

IMAGES OF PRE-WW II: NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICIES AS REFLECTED IN THE FIELD OF “NATIONAL LANGUAGE STUDIES” ITSELF

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Abstract

In this study I focus on the possible intellectual background regarding the scant attention paid by researchers and textbook writers to the establishment of the Japanese national language and pre-WWII language policies in Japan. This fact is surprising because the successful implementation of a modern standard language was one of the key factors in the process of the building of Japan as a modern nation-state. The central hypothesis of this research is that this conspicuous absence stems from the projection of the modern nation-state on the past, resulting in a perception of Japanese polity as a basically homogeneous and unchanged continuum in time and space. An analysis of several texts by prominent Japanese scholars of the national language has revealed important differences in perception. One group, mainly those preoccupied with the didactics of the national language, tends to view the past in the light of a “homogenised” present. On the other hand, those scholars researching Japanese in the wider context of general linguistics seem to treat national language related issues in a much more critical and theoretically informed way.

Keywords

Japanese language, *kokugo* (national language), language policy, projection, nation-state

Izvleček

Članek se osredotoča na možno intelektualno ozadje kot vzrok za pomanjkljivo pozornost, ki jo raziskovalci in pisci učbenikov posvečajo oblikovanju japonskega nacionalnega jezika in jezikovnim politikam na Japonskem pred 2. svetovno vojno. To dejstvo je presenetljivo, saj je bila uspešna implementacija modernega standardnega jezika eden od ključnih dejavnikov v procesu tvorjenja Japonske kot moderne nacionalne države. Osrednja hipoteza te raziskave je, da ta očitna odsotnost izhaja iz projekcije moderne nacionalne države na preteklost, ki je privedla do percepcije japonske državne tvorbe kot temeljno homogenega in nespremenjenega časovnega in prostorskega kontinuuma. Analiza več besedil vodilnih japonskih raziskovalcev nacionalnega jezika je razkrila nekaj pomembnih razlik v njihovih percepcijah. Ena skupina avtorjev, predvsem takih, ki se ukvarjajo z didaktiko nacionalnega jezika, vidi preteklost pretežno v luči homogenizirane sedanosti. Po drugi strani raziskovalci, ki proučujejo japonski jezik v širšem kontekstu splošnega jezikoslovja, mnogo bolj kritično in teoretično podkvano obravnavajo teme, ki so vezane na nacionalni jezik.

Ključne besede

Japonski jezik, *kokugo* (nacionalni jezik), jezikovna politika, projekcija, nacionalna država

1. Introduction

In this paper I try to shed some light on a rather surprising result of my recent study (Bekeš, 2011), i.e. the indifferent treatment that language policies since Meiji receive in Japanese high school history textbooks.

Consistent, state-endorsed, and often state-enforced language policies from the second half of the Meiji period onwards, which were aimed at the dissemination of the national language (*kokugo*) though finally failing in colonial territories, achieved their goal in the “inner provinces” (*naichi*) as well as in Hokkaido and Okinawa, contributing in the first half of the 20th century to a high degree of homogeneity regarding linguistic and ethnic identity in Japan (cf. Gottlieb, 2007, pp. 188-194).

In spite of this perceived importance of the role of the national language, most of the textbooks examined in Bekeš (2011) hardly mention any of these relevant issues. The only exception is *Nihonshi B* (History of Japan B), a textbook published by Sanseido publishers, which shows some concern with language policy issues during Meiji and pre-war Japan. Nonetheless, in spite of the importance of the issue, this concern does not go beyond introducing such examples merely as illustrations or instances of wider trends.

Based on the aforementioned facts, the following working hypothesis comes to mind. The fact that *kokugo mondai* (national language issues, including those in the analysed textbook material) are being perceived as something marginal might be a natural consequence of a certain view of society in general and history in particular. Namely the view where language is perceived as a more or less immutable, static context of historical developments and not as one of the essential factors, contributing on its own towards developments in society and at the same time being shaped by these developments, as was also the case with *kokugo* (national language), shaped and codified in the Meiji period. What is framing such views in Japan is most probably the mainstream way of doing research related to *kokugo*, and the mainstream representation of *kokugo* related issues in pedagogical and day to day discourse. It is this that may have in some way influenced the perception of the compilers of high school history textbooks.

To test the viability of the above hypothesis, in this paper I report the results of a pilot examination of some sources in the field of *kokugogaku* (national language studies).

