The Making of Monolingual Japan

The Making of Monolingual Japan

Language Ideology and Japanese Modernity

Patrick Heinrich

For Rossella

Contents

Preface

This book is the result of several years of research into the languages of Japan as part of Japan's history of thought. My interest in this topic began with a study of the reception of western linguistics in modern Japan for my PhD thesis, through which I came to understand that linguistics did not evolve in a vacuum but sought to provide solutions to problems exceeding those of language *tout court*. In Japan, there is a small branch of linguistics dedicated to what is called *kokugo mondai* (problems of national language). Having dealt with the very broad topic of the reception of western linguistics, I decided to restrict my research to *kokugo mondai* for a while. I can still remember the first time I came across the small section on *kokugo mondai* at the library of the National Institute for Japanese Language in Tokyo. At the time, I was due to take a position at Duisburg University as an assistant to Florian Coulmas, and so I quickly wrote down the titles of all the books on *kokugo mondai* on the shelves there, with the intention of writing something on this issue during my time at Duisburg. I have long since left Duisburg, and so I can safely say that the topic demanded far more attention than the few books on the shelves at the National Institute for Japanese Language suggested. For this is more than just a book about the problems of a national language in Japan – it is about the problems caused by the idea of a national language too. In writing this book, it was not finding material that proved difficult, but deciding on how best to present what material. Undoing ideology demands the conscious questioning of ontological knowledge, but it is not easy to produce academic work on such shaky ground.

Many people have helped me in forming the ideas behind this book. Above all, I am most indebted to my teachers Florian Coulmas, J.V. Neustupný and Josef Kreiner, and their influence is written all over the book. Inoue Fumio, Takaesu Yoriko, Miyara Shinsho and Ishihara Masahide were my hosts during prolonged research visits to Japan, during which times I studied matters that found their way into this book. In Duisburg, Sugita Yuko and Imai Jun discussed many of the issues presented here with me,

and in Uchinaa (Okinawa), Fija Byron was an important source of support and friendship. Michael Cresswell helped me to finish the manuscript and provided much needed encouragement while it was being written, and Scott Saft generously supported me while making revisions. Peter Backhaus remembered me saying that I wanted to write a book on ideology, and took the picture that appears on the front cover while studying Tokyo's linguistic landscape. I have given dozens of talks at various conferences on matters relating to language ideology, and so it would be impossible to list all those who have contributed in one form or another to the present study, but all contributions were gratefully received. My research into language ideology was supported by scholarships from the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science, the German Science Foundation (DFG), the German Academic Exchange Program (DAAD), the Japan Foundation and the Humboldt Foundation. Their kind support, too, was very much appreciated. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, to John Edwards for having this book be part of his series, and at Multilingual Matters to Anna Roderick for overseeing the process that turned a manuscript into a book.

A brief word on conventions. Japanese words are transcribed in the modified Hepburn system, while Japanese names are given in the traditional manner of family name first. Okinawa is termed as 'Uchinaa' here, as in the local language, because many of my friends and colleagues there were uncomfortable with the Japanese term 'Okinawa'. It remains in place, of course, for designations such as Okinawa Prefecture. All translations into English are mine unless otherwise accredited. Tradition also dictates that I hereby declare all remaining errors and inadequacies mine.

Finally, let me acknowledge that taking so many years to write one book does not come without its share of problems. I had to move several times to take up new positions, and while that was fine with me, it was a burden on my family. That they never wavered in their support for me has truly humbled me. My son Stephen is cool enough to still tease me for taking such a long time to write such a short book, but I know my wife Rossella will be more proud of this work than I will ever be. I shall dedicate it to her.

Patrick Heinrich
Sicily, Summer 2011

1 Language Ideology as a Field of Enquiry

Language ideology is an ever-present component of our communicative behaviour, for it regulates the way we talk. Yet this is something of which most of us are unaware, and so we assume our linguistic choices and attitudes to be entirely natural. The term 'ideology' is therefore a fitting one, and while language ideology escapes the attention of many of us most of the time, once one purposefully starts looking for it one encounters it everywhere. Consider the following examples of language ideology at work in Japan.

