for emphasis (*yo* in standard Japanese) while in Nagoya dialect an elongated *yō* fulfils the same purpose.

Dialects underwent a period of repression during the first half of the twentieth century during which the newly designated standard language was being disseminated through the newspapers and the national broadcaster. Children who were heard to speak dialects at school were often punished and ridiculed as a means of discouraging local usage (although of course those same students returned home in the afternoon to families who spoke the local dialect). As time passed, and more and more children became educated in the standard, they themselves became parents who were able to speak that standard, so that with time the degree of fracture between standard and dialect blurred, though never disappearing. Ministry of Education guidelines for teaching *kokugo*[6] still clearly stated in 1947 and 1951 that dialect expressions were to be avoided in favor of "correct forms," i.e. the standard language. Pressure was particularly applied in rural areas, where people were likely to go elsewhere to look for employment and could find their chances diminished if they did not speak the standard (Carroll 2001: 183–184).

As we see in Chapter Five, the current national curriculum guidelines for *kokugo*, issued in 1998, provide for students in the latter years of elementary school to be able to distinguish between dialect and standard; this is presumably applied in terms of the local dialect in the area in which the school is located. Students at middle school are expected to develop an understanding of the different roles of the standard and the dialects in sociolinguistic terms. This represents a complete change from the previous prohibition of dialects, although "despite the more positive comments on dialects in curriculum guidelines, the emphasis is largely on tolerance, rather than any active promotion of dialects" (Carroll 2001: 186). Policy statements from the National Language Council in the 1990s urged a new respect for local dialects, probably in response to the policy of regionalism which informed government directions from the late 1980s. The 1995 report, for example, while it restated the centrality of

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