

# JAPAN

## *Ten Linguistic Issues in Japan: The Impact of Globalization*

By

Junko Saruhashi

Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo

saru-jun@nifty.com

Yuko Takeshita

Toyo Eiwa University, Yokohama

yukot@toyoeiwa.ac.jp

### Introduction

Globalization has brought new aspects of and connections between linguistic issues which have been struggled over for a number of years, as well as newly emerging linguistic issues. For example, efforts to preserve world heritage, which involves discussions at the global level, has also let us to be aware of and value indigenous languages as common assets of this planet. Similarly, advocates of human rights for linguistic minorities have access not only to a nation-wide network but a world-wide one, thanks to internet technology. Different linguistic minority advocacy groups can exchange their knowledge and progress, and learn they share similar kinds of difficulties and possibilities. Several cases have proven that the movement of global opinions affects domestic decision making. Then, there are growing opportunities for international communication, which require a command of a common language. English language is expected to take this role, and how to overcome the English divide has become one of the new global linguistic issues. Examining such impact of globalization on linguistic issues will invoke our better understanding on the dynamism of the current linguistic environments.

This paper introduces ten current linguistic issues in Japan, referring to the impact of globalization on each of them. However, these ten issues are not meant to be representation of priority. We are fully aware that the homogenizing influences of globalization are most often condemned. On the other hand, there is also an opposite view that globalization leads to or supports cultural diversification. It may be safe to say that there are several elements which contribute to globalization, and some lead to

unification and others to diversification. Anyhow, it is clear that globalization is not something that just presented itself, but each of us is a part of it, creating and sustaining it. It is important to consider how to make globalization work (Steglitz, 2006). The aim of this paper is not to distinguish or compartmentalize issues, but to represent the dynamism and interactions of current linguistic issues for further inquiry as follows.

## Ten Linguistic Issues in Japan

### Single language issues

1. Maintenance and revitalization of the Ainu language
2. Empowerment policies for the Japanese Sign Language
3. Elaboration of the Japanese language system
4. Promotion of Japanese language learning
5. Reorientation of English as an international language

### Multilingual issues

6. Reinforcement of multilingual services
7. Support for inherited ethnic languages
8. Establishment of mutual language learning alliances
9. Innovation and integration of linguistic technologies
10. Review of holistic language policies

These ten issues are tentatively divided into single language issues and multilingual issues. This attempt will be useful when considering which languages should be selected in multilingual programs. In addition, another categorization according to the speakers' positions in the society could be possible. For example, for recently arrived foreign residents, linguistic support in their own language (6), Japanese language learning (4) and the maintenance of their ethnic language (7) would be perceived as an overlapping issue. This ability to categorize these ten issues in several ways suggests overlapping and deeper connection between the linguistic issues which has been accelerated by globalization. Each issue and its mutual interrelations are going to be reviewed below.

### 1. Maintenance and revitalization of the Ainu language

Ainu, the indigenous Japanese minority, had evolved their unique culture and social system in northern part of the Tohoku region and Hokkaido until Japan launched an aggressive settlement campaign in 1868. The Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection

Law was formulated in 1899; however, the clauses were far different from what its title suggested and it actually prohibited them from performing their traditional practices and speaking their ethnic language.

Due to this severe assimilation policy, the Ainu language started to be recognized as an endangered language. Then, prominent non-Ainu linguists such as Kyousuke Kindaichi and John Batchelor lived in the Ainu community to study it and devoted themselves to recording their language. Although several native Ainu scholars and advocates, such as Mashiho Chiri and Hokuto Iboshi, took the lead in research and revitalization movements, the number of Ainu speakers kept decreasing. There was also a criticism that the notion itself of the Ainu language as an endangered or near extinct language accelerated language shift of the Ainu speakers to Japanese.

With persistent request from the end of the 20th century, the Ainu gradually acquired official acknowledgement. Upon unrelenting calls from grass-roots activists, the Hokkaido prefectural government joined them in 1988 to call for a new Ainu law from the central government. The Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture (FRPAC) was founded in 1997 with corporative efforts by grass-roots groups and the Hokkaido prefectural government, and the Japanese government finally enacted the Hokkaido Aborigine Protection Act in the same year.

