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978-1-107-00716-1 - Language Policy in Japan: The Challenge of Change

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Language Policy in Japan

The Challenge of Change

Over the last thirty years, two social developments have occurred that have led to a need for change in language policy in Japan. One is the increase in the number of migrants needing opportunities to learn Japanese as a second language, the other is the influence of electronic technologies on the way Japanese is written. This book looks at the impact of these developments on linguistic behaviour and language management and policy, and at the role of language ideology in the way they have been addressed. Immigration-induced demographic changes confront long-cherished notions of national monolingualism, and technological advances in electronic text production have led to textual practices with ramifications for script use and for literacy in general. The book will be welcomed by researchers and professionals in language policy and management, and by those working in Japanese Studies.

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I dedicate this book to the memory of my dear friend,
Kobayashi Yōko.

亡き友 小林洋子氏に捧げる

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Preface

This book examines two language issues in Japan today which have arisen from significant developments in the social environment over the last three decades and have pointed to a need for a change in language policy. One is the increase in the number of migrants needing opportunities to learn Japanese as a second language (JSL), the other is the influence of electronic technologies on the way Japanese is written. Immigration-induced demographic changes confront long-cherished notions of national monolingualism, and technological advances in electronic text production have led to textual practices with ramifications for script use and for literacy in general. My central concern is to show whether and how language policy authorities in Japan are moving to accommodate these social and cultural changes. Both the integration of immigrants and new practices affecting literacy are important to the social fabric; it is essential, therefore, that expectations about language in these areas are clear and that policy addresses the realities of the present rather than harking back to an earlier social context.

In one of these two areas, a national policy already exists; in the other, it does not. In one of these areas, the national policy has been revised to acknowledge change; in the other, no national-level policy has yet been developed. In the area of kanji policy, deeply rooted in Japanese language ideology and important to ethnic mainstream Japanese citizens as it is, the widespread uptake of electronic text production has been viewed as necessitating a revision of the List of Characters for General Use, which has just been expanded to acknowledge that larger numbers of kanji are now routinely used than was the case when writing by hand alone. In the second, more contentious area, that of providing JSL instruction for migrants to Japan at a national rather than local level, no policy currently exists, in large part because such a move goes against deep-seated national language ideologies of monoethnicity and monolingualism. It is only very recently that the national government – in contrast to local governments, which have been active in this area for years – has begun to make sporadic provision for language training in certain clearly defined areas relating to employment.

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The main thrust of this book is therefore on the challenge Japan faces in opening up thinking at national government level to encompass the implications for social cohesion of the growing numbers of residents in local communities who need to learn Japanese. Over the past three decades this has developed far beyond the presence of long-established Chinese and Korean ethnic groups, as a result of globalisation-induced labour and other migration from many parts of the world, in particular from other parts of Asia and from South America. The announcement by the government on 30 November 2010 of the Revised List of Characters for General Use shows that national-level language policy can be changed when a need is seen to exist, as I will show in Chapter 4. While local governments and community groups have known for many years that immigrants need opportunities to develop Japanese-language skills which will smooth their lives and enable them to contribute fully to their new communities, however, the national government has only recently begun to acknowledge this and has put together ad hoc policies to meet those needs in certain areas but not across the board. Japan's intake of foreign labour is small in comparison with other countries but has increased rapidly since the 1980s. The growing proportion of non-Japanese people in the population – many of whom now stay on as permanent residents – means that Japan has in fact become a country of immigration, although this is not acknowledged in national political discourse, with foreign workers being admitted under a range of disparate schemes rather than under a coordinated immigration policy. No political will to address the issue of immigration policy is currently in evidence, despite often vocal private-sector and civil-society advocacy on this account. While the closed-country 'sakoku' policy ended long ago, its intellectual and ideological baggage has lingered to a considerable extent in national discourse until quite recently, when the national government began to show signs of responding to evidence of linguistic needs that have been accepted and pragmatically managed at local government level for many years.

The language ideologies which govern Japan's existing language policies (or lack of policy) – the assumptions about language that shape the ways in which language is managed within a society – have come increasingly under challenge as the social fabric of Japan changes in ways not foreseen by earlier generations. An important aim of this book is to explicate the relationship between these two aspects of language in society – immigration and electronic technologies – and existing national language ideologies. Language ideologies shape many aspects of a society's workings and have a considerable influence on all of its members in one form or another. Education policy for the national language, for example, and other language-in-education policies such as whether and to what extent community or international languages are taught in schools are all important indicators of language ideologies within a given society. It is already clear that in Japan, which has a clearly defined set of existing language

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policies and strongly entrenched ideologies of language, the areas of social change I have singled out have significant implications for the future trajectory of language policy, with the challenge now being to move the first of them from local to national government level in terms of policy development and implementation.