I examined two monographs and two encyclopaedias. The first monograph is the sixth of the 7 tomes in a series of monographs on the Japanese language: Kamei, Takashi et al. (Eds.), (1965, /2007/) *Nihongo no rekishi 6: atarashii kokugo e no ayumi*

(History of the Japanese Language vol. 6: Steps Toward the New National Language). Tokyo: Heibonsha. The other is a monograph on the cultural history of language, focusing on Japanese in its cultural and historical context: Sugimoto Tsutomu (1982) *Kotoba no bunkashi: Nihongo no kigen kara gendaigo made* (Cultural history of language: from the origins to modern Japanese), Tokyo: Ōfusha. The first of the two encyclopaedias is devoted to linguistics in general: Kamei Takashi et al. (Eds.), (1996) *Gengogaku daijiten 2: Sekai gengo hen* (The Great Dictionary of Linguistics vol. 2: Languages of the World). Tokyo: Sansendo. The other is an encyclopaedia covering explicitly facts pertaining to the Japanese language: Kindaichi Haruhiko et al. (1990) *Nihongo hyakka daijiten* (The Great Encyclopaedia of the Japanese Language). Tokyo: Taishukan.

2. A brief sketch of the premodern and modern linguistic situation in Japan

The momentous nature of Meiji language reforms is most evident if we compare these developments with the premodern linguistic situation in Japan.

2.1 Premodern linguistic situation

The premodern linguistic situation of Japan, prevalent until the end of Tokugawa period and extending into the early part of Meiji period is characterised by the following factors:

Diglossia in the written language (cf. Kamei et al. (Eds.), 1996). Roughly speaking, written literary Chinese (*kanbun [kundoku]*) and written literary vernacular (*bungo*). While literacy in these two styles was limited to the elites, since the Kamakura (1185–1333) and Muromachi (1336 - 1573) periods, literacy in the spoken vernacular had emerged among commoners as well (cf. Amino, 1990).

Consolidation of political power under the Tokugawa shogunate. Relative peace and accompanying economic prosperity during the first half of the period resulted in vibrant literacy of city dwellers, as well as in the countryside, in the spread of printed media and the development of a new schooling system (*hankō, terakoya*) (1603 - 1868, cf. Kato, 1983, Vol II). With the political centre moving east to Edo, a new contact dialect, with elements of both eastern and western Japan dialects, formed there and consequently grew in importance, while Kyoto speech retained its prestige (cf. Frellesvig, 2010, Ch. 13).

No attempt at language standardization. The *bakuhau* political system of the Tokugawa period, splitting Japan into isolated *han* “feudal” domains and discouraging direct contact among them led to dialectal fragmentation of the country as is described by Gottlieb:

The political structure in place during the Tokugawa Period (1603-1868) contributed substantially to the need for placing a standard language high on the linguistic agenda during the following period. In the pre-modern period, Japan was segmented into a large number of local domains, each ruled by a local daimyo who reported to the shogun in Edo (today's Tokyo). Since the domains were relatively tightly sealed off from each other in the interests of the 'divide and rule' principle, and since travel was with very few exceptions forbidden to residents of each, local dialects flourished and little in the way of language (or dialect) contact took place. The de facto standard used throughout Japan by those who travelled during this period was based on the speech of Edo ...
Gottlieb (2007, pp. 188-9)

The above situation in the second half of the Edo and early Meiji periods is a typical premodern situation, in line with the situation in pre-unification Italy, in the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, in Russia etc., during more or less the same period. What makes it different is a relatively high degree of literacy as compared to Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe in the same period (cf. Shulze, 2003).

2.2 Linguistic situation during the Meiji period and afterwards

In spite of many similarities, there are significant differences between mid-19th century Japan and Central Europe. In contrast with Central Europe, Japan was politically unified. Presumably because of this, language standardisation was not perceived as an urgent task in the agenda of modernising Japan.

Modernising projects taken up by the Meiji regime were the abolition of the caste system, the abolition of the *han* system, the introduction of a centralised administration, the establishment of compulsory education (*kokumin gakkō*), the implementation of universal military service, the inception of constitutional monarchy and the spread of modern printed media, colonial expansion, and in the mid 1880s steps towards the standardisation of language (cf. Benner, 2006).

