

## CHAPTER 2

# LANGUAGE PLANNING IN JAPAN

### *Internal Monolingualism, External Pragmatism*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Japan consists of four main islands (Kyushu, Shikoku, Honshu and Hokkaido and the Ryukyu Islands—including Okinawa—also known as the Nansei-Shoto group, and possibly the disputed Kuril group and a number of smaller islands), lying along the northeast coast of Asia, covering some 145, 882 square miles (377,835 sq. km.). If the Japanese islands were stretched out along the United States East Coast, they would reach from Maine to Florida (roughly 1,300 miles). Japan has a population of some 126,549,976 people. (See Appendix A, Figure 5.)

Except for the Ainu people in Hokkaido, Japan has been essentially a monoethnic society for more than 2,000 years. While there were contacts with other polities, these were essentially fleeting; Buddhism came to Japan from China about 550 CE. First word of Japan came to Europe when Marco Polo returned from his travels in the late 1200s. The Portuguese arrived in 1543; St. Francis Xavier introduced Christianity into Japan in 1549. In the 1590s Japan attempted a conquest of Korea. In the early 1600s, traders arrived from Holland and England. In 1614, Christian missionaries were evicted from the country and the practice of Christianity was banned; foreign traders, except the Dutch, were expelled in the mid-1600s. Commodore Perry, the US naval commander, sailed into Tokyo Bay in 1853, opening Japan to foreign trade, and The Netherlands, Russia, Great Britain and France entered into commercial treaties with Japan in 1858. In 1867, the Meiji restoration began, and Japan went through a period of industrialisation and relatively open contact with the rest of the world. In 1894-5 and 1904-5 Japan defeated China and Russia respectively and took control of Formosa and Korea. By the 1930s Japan had initiated a policy of military aggression that culminated in the events of World War II. In sum, over most of its past two thousand years of history, Japan was isolated, with the population speaking Japanese and following a Japanese cultural development.

#### 2. THE LANGUAGE SITUATION

The history of the Japanese language is unclear. A traditional view suggests that Japanese is related to Korean and the Altaic family, but more recently Japanese has been viewed as a mixed language deriving lexical and grammatical features from

Austronesian and Altaic with possible additions from Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian. Japanese is an isolated language, spoken almost entirely within the confines of the islands of Japan (with relatively small diaspora populations in Hawaii and the Americas). Although Japanese is an isolate, it is rich in dialect variation, including the Ryūkyūan dialects (11 dialects: Southern, Amami-Oshima Northern, Kikai, Kunigami, Miyako, Okinawan Central, Oki-no-Erabu, Toku-no-Shima, Taeyama, Yonaguni, and Yoron) as well as western Japanese (centred around Kyoto) and eastern Japanese, centred around Tokyo (see, e.g., Yamada 1972, Carroll, 2001: Chapt. 6). Different dialects may be mutually incomprehensible, but some level of uniform communication is achieved through the use of *kyootuu-go* ('common speech,' based on Tokyo dialect) and *hyoogyun-go* ('standard language') used widely in newspapers and on national radio and television). The latter suggests a sense of linguistic unity across the country.

Japanese has been a borrowing language; a great many Sino-Japanese words are in use, so many that perhaps 60 per cent of popular Japanese dictionaries are made up of such borrowings. Additionally, ten per cent consists of words borrowed from western languages (largely English). The Japanese writing system is heavily indebted to Chinese. Actually, Japanese has three writing systems—Kanji (Chinese characters, [*hanzi* (Chinese), *hanja* (Korean) and *kanji* (Japanese)] used to write content words), Hiragana (used to write grammatical function words) and Katakana (used to transcribe loanwords from western languages). In addition, Rōmaji (based on Roman alphabet) is used to write western names (including product names) and various Japanese words (e.g., names of train stations) for the assistance of foreigners. All four scripts may be used in a single sentence. Traditional writing is vertical, read from right to left; books open in the reverse direction from English. Horizontal script occurs in a variety of contemporary settings.

