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Language and Society in Japan

Language and Society in Japan deals with issues important to an understanding of language in Japan today, among them multilingualism, language and nationalism, technology and language, discriminatory language, and literacy and reading habits. It is organized around the theme of language and identity, in particular the role of language in constructing national, international and personal identities. Contrary to popular stereotypes, Japanese is far from the only language used in Japan, and the Japanese language itself does not function in a vacuum, but comes with its own cultural implications for native speakers. Language has played an important role in Japan's cultural and foreign policies, and language issues have been and continue to be intimately connected both with certain globalizing technological advances and with internal minority group experiences. Nanette Gottlieb is a leading authority in this field. Her book builds on and develops her previous work on different aspects of the sociology of language in Japan. It will be essential reading for students, scholars and all those wanting to understand the role played by language in Japanese society.

NANETTE GOTTLIEB is Reader in Japanese at the University of Queensland. Her previous publications include *Word Processing Technology in Japan* (2000) and *Japanese Cybercultures* (2003).

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Preface

This book is a study of the major cultural, social and political aspects of language in Japan. It focuses on the interaction between the language and the people it serves from an overarching social rather than specifically linguistic perspective, with the intent of contributing to the study of the sociology of language in Japan. The term "language in Japan" may seem on the surface to be unproblematic; when we look more closely, however, we find dimensions not apparent at first glance. The Japanese language itself, for instance, is not a monolithic, unchanging entity as the term implies, although some of the ideological arguments both prewar and postwar have been devoted to making it seem that way. Like any other language, it exhibits dialectal variations, differences in usage based on gender and social register, subcultural jargons and foreign influences. No language functions in a vacuum; it comes with its own freight of wider cultural implications for its native speakers. One of the objectives of this book is to tease out those implications and examine how they manifest themselves in practice in relation to Japanese itself (Chapters One, Three and Four). The other is to show the diverse range of languages other than Japanese spoken in Japan today and their sociocultural contexts (Chapter Two).

The organizing theme of the book is the interconnection between language and identity. I will identify and discuss some of the issues which past and present debates have foregrounded as important to an understanding of the role of language in constructing national, international and personal identities over the modern period (defined as beginning with the Meiji Period in 1868) right up to the present day. Language has played an important role in Japan's cultural and foreign policies, and language issues have been and continue to be intimately connected both with globalizing technological advances and with internal minority group experiences. We shall see how the institutions of the schools and the media played a part in disseminating the desired standard form of the language. We shall also see how the print and visual media put brakes on the use of language which incited protest from marginalized sections

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of the community (Chapter Six). Chapter Five will provide a picture of literacy in practice: what the writing system is, how people learn to read and write, what problems they may encounter, and what they do with the knowledge once they have it.

Language issues today extend to the Internet, whether accessed by computer or, more likely, by mobile phone. We shall see how the technology that made possible the electronic use of written Japanese has resulted in certain changes in writing practices and self-identification, not least in the development of a new dimension of written Japanese in the emoticons favored by chatroom users and in the subversive use of script by bright young things. The anonymity of the Internet has resulted in the phenomenon of online hate speech of the kind no longer permitted in the print and visual media: if word processing constituted the acceptable face of technology, as I argue in Chapter Seven, then this aspect of Internet use constitutes the dark side, allowing free use of the kind of language that has largely disappeared from other media.

I make no claim to have covered all areas of language use in today's Japan, and doubtless some readers will wish I had focused a little more on this and a little less on that. What I have done is provide an analysis of significant aspects of the diversity of Japan's linguistic landscape in both its spoken and written aspects and an understanding of how that landscape has changed (and in some cases been manipulated) over the last 140 years. The link between ideology and language policy (Chapters Three and Four) gives a good indication of how philosophies relating to the Japanese language have been made to serve the purposes of the state, while policies relating to Ainu and English represent in the one case an attempt to erase the depredations of a century of assimilation and in the other to acknowledge the realities of the world situation in which Japan is a participant. Below it all, object of the policies, lies the highly literate population of readers and writers which underpins any analysis of language in Japan. I commend their story to you and wait with interest to see what the future brings in terms of ongoing developments in linguistic identities.

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Sections of this text are based on my earlier work, supplemented by new research specifically undertaken for this purpose. The discussion draws on my books *Language and the Modern State: The Reform of Written Japanese* (1991), *Kanji Politics: Language Policy and Japanese Script* (1995), *Word-processing Technology in Japan: Kanji and the Keyboard* (2000), *Language Planning and Language Policy: East Asian Perspectives* (2001, edited with P. Chen) and *Japanese Cybercultures* (2003, edited with M. McLelland). It also refers to articles published in the *Asian Studies Review* and *Disability & Society.*

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