There are of course many important language policy issues other than the two I deal with in this book, prominent among them the move to teach English in elementary schools from 2011. While the promotion of English as an International Language in the education system is a major focus of language policy in Japan today, it is not my focus in this book. I mention the emphasis on English only tangentially insofar as it is necessary to establish the parameters for a comparison with the teaching of other languages. That is not in any way to deny its enormous importance in Japan's array of language policies. What I am interested in, however, is the manner in which provision has been made for the linguistic needs of foreign residents in schools and communities, the push for JSL education to become a national-level undertaking outside schools, the provision for teaching and using other languages which may now properly be considered community languages and policies relating to the provision of multilingual information to non-Japanese residents. I use the example of the kanji policy revision to illustrate that where ideology and changing social environment intersect in a positive manner considered important on a national level, policy change occurs; where the change runs counter to existing language beliefs and practices, it does not, or at least, it takes much longer and is much harder to effect.

A society which has resolutely considered itself monolingual for purposes of nation-building rhetoric now has to come to terms with the reality of its own growing multilingualism, with all the signs being that migration-induced multilingualism is here to stay. Increased ethnic diversity has created demand for JSL classes for foreign children in Japanese schools and JSL classes through other means for their parents. In a growing number of areas, street signage now reflects a range of languages used in local communities. It is important to understand how the challenge to notions of national linguistic homogeneity posed by the presence of migrant communities in Japan create new expectations of the state, which itself must develop to meet those expectations through providing host-language learning opportunities for those who need them and through reassessing the teaching through the education system of what have become community languages. To date the provision of language-learning opportunities has been undertaken by local governments and civil society volunteers in the communities in which immigrants settle, but there is now a growing advocacy within the civil sector for the development of relevant language policies at national level. In the long term, this means a reconceptualising both of the place of language in national identity and of the linguistic dimensions of Japanese

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citizenship. It means a rethink of the role of language in nation-building, not this time within the earlier context of building a modern Japan under the one people-one language banner beloved of nation-states but rather within that of providing the linguistic foundations needed for a socially cohesive Japan in a future in which immigration is forecast to increase.

The book begins with a chapter on language ideologies and how they play out in Japan today, examining the relationship between language ideologies, language planning and language policy before introducing the two developments which are investigated at length in the rest of the book. Chapter 2 then explores the language needs of immigrants who are struggling to achieve mastery of Japanese and the manner in which those needs are (or are not) being met, focusing in particular on the language needs of school students, adults in general, non-Japanese spouses, foreign nurses and care workers and foreigners caught up in the legal system. In Chapter 3, the discussion moves from the individual needs of immigrants to two other policy-related aspects of language provision in the community relevant to immigration, namely the teaching of community and foreign languages other than English and the provision of multilingual material to immigrants to help them settle into life in Japan. While the latter is well advanced and variously applied, the former remains underdeveloped in the school system, raising the question of whether it would not be to Japan's benefit to devote greater resources to widening the profile of foreign languages offered to students rather than depending so heavily on English alone.

Chapter 4 then highlights the lack of national-level policy action in response to immigrants' language needs, which are not supported by national language ideology, by discussing the very recent overhaul of a national kanji policy which is strongly supported by such ideology, throwing into relief the central role of language ideology in achieving national action. Kanji are the venerated icons of Japan's writing system and literacy is judged not just on the ability to read and write but on the ability to read and write characters: reinforcing their position is very much in line with the language ideology discussed in Chapter 1. This chapter discusses prevailing perceptions of declining kanji ability and the perceived role of electronic technologies as a factor in falling standards before going on to examine the recent revision of the kanji policy in response to the influence of such technologies.

In the fifth and final chapter, I examine the policy response to date to immigration-related language issues, focusing on language policies instituted at local government level, the evidence so far for the dawning realisation of the importance of language training for immigrants on the part of the national government and the push from elements of civil society for a national law guaranteeing opportunities for such training to immigrants wishing to avail themselves of them. It seems clear that a discursive shift is under way in

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relation to the old ideology that the Japanese language is the exclusive property of the Japanese people, but until the revision (or rather, development) of immigration policy and its attendant responsibilities is undertaken at national level, it is likely to be a very long time before discourse translates into action. The book closes with a conclusion reflecting upon the importance to future social cohesion of not allowing a linguistic underclass of migrants to develop. It is imperative that language policy evolves to reflect contemporary social realities and does not remain fossilised, reflecting circumstances now past. The revision of the kanji policy has shown that government can be responsive (even if slowly) to incontrovertible evidence of change in language practices. It now remains to address the realities of emergent multilingualism in Japan's communities.

Editorial note: Japanese names are given in Japanese order (surname first). Where no page number has been given in a reference, this usually indicates that the document has been read online, unless I am referring to the overall thrust of the source text rather than to a specific piece of information.

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Most of the research that has gone into this book has been undertaken specifically for that purpose, but a couple of small sections do draw on my 2008 polity study of Japan, 'Japan: Language Policy and Planning in Transition', *Current Issues in Language Planning* 9 (1): 1–68 and are used here with kind permission of the editor. This material has been revised and updated.

As always, Hans, Susan and Greg have provided the ongoing understanding, encouragement and support that I have been privileged to receive from them throughout my academic career. They are particularly magnificent as deadlines approach.

And finally, essential daily caffeine and warming chat has been provided by the friendly staff of the Espresso Hut, whose contribution to the progress of this book has been greater than they know.