Language Policy in Japan: The Challenge of Change
Nanette Gottlieb
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In *Language Policy in Japan: The Challenge of Change*, Nanette Gottlieb raises two critical points concerning language policy in Japan. The first point is about new and changing faces of Japan: Japan is no longer a monoethnic, monolingual country. Due to Japan’s reluctance to acknowledge this, Gottlieb argues, migrants who need to learn Japanese as a second language (JSL) do not have sufficient resources to make this happen. The second point is about the changing nature of literacy practices brought about by a myriad of technological innovations: How do such technologies (mis)align with the ideology-driven approaches to learning Japanese kanji (adopted Chinese characters), “the venerated icons of Japan’s writing system” (p. 98)?

One deep-seated concept Japan fails to address as of yet, and what Gottlieb vehemently argues throughout the book, is the power of *language ideology* that makes Japan a unique entity unlike any other, an ideology that is constructed discursively by *Nihonjinron* (theories of what it means to be Japanese) (p. 17). This construct is further discussed in Chapter 1 as an equivocal, yet mutually agreed-upon, exotic character that (re)produces “a lingering belief that Japan is monolingual” (p. 1). It is, therefore, in the interest of Japan that it recognizes the stark reality that the labor force blue-collar foreign migrant workers provide is indispensable. Only after Japan moves past the argument whether Japan is *really* monolingual and
monoethnic can Japan start to acknowledge peoples in Japan as full members of the society. To this end, Gottlieb critically analyzes the historical formation of language policy in Japan and the detrimental impact such antiquated policy has had not only on the peoples living in mainstream society, but those living in ethnic enclaves in Japan.

It is no surprise that Japan, unlike countries of immigration such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, has yet to come to terms with the changing faces of Japan. Despite Gottlieb’s accusation that Japan does not consider itself to be a country of immigration, she at the same time acknowledges that Japan at the local level has begun to show signs that transnational foreign migrants, from school-aged children to adults, need proficiency in Japanese for social cohesion (p. 72). The central issues surrounding language policy in Japan today then, Gottlieb argues, are not simply the way in which such policy is constituted and stipulated as is, but rather it is “fragmented rather than centrally planned and coordinated at [the] national level” (p. 1). With this orientation and framework in mind, Gottlieb analyzes past and current states of language policy in Japan through document analysis. Research studies Gottlieb cites draw on various theoretical orientations published in Japanese and English and are succinctly and comprehensively cited in this book, including but not limited to sociolinguistics (Milroy & Milroy, 1992), linguistic anthropology (Inoue, 2006), gender studies (Suzuki, 2000), and educational policy (Takayama, 2008).

Following a brief overview of the book, Gottlieb sets out the first chapter focusing on the conceptual framing of language ideology. The definition of language ideology given by Gottlieb is as follows:

The defining belief about language cherished by a society, or by a particular dominant section of a society, as an encapsulation of all that makes the language in question special and legitimates its use as the dominant language of that society. (p. 2)

Gottlieb gives some concrete examples of language ideology that first language (L1) Japanese speakers employ such as the way parents teach Japanese children to speak “good” Japanese, code-switching of local dialect and de-facto standard Japanese, and use of Japanese honorifics (p. 4). Gottlieb uses these examples to give readers a concise account of how Japan’s monolingualism myth continues to thrive further through conscious
and unconscious acts of essentialization to claim exclusive sovereignty of Japan and the Japanese language amongst its own people. In addition to language ideology exercised on the individual level, Gottlieb notes that Japan’s “highly ethnocentric and essentialist literacy genre known as ‘nihonjinron’ (theories of what it means to be Japanese)” (p. 17) has to do with further fueling the expansion and dissemination amongst Japanese people of nationalist approach to unique attributes of Japan and the Japanese language.

What Gottlieb attempts to demonstrate in this chapter is well-conceived by drawing upon Appadurai’s (1996) theoretical underpinning of the modern nation-state in which Japan no longer can control its pure ethnic-Japanese population. Facing a severe shortage of cheap foreign labor force, Japan relaxed the immigration law in 1990 (the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act), which permitted unskilled workers in South America who are of Japanese descent (nikkei-jin) to work in Japan (p. 22). According to Takenaka (2008, as cited in Gottlieb, 2012, p. 28), this is a “carrot and stick” approach and serves a double purpose. On the one hand Japan can expect to increase labor force at a lower labor cost. In addition, these nikkei-jin did not disturb the classic nation-state ideology, or so it was believed, which is to maintain “a strictly nationalist mode” (p. 28) by maintaining racially homogeneous demography. As it turned out, this was a miscalculation, as the culture such nikkei-jin brought from Brazil, for instance, is quite different even though they may call themselves ethnic Japanese. Also, not all nikkei-jin are pure ethnic Japanese. Many of them in fact are racially mixed. Gottlieb ends the chapter with a reminder that “Japan is no longer (and really never was) the homogeneous, static society of the national imaginary (p. 29).