On 18 January 2000, a consultation body organized by the late Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō published a booklet which proposed the establishment of English as a second official language in Japan. In the resultant discussion on the appropriateness of such a proposal, linguist Tanaka Katsuhiko (2000) drew attention to the fact that Japan does not actually have a first official language.

On 20 February 2009, the evening edition of the daily newspaper *Asahi shinbun* led with the headline, 'Hachijo Language'¿, followed by the statements, 'UNESCO: 2,500 languages world-wide threatened by extinction', 'Eight languages in Japan endangered' and 'Also [Japanese] dialects are independent languages'. Such was the response of Japan's most influential newspaper to the publication of the latest UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, which identified eight endangered languages in Japan (UNESCO, 2009).

On 26 May 2009, colleagues and friends of mine met at my office at the University of the Ryukyus. Frustrated by the lack of a language policy supportive of Ryukyuan languages, radio presenter Fija Byron commented, 'if we had a governor who said, all of a sudden, 'From now on, I will speak only Uchinaaguchi' (Okinawan)...Someone with that kind of faith...That would be it'!

In February 2009, Florian Coulmas handed me a copy of Tomasz Kamusella's *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe* and asked me for a review. On the plane from Tokyo back to Naha, I read Kamusella's words:

> The most ethno-linguistically homogenous nation-states (that is, almost without any native speakers of other languages than the national) are Iceland, Japan, and Poland. In the cases of Iceland and Japan, this unusual homogeneity was achieved by the long lasting maritime isolation of both parties. (Kamusella, 2009: 60)

It is easy to find such conflicting attitudes and opinions when dealing with the issue of language in Japan, yet few people take the time to consider the reasons for this incongruity, where it originated and how it might be resolved. Here, the issue of language ideology is crucial. As will be demonstrated in the course of this book, incongruity arises from the fact that the dominant language ideology in Japan is far removed from the country's sociolinguistic situation. To understand this disparity, we must trace the social and historical genealogy of dominant ideas about language in Japan, for by doing so we will find that there is a single ideology present in all the vignettes above which was proliferated towards the end of the 19th century. The idea is that of language nationalism. Of course, language nationalism is in no way unique to Japan, nor is it exceptional that the creation of a modern nation-state following the Meiji restoration of 1868 necessitated the establishment of a national language for Japan. That said, however, the events recounted in this book are in many ways unique. The implementation of language nationalism, its adaption to the Japanese socio-political and linguistic context, and the impact on the linguistic situation of present-day Japan will be dealt with in the chapters that follow.

The significance of studying language ideology encompasses the field of history of thought, to which this topic might be most closely related. Three reasons will be shown to be relevant for a consideration of language ideology for all orientations of linguistics. Firstly, all ideologies emerge in specific socio-cultural conditions and thus do not form an appropriate base for a general linguistics worthy of that name. Secondly, these conditions grow quickly obsolete due to the normalization of ideological claims. Hence, ideologies pass as fact and appear to be common-sensical and natural, and they are usually also shared by linguists. Thirdly, language ideology influences the sociolinguistic realities on the ground in making them more similar to ideological claims. In brief, linguistics is involved in changing sociolinguistic situations due to its negligence of the socio-cultural conditions under which ideologies are created. This results in confusing ideological claims for fact,

and hence, in further support for ideology. Since the basis of dominating ideology is power, linguistics will be shown in this book to assist in changing the sociolinguistic situation in ways which are beneficial to powerful actors. This book will also make clear that non-idelogical linguistics is not possible, and it will be argued that power-based ideologies should be replaced by ideologies based on cultural liberty and solidarity.