During this time, influential articles and lectures by Ueda Kazutoshi (1867-1937), a Tokyo Imperial University academic who was greatly influenced by several years spent studying linguistics in Germany, compared the national language to the country's life blood and exhorted the government to ensure that it was treated with the degree of respect the language of a modern state deserved (e.g. Ueda, 1894). In Ueda's view, this involved improving the language through standardization and modernization, contrary to the views of purists who saw any form of artificially induced language change as an unwarranted attack on standards and tradition. Ueda and the group of students he trained in the methods of Western linguistics were instrumental in lobbying for the establishment in 1902 of the first official body charged with working on language issues, the National Language Research Council. As a result of the work of this body, the dialect of the Yamanote area of Tokyo was announced as the standard language in 1916.
Gottlieb (2007, p.189)

Ruthless enforcement of standard language in public use (including methods such as the use of *hōgen fuda* “dialect placards” as punishment in compulsory education¹) was concomitant with a wish for modernisation in the provinces (cf. Ichimiya, in this volume), strict government control on teaching contents, the spread of new media which accompanied economic prosperity after WW I, total mobilisation under ultranationalist regimes preceding and during the years leading to the war in China, SE Asia and the Pacific (cf. Frellesvig, 2010; Gottlieb, 2007; Komori, 2000).

Language thus played a prominent role in the ideological construction of the Japan for which the war was being fought, **possibly second only to the Emperor** as the symbol of ultranationalist values. (See Gottlieb 1995). Gottlieb (2007, p. 192)

The successful spread of *kokugo* had as a consequences the view that *kokugo* was a homogeneous entity extending territorially in the politically consolidated territory and temporally (i.e., the projection of *kokugo* and the modern nation-state backward in time). Dialects as its obvious varieties were considered to be enriching *kokugo* itself. Therefore it is no wonder that the great works of classical literature from *Man'yōshū* to *Ugetsu monogatari* were all seen as written in *kokugo*. (cf. Yasuda, 1999a).²

Parallel with this development, deep penetration of the Japanese language in the colonies, i.e., Taiwan, Korea, to a lesser extent Manchukuo, was taking place as well. (See Yasuda, 1997; Osa, 1998; Tani, 2000).

3. Analysis of the material

For the sake of expediency, the following shorthand will be used for the sources analysed:

- Kamei Takashi et al. (Eds.), (1965, /2007/) *Nihongo no rekishi 6* (History of Japanese 6) → (1);
- Sugimoto Tsutomu (1982) *Kotoba no bunkashi* (Cultural History of Language) → (2);
- Kamei Takashi et al. (Eds.), (1996) *Gengogaku daijiten* (The Great [Encyclopaedic] Dictionary of Linguistics) → (3)
- Kindaichi Haruhiko et al. (1990) *Nihongo hyakka daijiten* (Encyclopaedia of the Japanese Language) → (4).

¹ Dialect placards were based on a method imported from the more “advanced” France, itself in 19th century extensively assimilating non-French speaking minorities. (cf. Pontecouteau 2002).

² For a typical case of a similar projection, common in Slovene “patriotic” history and language circles, Prunk (1996) is a good example. Also see Shulze (2003) for Germany’s projection onto Holy Roman Empire (i.e., the 1st Reich).

3.1 Nature of Japanese language and *kokugo*

Kamei et al. eds. (1965/2007) and Kamei et al. eds. 1996, i.e., sources (1) and (3) present a rather detailed discussion of what constitutes *kokugo*, and make explicit its temporal and spatial characteristics. A characteristic aspect of this discussion is the systematic use of *minzokugo* (ethnic language) instead of *kokugo* (national language) in contexts where it is technically impossible to use the latter. Interesting is the view that the idea of *kokugo* was in a latent form already present in the thought of *kokugakusha* (national scholars) of the Tokugawa period, in the notion of *mikuni kotoba* (the language of the noble land) referring to the language of Japan as opposed to Chinese. At the same time (1) distinguishes a clear cut difference between *kokugakusha*'s *mikuni kotoba* and the notion of *kokugo*, introduced during the Meiji period. The former has the nuance of preservation of the existing vernacular cultural heritage, as opposed to the perceived encroachment of classical Chinese, while the latter is connected with the modernising project of developing latent linguistic potentials as a communication medium. Source (1) also makes explicit the difference between *kokugo* (national language [of Japan]) and *nihongo* (Japanese language) as two different notions, pointing out the polysemy in the use of *kokugo*: (i) language recognised as one nation's own language; (ii) in particular - Japanese; (iii) Japanese linguistic elements remaining after the removal of Sino-Japanese lexical elements, i.e., proper Japanese elements; (iv) not just as an object of scholarly study, but Japanese as a subject in the school curriculum in the existing educational system. Thus, *kokugo* is inappropriate as a term for the object of scientific linguistic study, which can only be *nihongo* - Japanese. From the point of view of *kokugogaku* (*kokugo* studies), the scientific study of Japanese is relevant only as a means for the advancement of *kokugogaku*, and not as an inherent goal of scientific study in itself (See Kamei et al. eds., 1965/2007, pp. 197-202).