In Chapter 2, Gottlieb focuses on language issues that foreign residents in Japan face, namely their learning opportunity of the Japanese language. In addition to migrant workers and their children, Gottlieb reports on the lack of language learning opportunities for foreign nurses and care workers. When it comes to JSL education in public schools, it is “patchy at best” (p. 39). As Gottlieb has demonstrated in Chapter 1, she critiques Japan’s insufficient and undeveloped language support system for foreign students enrolled in Japanese public schools for its lack of staff training and necessary teaching materials (p. 39). Similar to the case of school-aged foreign children in schools, a large number of nikkei workers who came to Japan following in the footsteps of their predecessors after the 1990 revision of immigration have formed communities where many nikkei-run businesses
support their financial needs, while at the same time they provide cultural and linguistic capital. To Japanese policy makers, the fact that nikkei workers do not speak any Japanese or do not act the way ‘Japanese people do’ was what they had already expected (p. 44). In addition to nikkei workers and their family members, non-Japanese spouses of Japanese citizens are not meeting the expected language attainment, due partly to the fact that “wives and mothers often find that work and family responsibilities leave them little time to attend JSL classes” (p. 51). Gottlieb give examples of language support provided by local language volunteers who help foreign residents learn the language at the grassroots level. Such support was made possible through financial support by respective local government. In the absence of national-level funding to train language teaching volunteers and support activities that facilitate language learning, community members, both foreign workers and Japanese people continue to struggle. Gottlieb extends her discussion to the cases of foreign nurses and care workers from Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines (p. 53). Although such foreign nurses and care workers are skilled workers unlike unskilled nikkei migrant workers from Latin America, they are required to learn Japanese as quickly as possible and must pass the national examination in order to remain in Japan. Under such pressure, they were forced to learn not only how to speak but read and write kanji characters in order to write daily reports. Gottlieb reports that no one passed the national nursing examination in the first year (2009). Gottlieb attributes the reason for this then unexpected outcome to the cognitively demanding task of memorizing kanji for the sole purpose of passing the national examination. Had the examination been amended for foreign nurses by adding hiragana over kanji characters, the situation would have been different. On a positive note, Japanese higher officials are “considering addressing the language barrier” (p. 55) for a possible revision in future years.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Gottlieb diverts her attention from the discussion of issues related to immigration and national language policy per se in Japan, to which she devoted almost half of the book. Chapter 3 concerns the teaching of foreign languages other than English in Japan, both in community and educational settings. Gottlieb’s thesis statement in this chapter is to critically analyze the definition of the Japanese phrase gaikokugo (foreign languages) in Japan. Gottlieb walks us through the historical development of foreign language education in Japan, including the reason the English language became the exclusive gaikokugo on the one hand, while all other foreign
languages are deemed *eigo igai no gaikokugo* (foreign languages other than English) on the other hand (p. 64). Gottlieb reports that *other* foreign languages such as French and German were included in the secondary school and university curricula (p. 81) during the Meiji Period (1868-1912); however, Japan’s decision to give English the sole status as *gaikokugo* is an outright attempt to internationalize the nation through English while at the same time maintaining Japanese as *kokugo* (de-facto national language) and English, the only foreign language needed for the sake of Japan’s internationalization. The ideology that people in the world speak English is indeed ignored (p. 66). Building further on the ideology of English as an international language, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT) developed the action plan to Cultivate Japan with English Abilities (p. 65). This movement ultimately led to an introduction of English into the elementary school curriculum in 2011.

Gottlieb discusses the role of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) who are sent to Japan through the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET Programme) sponsored by MEXT. At the inception of the program in 1989, many ALTs from diverse language backgrounds (e.g., German, French, Chinese, Korean, Russian) were recruited to teach their respective languages. However, despite Japan’s ambitious and exploratory plan then to introduce *other* foreign languages, English became the only language that survived (p. 67). Gottlieb’s argument here is that, while English is truly the only *gaikokugo*, other languages such Chinese and Korea should be taught as “community languages,” drawing on the case of Australia in which “the general community…acknowledge[s] that these languages form a continuing part of the Australian social fabric (p. 68).” Despite the ideology that sees English as the sole foreign language in Japan, Gottlieb reveals some changes among adult language learners in Japan, some of whom have started learning Asian languages “through a range of available options as a result of grassroots internationalization in local communities” (Tanaka, 2002, as cited in Gottlieb, 2012, p. 74). However, many language learners in Japan do not have the opportunity to learn *other* foreign languages until they reach university (p. 84). As is clear, as Gottlieb discussed earlier, the idea of learning community languages (e.g., Indonesian, Chinese, Portuguese) is quite different from formal learning of foreign languages (both English and all others). This is because the former assumes language teachers themselves may be migrant workers who share with community members the joy of learning, whereas the latter is more or less a formal form of knowledge production and dissemination, typically in the top-down manner from
qualified instructors with at least a bachelor’s degree. Nevertheless, Gottlieb presents in this chapter logical and practical ways of teaching other languages in Japan, and what such practices mean to local communities and cities with high concentrations of foreign residents. Japan, without a doubt, has a lot to learn from countries of immigration.