However, the progress of official acknowledgement and active support seems too tardy. Although the Japanese government voted for the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted by the United Nation General Assembly in September 2007, the government would not recognize the Ainu as an indigenous people, claiming there was no “official” definition of indigenous people. In June 2008, the diet resolution finally stated, "The government shall recognize that the Ainu are indigenous people who have their own language, religion and culture." (*The Japan Times*. June 7, 2008)

## 2. Empowerment policies for the Japanese Sign Language

It took a long time for the Japanese Sign Language (JSL) to be recognized as a full-fledged language even among linguists. The ultimate purpose of deaf education was to achieve integration of deaf people into the hearing society, and only lip-reading and mouthing with sound had been taught until recently. Nowadays, no linguist denies that JSL is a language. However, there needs to be more effort to encourage policy makers and the general public to empower JSL.

For advancement of JSL, not only the grass-roots activists but also global movements are necessary. A recent global initiative, the Convention on the Protection

and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities adopted by the United Nations in 2006, played a crucial role. In the same year, the Japanese government amended the Supporting Independence of People with Disabilities Act, aiming to enhance communication opportunities for deaf people. It encourages local governments to increase the number and use of JSL interpreters. Encouraging social status and awareness of JSL also affects a sense of self-pride and empowerment of deaf people and their community straightforwardly.

### 3. Elaboration of the Japanese language system

Since the Meiji Restoration, beginning of the modern nation-state, in 1868, there has been a notion in Japan that the language should be left alone, and after the end the Pacific War in 1945, the governmental commitment to language issues was even more reduced. Although Japan does not have any official statement about a national language in its Constitution, the concept of the national language, which implied standard Japanese, is widely shared in Japanese society. So called national language policies in Japan have mainly dealt with modifying orthography and designing curriculums in compulsory education. Thanks to the thorough national language education policy, the Japanese government reports to UNESCO that Japan has a nearly 100 percent literacy rate.

Another conventional linguistic issue, which is addressed by professional groups in such fields as science, technology, medicine and economics, was how to translate or integrate new concepts and terms into the Japanese language. Due to this constant demand on the Japanese language to adapt philosophies and science from both the east and the west, Japanese orthography adapted phonogramic system; *katakana*, and ideogramic system; *kanji*. Affirmed and fixed technical terms among professionals were introduced to the general public. In contrast to this up-down stream, recent 'plain language' movements pay attention to the information needs of social minority groups, such as non-Japanese, children, elderly people, people with disabilities, criminal victims, patients, care takers and so on.

### 4. Promotion of Japanese language learning

Major language policies in Japan have been divided into two categories, and each was dealt with by different government entities, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA). On one hand, National Language Council attached to the MOE was in charge of national language policy, which discussed orthography and national language education curriculum for native Japanese speakers.

On the other hand, ACA was in charge of Japanese language policy, which discussed Japanese language teaching for non-natives, language awareness surveys and the promotion of linguistic culture inside and outside of the country.

Since the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) was reorganized to replace MOE, the responsibilities for the elaboration of Japanese language system transferred to ACA. Accordingly, agendas to modify the writing system and to describe the lexicon and syntax of Japanese and acquisition for non-native speakers had an opportunity to be closely linked. In other words, the contents of the language are examined not only for native speakers but also for foreign residents in Japan and learners world-wide.

Globalization has broadened the targets, purposes, needs and curriculums for Japanese language learners. Foreign residents in Japan have an urgent need to learn Japanese. The number of foreign residents was 2.08 million in 2006, which made up 1.63 percent of the total population, and this has almost doubled within the next 15 years. According to the survey conducted by ACA, 135,514 of them are learning Japanese at language leaning institutions and universities. Sixty-seven percent of them are learning at language classes and salons supported by municipal governments or non-profit organizations. This means most of them are not under school age. Their ages, social roles, occupations and needs are varied. ACA is now expected to develop learning materials for Japanese for specific purposes as well as provide a variety of learning opportunities.

Japanese living abroad, immigrants and their descendants, returnees and non-Japanese around the world who are interested in the Japanese language and culture are also increasing. The number of Japanese students living outside Japan at the compulsory education level up to junior high was 58,304 in 2006, and about 32 percent of them were learning at overseas Japanese public schools. More than 10,000 elementary and junior high school students come back to Japan every year. Adequate follow-up programs need to be provided for students who return from around the world based on their' past leaning experiences and the level of Japanese maintained while stationed overseas.

## 5. Reorientation of English as an international language

Regrettably, it is common to hear this feeling expressed: “we, Japanese, devote 3 years in junior high, another 3 years in senior high school for English language learning, and, for some students, even additional courses in the tertiary education. However, we are not yet able to communicate sufficiently in it.” There have been

reoccurring discussions to find the causes and solutions for the problem. Student attitude toward languages, learning objectives and pedagogies are pointed out, and new proposals for reforming English education never cease to be made one after another. Although there is still a heated argument, it seems that MEXT has finally launched the English education reform with a paradigm shift toward learning objectives. (See Country Note on topics for Breakout Session 1.)