Japanese has five vowels and 11 consonants with some complex allophonic rules. Japanese is a CV language, with each such CV unit equating to a kana word. The language is agglutinative, employing a fairly large number of suffixes in its verb morphology. The syntax follows a S-(IO)-O-V structure; postpositions follow nouns and modifiers precede heads. It is a pro-drop language. The politeness structure is complex, allowing both the expression of deference and the use of honorifics. The system is differentiated for men's and women's speech. (See, e.g., Shibatani 1992, 1990, Hinds 1986.)

It is a curious phenomenon that the Japanese language has no legal status in Japan. The current national Constitution makes no mention of language matters. Indeed, there has been only restricted governmental language planning to speak of in all of its previous history. It has simply been taken as a given that all Japanese speak Japanese and that there is no language problem in need of attention. It is important to understand, as Neustupný (in preparation) writes "...Japanese society still maintains a very strong Modern (i.e., not Post-modern) component, with attendant isolation from the rest of the world."

That is not to say that there has been absolutely no language planning. On the contrary, at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration, there was a great deal of concern on two counts: In the written language, there was considerable style diversity, more academic registers employing great numbers of Chinese characters, thus making

written language inaccessible to the majority of the population (see similar concerns in the two Koreas); in the spoken language, there was considerable dialect variation, and there was a significant gap between spoken and written language. Several alternatives were widely debated—reducing the number of Chinese characters, eliminating Chinese characters entirely, or adopting a Roman alphabet. This debate, however, took place largely among intellectuals; the government distanced itself from the fray. The Ministry of Education endorsed the first 'Modern Standard Japanese' textbooks in 1903, thereby lending some weight to the development of a standard variety. Through the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, various movements arose championing the three alternatives. However, with the Japanese success in the 1894-5 and 1904-5 wars, there was a significant increase in nationalist feeling. In emulation of the situation in the west, a strong movement for the development of a 'national language' [*kokugo*<sup>1</sup>] arose. In the period leading up to WWII, the popular desire for a national language took hold (Twine 1991). The impoverished and outnumbered Ainu as well as the Okinawans were turned into Imperial subjects. Indeed, the evolving language policy did not stop with the Japanese Islands; it was extended to Korea (1905), the South Sea Islands (1914), and Manchuria (1932) and subsequently became a feature of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (Coulmas 2002).

In 1902 the National Language Research Council (*Kokugo Chosa Inukai*) was established under the Ministry of Education. The Council was disbanded in 1913, and the Interim Committee on the National Language (*Rinji Kokugo Chosakai*) replaced it in 1920; The Interim Committee in 1923 published a "List of [1,963 Chinese] Characters for General Use." The Interim Committee continued to function until 1934 when it was replaced by the Deliberative Council on the National Language (*Kokugo Shingikai*). Clearly, all of this activity was directed at language standardisation; it was determined that the oral standard would be the speech of educated Tokyo residents; rural dialects were perceived as delaying the learning of the standard but also as relics of the old order—they had to be eliminated. This activity was conducted largely through the educational system.<sup>2</sup> As the Empire expanded in the 1930s and 1940s, the educational system went with it, and the idea developed that Japanese should be the common language of East Asia and indeed should be recognised as a leading language of the world.

After World War II, the policy of Japanese language spread was discontinued. Language policy became a matter of political contention in the years of the US occupation (Unger 1996). Language planning was perceived as a government prerogative. And a simplified writing system became the objective, though still inhibited by debates between traditionalists and liberal proponents of simplification. But a new idea had entered the debate—democracy. It appeared that a transparent writing system accessible to all was essential as a precondition for broad political participation and democratic citizenship. As a result, reducing the number of Chinese characters became an imperative of social change. The vestigial Council on the National Language, in 1948, produced a list of 1,850 characters (*Tōyō Kanjihyō*). However, with the end of the occupation and the election of the Liberal Democratic Party to power, the simplification debate continued, and between 1966 and 1991 the Toyo list was often amended, resulting in a new list (*Jōyō Kanjihyō*) in 1991 adding

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Kaplan, R.B.; Baldauf Jr., R.B.

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