The description in source (3) being an encyclopaedic dictionary of linguistics, is less explicit because of limited space, but the relevant text is by the same author, Kamei, following the same lines as (1). See Kamei et al. (1996, pp. 1629-32).

The overall impression both sources give is that of an impartial, objective approach to the realities concerning the development of the Japanese language.

Sugimoto (1982), i.e., source (2), being a monograph on the cultural history of language, illustrated with the developments in Japanese, is less extensive in coverage than (1). Here, *kokugo* as a notion is given no explicit treatment though political implications of *kokugo* education are mentioned in several places from a critical standpoint. Thus there is a critical assessment of *kanji* policies, critique of the goals the Meiji government had with *kokugo kyōiku* (national language education) at the expense of regional varieties of Japanese, and finally, a critical assessment of the results of Meiji style *kokugo kyōiku*, i.e., the long lasting split between "elite" centre and "coarse" countryside.

Language policies in Meiji are explained in the context of Meiji state policies and goals of modernisation and militarisation of Japan.

Kindaichi et al. (1990, pp. 1227-1242), i.e., source (4), treats *kokugo* as a given fact, there is no discussion of its historical and ideological properties (cf. Kindaichi, 1990, p. 1227). The Japanese state and its language are presented as an unchanging and unproblematic continuum at least since the 1st half of the 1st millennium CE (ibid., p. 1229). Such a view is in clear contradiction with established historical facts and is a clear case of projection of the present state of affairs onto the past. In this context the use of the emotionally and politically loaded term *wagakuni* (our country), not found in the other three sources, is emblematic.³

In our country (*wagakuni*) there was no indigenous system of letters to write the language of one's own country. From 4c to 5c CE, through the contact with Chinese characters that were *introduced* together with cultural artefacts from China, writing became known. Since then, using various devices, Chinese characters, i.e., the characters to write Chinese, came to be used for writing Japanese.

我が国には、自国の言葉を書き表わすための体系的な固有の文字がなかった。4世紀から5世紀ごろにかけて、中国から大陸の文物と共に採り入れた漢字に接しはじめて文字の存在を知った。以後、漢字という中国の言葉を書き表わすための文字を、様々な工夫をこらし、日本語を書き表わすことができるようにしていった。Kindaichi et al. eds. (1990, p. 1229), translated by A. B.

3.2 Autochthonous minorities - Ryukyu/Okinawa and Ainu

Sources (1), (3). In source (1) the harsh treatment of Okinawa, including the use of *hōgen fuda* “dialect placards” in relation to teaching standard language, are mentioned in detail (cf. Kamei et al. eds. 1965/2007, pp. 367-8). On the other hand, the same source does not mention the cultural and linguistic assimilation of Ainu.

In (3) autochthonous minorities are treated under extensive entries devoted to Ryukyu/Okinawan and Ainu while under the entry of the history of Japanese language, they are not mentioned.

Source (2). The Ainu people and language are mentioned only in the context of the origins and genetic affiliation of Japanese. Ryukyu/Okinawa receives no mention. (Sugimoto, 1982, pp. 282-298).

Source (4). Conspicuous is highhanded treatment of Ainu people and Ryukyu/Okinawa people as mere minorities. The issue of preserving minorities' linguistic and cultural identity is presented as too petty for the Japan state to be preoccupied with. In addition, Ryukyu/Okinawan is mentioned as a dialect though it is

³ The emotional load of *wagakuni* can be observed, among others, on blogs, such as Internet source 3.

totally unintelligible for people from the Japanese mainland islands and though it had an independent written tradition of its own before the annexation to Japan. Repression of dialects (*hōgen bokumetsu*) is mentioned (without specifics) as an accidental fact, which, in a more relaxed atmosphere after WW II, was unfortunately perceived as coercion and enforcement of *hyōjungo* “standard language”. (Kindaichi et al. Eds., 1990, p. 1228).