## 6. Reinforcement of multilingual services

Multilingual interpreting and translation services in Japan have a long history. However, those services have been organized mainly for the convenience of the dominant language society. For example, Article 175 of The Code of Criminal Procedure prescribes that “When the court has a person who is not proficient in the national language make a statement, it shall have an interpreter interpret it.” This statement focuses on smooth procedures of trials and precise documentation rather than on guaranteeing the human rights of linguistic minorities. Recent increases in the number and the distribution of foreign tourists and residents, which reflects aspects of globalization, press various social domains to provide multilingual services.

Due to the current pressure to improve policies for foreign residents, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (IAC) published a plan for promoting a multicultural society in March 2006. The report focused mostly on the needs of foreign residents, including supports for housing, education, labor conditions and healthcare. As far as examining this IAC’s policy, Japan seems now in the process of transition from a majority-centered multilingualism to a minority-centered one. However, the strategy of this plan encourages municipal governments to tackle these problems, because each municipal region has a different ratio of ethnic components, but there is also criticism that it shows the governments’ reluctance for direct involvement. Similarly, in 2007, statistics shows that only 7 percent of the trial cases for crimes committed by foreign residents were attended by interpreters. It seems to take more time to actualize this goal in practice.

Especially, areas closely related to human rights and life-and-death issues, such as emergency medication, disaster relief programs and criminal investigation, are now challenged to offer multilingual services. One of the biggest problems of multilingual services is lack of interpreters and translators of minority languages. Now, 3,824 interpreters capable of working in 54 languages are registered in Japanese courts. But the number of interpreters for certain languages does not match the actual languages required at court. Japanese courts have an open call for interpreters of

minority languages.

Applicants for court interpreter go through several steps; first, attending actual court sessions for self-assessment, second, having an interview with a judge for screening resumes, third, taking several seminars to learn the Japanese judicial system and expected performance as an interpreter. Applicants who have gone through this process may be registered as interns and start actual interpretation from simple cases. Japanese courts try to prepare interpretation seminars especially for the purpose of training interpreters of minority languages. However, the opportunities are far from the sufficient and many interns have experienced actual court interpretation sessions before taking training courses. Another crucial problem often pointed out is that there is no certification system for judicial interpreters.

#### 7. Support for inherited ethnic languages

An issue of maintenance of inherited ethnic language seems to be excluded from linguistic priorities. It is certainly one of the important issues for foreign residents, but it is sometimes agreed at assembly meetings by foreigners that the first linguistic priority for new comers is multilingual services for basic and crucial domains, the second is Japanese learning, and the maintenance of ethnic languages comes the third. Therefore, language maintenance still tends to be left to grass-roots activities with limited financial support. But if we take a deeper look, there are energetic, enthusiastic and meaningful effort and engagements. (See Country Note on topics for Breakout Session 4.)

Maintenance of languages other than Japanese for returnees also tends to be forgotten. However, many returnees have fostered not only linguistic competencies but also emotional attachment toward their second language and culture. Interactional experiences in different countries for years have affected children's identity. This issue has much room to be discussed to establish a social system to support linguistic maintenance, because social systems to support their languages represent valuing their experiences and linguistic competencies within the society. It will also help to resolve the lack of multilingual interpreters discussed in the previous section.

#### 8. Establishment of mutual language learning alliances

With the advance of the English language as an international language, some people find this trend threatening in relationship to the Japanese language. English is now frequently used as a working language among non-native speakers in the world. Honna describes it as "a primary Asian language." (See Country Note on topics for

Breakout Session 1.) In addition to English as a common language to achieve further international understanding, learning other languages will play a crucial role. Establishing mutual language learning alliances on the governmental level or the educational institutional level will also avoid one-way linguistic shifts and will help establish a power balance between languages and nations.

The Japan Forum, established in 1987, promotes mutual language learning for youth in East Asia. Their projects include supporting Japanese learning in China and Korea, encouraging Korean and Chinese language learning in Japan and provide learners opportunities to meet with each other. Their projects not only increase the number of learners but also face-to-face and digital-mediated interactions and create new learning materials. This educational model to build practical intercultural and international communication and friendship of the younger generation will contribute towards peace-building for the future.