Gottlieb discusses in Chapter 4 the possible impact emerging digital media have on the future of Japanese language policy. Although the topics in this chapter seem to have shifted from Japanese language policy, as the book title infers, Gottlieb questions the validity and value of writing Japanese kanji by hand, keeping in mind how the art of writing by hand is indeed helpful for foreign migrants who need to learn Japanese quickly. Gottlieb argues that the changing nature of human communication, from paper-and-pencil to electronic writing and reading devices, is not meeting the demand of learners of Japanese, both Japanese and non-Japanese. As Gottlieb reviewed in the section where she discussed the issues that foreign nurses and caregivers face when they prepare for the national nursing examination, kanji as one of the three writing systems in the Japanese language is not only cognitively demanding, but is “seen as the reason for failure to live up to the ideal expectations of literacy, namely the ability to write all 1,945 of the kanji” (p. 106) if Japanese students do not memorize all the kanji by the end of compulsory education. Clearly this rule applies to learners of Japanese. As Gottlieb adds, writing by hand is “language ideology [that] ensure[s] that electronic means of text production were viewed through a lens of suspicion and disapproval” (p. 106). Not knowing how to read and write kanji consequently leads people to doubt “your entire intellectual level, including your knowledge of history, culture and all sorts of other things” (p. 112).

The implementation of yutori kyoiku [relaxed education] (see Takayama, 2008) that had started in 2002, Gottlieb reports, resulted in a devastating effect that further fueled the declining literacy standards. Seeing that yutori kyoiku did not work quite well judging from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, yutori kyoiku later reverted to the “back to basics” approach (p. 102) only after a couple of years after its inception. Needless to say this phenomenon that favors strong government control and a return to past values is not unique to Japan (see Apple, 2006). As a result of this “back to basics” movement in 2005, the Kokugo Bunkakai (subdivision on National Language of the Committee for Cultural Affairs) decided in favor of the importance of “retaining the ability to write well by hand” (p. 103). Gottlieb’s attempt to critically analyze these changing...
educational policy trends is by no means to leave behind kanji literacy and replace kanji with kana or the Roman alphabet (p. 115). Her aim is to provoke the validity of the current list of kanji characters for general use stipulated back in 1981, when Kokugo Shingikai then probably had “no concept of the rapid spread of the information technology” (p. 118). In other words, one of her main points in this chapter is to address how to fill the gap between the extra layer of burden with which new comers (e.g., foreign nurses) need to cope in the area of kanji reading and writing, and the old list of kanji characters created in the absence of information technology then.

In Chapter 5, Gottlieb provides possible paths in which Japan can and should move forward in order to bring about change at the national level rather than the local, which, as Gottlieb reports, is already happening. Understanding the “presence of deep-rooted language ideologies” (p. 123) in Japan, Gottlieb does not offer radical suggestions or solutions to change the status quo. Instead, her careful analyses of national and local government documents are meant to inform readers, who are by now cognizant of language policy in Japan, of the gap that exists in the current language policy that it is time to revamp the policy to better meet the demand of newcomers who live and work in Japan, many of whom are determined to live permanently. As one of the pressing policy issues, Gottlieb stresses the need for JSL education for foreign residents (p. 123). In the absence of national language policy, providing nationally funded Japanese language education (i.e., JFL) for foreign residents remains a major concern. Gottlieb criticizes the current budgetary allocation related to foreign language education (i.e., English for Japanese students) and JFL for foreign residents in Japan. She argues that “one-third of the amount requested under the heading of Enrichment of Foreign Language Education…[goes to] elementary school curriculum…reflect[s] the disparity in the importance accorded to those two arms of the current language policy landscape” (p. 140). Gottlieb argues that it is critically important to recognize the need to train JSL teachers and provide ample opportunities for foreign residents to learn the Japanese language.

Recognizing the brutal reality of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination that foreign residents and school-aged children may face in school, who in turn lose an opportunity to socialize with peers (see, e.g., Kromidas, 2011 ), it is indeed critical that trained language teachers help foreign students in the classroom to meet their language need. However, as Gottlieb writes, “the national government has yet shown no interest in or long-term vision for the
issues” (p. 148). Back to the local level, in contrast, various grassroots movements are in motion. One such example is a series of declarations starting in *2001 Hamamatsu Declaration* (p. 149), which stressed the importance of educating non-Japanese children the language and culture in schools in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka prefecture. Similar declarations followed suit in Japan (p. 150).

In the conclusion, Gottlieb emphasizes that revision of the language policy at the national level is an urgent task for Japan for “future social cohesion” (p. 161) through Japanese. As Gottlieb stresses in the book, policy change cannot be accomplished without dismantling the existing language ideologies. As a first step, Gottlieb concludes that “willingness to accommodate others” (p. 162) is the key element for such change to happen. Ignoring the existence of such ‘others’ in Japan not only damages social cohesion between Japanese and non-Japanese, but leads to the creation of “a linguistic underclass” (p. 163). Gottlieb further goes on to argue that such alienation and gradual formation of a linguistic underclass leads to such others’ involvement in crimes, citing a case study that examined nikkei Brazilians. Using examples such as this, Gottlieb warns that it is imperative Japanese policy makers take necessary measure to better meet the needs of foreign residents of Japan, both linguistically and culturally, and move past the romantacization of Japan.

References