3.3 Language policies in the colonies

Korea being directly annexed and prepared for cultural and linguistic assimilation, and Taiwan also being under a very close colonial rule, language policies in the prewar Japanese colonies were closely connected with language policies in *naichi* (mainland Japan). In the light of research done by Osa (1998) and Yasuda (1997, 1999a, 1999b) among others, on the intrinsic relationship between script reforms in the colonies and the mainland, it is surprising that this issue receives no mention in any of the examined materials.

3.4 Focus of description

Sources (1), (2), (3) share a common focus: while presenting relevant linguistic facts concerning the development of Japanese, they also introduce a considerable amount of social, cultural and historic context information in a polemic mode. On the other hand, Source (4) presents technical facts while providing less context for their understanding. When the context is given at all, facts from the context tend to be presented in a mechanistic way, not revealing the causal relationship with the linguistic facts.

4. Discussion

Source (1), Kamei et al. (Eds.), (1965 /2007) is a work meant for both experts and for the wider public. Similarly, Source (2), Sugimoto (1982) is a work more oriented towards the general public and technically not very demanding. On the other hand, Source (3), Kamei et al. (Eds.), (1996) being an encyclopaedic dictionary of linguistics, is a technical work primarily meant as a reference for fellow linguists. All three sources, despite some limitations, and regardless of whether they are meant for the general public or for experts, provide a rather objective treatment of relevant issues.

Source (4), Kindaichi et al. (Eds.), (1990), being an encyclopaedic dictionary of the Japanese language, is basically also intended as a reference work for a more technically demanding audience of experts working on various aspects of Japanese language (from teaching Japanese as the 1st language to teaching it as a 2nd language and for linguistic and philological research). In spite of this, the entries examined here

do not compare well with related parts of the other three works; they seem to be less scientifically rigorous and reflect a more utilitarian approach common in mainstream *kokugogaku*. In (4), a priori identification with utilitarian goals of promoting the national language is seen in particular from the treatment of the nature of *kokugo* and Japanese language. It seems that there is no distinction between the two. This is in stark contrast with the treatment in Kamei et al. (Eds.), (1965/2007, pp. 201-202), which gives a clear picture of the loose usage of the term. Also, in Kindaichi's treatment there seems to be an ideologically based temporal and spacial projection of the term backwards in time and to the territory of the modern Japanese state. Also, the coercive phase of the introduction of standard language (*hyōjungo*), involving deeply divisive issues such as the aforementioned use of *hōgen fuda* "dialect placards", is presented so as to imply that such practices might have only been a remote possibility. Other authors (i.e., Kamei et al.) treat this issue in a much more critical way.

One thing common to all the materials is the omission of any treatment of language policies in the colonies. This omission may reveal an implicit understanding of priorities, that language is indeed a *kokugo* (national language) whose relevant treatment is necessarily limited to the territory of the nation in question. One further fact supporting this view is also the systematic omission in all four materials of any mention of language problems of the rather numerous Japanese diaspora in USA and South America.

5. Conclusion

While all the four sources display hints of biases based on the identification of language with the territorial nation-state in their view of the linguistic processes in Japan, description in Kindaichi et al. (Eds.), (1990) clearly emerges as the odd one out with its apparent lack of objective reflection and clearly discernible patriotic fervour seen in the projection of the modern homogenised nation state and its national language image back in times when both social and political organisation as well as linguistic situation was entirely different from the one in a modern nation state. Such attitude is also seen in the use of expressions such as *wagakuni*, which would be more appropriate in a political speech than in an encyclopaedic entry of a technical publication.

Kindaichi et al. views on *kokugo* and its corresponding nation state are not limited to the authors but seem to be, through compulsory education and its accompanying textbook industry, accepted under the auspices of the nation state authority, and far more current among the general public than the views of other authors.

If we view the national language as basically being present since times immemorial and being homogeneously spread all over the national territory, with the dialects, once safely subdued under the standardisation and being just a colourful addition of the local taste, then the radical and profound language reforms being

implemented during the later part of Meiji period do not appear as such at all. They are just reforms in a long string of language reforms, which after WW II include periodical adjustment of kanji to be learned or of kana orthography.

And being just one episode in a long series of such reforms, they indeed, in the view of history textbook authors, do not deserve the attention of high school children, cramming themselves for the entrance exams and can as such be happily omitted. Which is exactly what seems to be the case.

Note

The research presented in this paper was supported by JSPS and ARRS project funding. An earlier version was presented at the “Comparative Analysis Of History Textbooks In Japan And Slovenia: Structures, Contents and Interpretations” (2nd Workshop, Tokyo, 17-18 December, 2010).

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