#### 9. Innovation and integration of language related technologies

The application of innovative technologies will open doors to unexpected possibilities. Internet technology and other media devices have succeeded in providing vast amounts of learning materials and actual interaction for foreign language learners without traveling. Especially, a variety of learning software programs for game machines and mobile phones have been invented in Japan. ICT has helped resolving learning difficulties, supporting low-motivated students, busy businesspeople and learners in remote areas. (See Country Note on the topics for Breakout Session 6.)

Machine translation technologies are also progressing day by day. Even though the translation software is said to be far from the creativity and flexibility of human beings, it is exactly our creativity and flexibility that will make effective applications of the inventions possible.

Integration of technologies will be the key to this innovation. Recent remarkable progress in brain science is expected to create a paradigm shift for second language learning, individual multilingualism and mother-tongue maintenance. Koizumi emphasizes the possibilities of transdisciplinary research. (See Country Note on the topics for breakout session 2.) At the same time, international agreements which encourage and protect mutual benefits among scholars and practitioners, such as ethical guidelines and intellectual copyright, need to be sophisticated and widely acknowledged.

#### 10. Reviewing holistic language policies

As mentioned in the issue of elaboration of the Japanese language (3), the Japanese government has maintained minimum involvement in linguistic issues. However, it does not mean there were no specific approaches toward languages in Japan. If we observe carefully and closely, there are varieties of creative approaches by grass-roots groups, self-help groups, nonprofit organizations and volunteers. One aspect of globalization increases the pace of our daily life, and makes people ignore values which seemingly are not practical on the surface. Another aspect of globalization makes several linguistic issues closely related to each other. It would not leave issues of the Japanese language only as a domestic matter. Elaboration of the Japanese language relates not only to school curriculums of compulsory education in Japan but Japanese language learning for foreign residents and its world-wide learners. Higher demands on multilingual services are deeply related to language learning other than English and their maintenance.

Therefore, to support and encourage relatively minor linguistic issues and to realize effective networking between linguistic groups, holistic language policies are awaited. Strategic views and management tactics of language policies would help not only the government but other institutions. Development of language policy schemes with ethical guidelines will help to resolve linguistic difficulties within society and organizations. (See County Note on topics for Breakout Session 5.)

## Conclusion

Reviewing the current ten issues reveals to us the dynamism of mutual relations which construct linguistic environments. A deeper connection between linguistic issues provokes an image of the shrinking world. And diversification within each issue leads us to an image of an expanding world. Globalization represents a totally opposing image of the world, neither shrinking nor expanding. This aspect of globalization suggests us that we have choices to change current situations. Linguistic environments depend on what kind of linguistic visions you have for yourself and for the community in which you belong.

## Reference

Stiglitz, J. (2006). *Making Globalization Work*. London: Penguin Group.

Further information available in English

### 1. The Ainu language

The Ainu Association of Hokkaido <http://www.ainu-assn.or.jp/english/eabout01.html>

- The Ainu Museum <http://www.ainu-museum.or.jp/english/english.html>
2. The Japanese Sign Language  
The Japanese Foundation of the Deaf <http://www.jfd.or.jp/en/>
  3. Elaboration of Japanese language system  
The National Institute for Japanese Language <http://www.kokken.go.jp/en/>
  4. Promotion of Japanese Language Learning  
The Association for the Promotion of Japanese Language Education  
<http://www.nisshinkyo.org/>  
Japan Foundation <http://www.jpf.go.jp/e/index.html>
  5. Reorientation of English as an international language  
The Japanese Association for Asian Englishes <http://www.jafae.org/english/>
  6. Reinforcement of multilingual services  
The AMDA International Medical Information Center  
<http://homepage3.nifty.com/amdack/english/E-index.html>  
The Japan Association for Interpretation Studies  
[http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/jais/html/english/html/index\\_eng.html](http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/jais/html/english/html/index_eng.html)
  7. Support for inherited ethnic languages  
Korean Residents Union in Japan <http://www.mindan.org/eng/>  
Multilingual Living Information by Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) <http://www.clair.or.jp/tagengorev/en/index.html>
  8. Establishment of mutual language learning alliances  
The Japan Forum <http://www.tjf.or.jp/eng/overview/staff.html>
  9. Innovation and integration of linguistic technologies  
RIKEN <http://www.riken.jp/engn/index.html>  
Information Processing Society of Japan <http://www.ipsj.or.jp/english/index.html>
  10. Review of holistic language policies  
Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology  
<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/index.htm>  
Agency for Cultural Affairs <http://www.bunka.go.jp/english/index.html>