In considering the importance of language ideology to the creation and spread of a 'national language', we will look in this book at (1) the fundamental ideological entities of *kokugo* (national language) in Japan; (2) their evolution; and (3) their impact. We will thus attempt both to trace the ideological genesis of the ontology of *kokugo*, and to reveal the impact of *kokugo* ideology on Japanese society. Chapters 2–4 deal with language ideology and the creation of *kokugo*. In Chapters 5–7, we will turn our attention to the ways language ideology functions. Chapter 8 highlights contemporary attitudes and challenges to the legacy of *kokugo* ideology in late-modern Japan. In Chapter 9, we will return to the three central considerations outlined above, and discuss language ideology as a generative principle which constantly creates new meaning as contexts evolve. Given the scope of this book, it is perhaps appropriate to begin with a brief review of modernization as it occurred in Japan, and also to introduce some of the fundamentals of language ideology study, by way of preparing the ground for a more detailed discussion which will follow.

Overcome by Modernity

Following the reopening of Japan to contact with the outside world as enforced by Commodore Matthew Perry (1794–1858), Japan was suddenly and involuntarily faced with a need to define its place in the modern world. Japan's transformation into a modernized state required the formation of a new cultural and linguistic consciousness, something for which its feudal society was quite ill prepared. Identity and loyalty were shifted from premodern feudal domains to the emerging state, the modernization of Japan thus redefining the inhabitants of old Japanese provinces as Japanese nationals. A common notion of Japanese identity had quite simply not existed before the Meiji restoration of 1868 (Gluck, 1985). Writing in 1875, enlightenment scholar Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) wrote (quoted from Craig, 1968: 118–119), 'I would say that though there is a government in Japan, there is no nation.' As in every other part of the modern world, internal differences were suppressed whilst difference from the outside world was highlighted in order to define, and thereby create, the idea of a Japanese nation.

At the outset, the internal linguistic situation was one of great variety. Nanette Twine ascertains that prior to the modernization of Japan, local dialects served as linguistic standards within

> each feudal domain [...], fulfilling the primary function of language, that is communication. Farmers, fishermen, and forestry workers had no need of any other medium of communication, since restrictions on travel made it unlikely that they would have much occasion to converse with speakers of other dialects. (Twine, 1988: 435)

In other words, a unitary national language had not existed prior to Japanese modernization precisely because there was no need for one. This is crucial because, in contrast to Benedict Anderson's (1991) view that national languages were a resource for nation building which had previously lain dormant, in fact, such national languages did not come into existence by themselves. National languages are – like nations – ideological constructs. The idea of Japanese as a national language was thus actively and purposefully created in response to the very specific requirements of Japanese modernization.

As the first non-western country to join the modern world, Japan's situation was always going to be different from that experienced elsewhere. Due to the enforced opening of the country to the outside world, Japan had both to establish unity within its own borders and to restore the self-esteem of its own people vis-à-vis the outside. The struggle of Japan to gain both autonomy and respect from the west was not limited to fields such as economy, politics and culture, but included language as well. In order to be seen as a legitimate power by the western world – and thereby avoid colonization – the young Meiji government sought to demonstrate that Japan's society, culture, education and language was just as developed as that of countries in the west. Japanese modernization thus required the creation and proliferation of a unitary Japanese language, one comparable to the standardized national languages of the western world. This was no easy task. Hirai Masao's (1998: 477–497) *History of Problems of the National Language and Script* (*Kokugo kokuji mondai no rekishi*) details no less than 343 language planning schemes proposed in the Meiji period (1868–1912) alone.

The Idea of a Unitary Language

Let us consider the idea of a unitary national language in Japan in more detail. In Japanese 'national language' is called *kokugo*, a term generated from the two Chinese characters denoting 'country' and 'language'. According to the *Comprehensive Dictionary of the National Language* (*Kokugo daijiten*), *kokugo*

refers to the following four concepts: (1) the official language or common language of a country; (2) Japanese as the language of Japan; (3) a Japanese word or a word not borrowed; and (4) a subject taught at school. It is important to note here that the second and fourth definitions emerged only during the course of Japanese modernization (Yasuda, 1997b: 29–30). The entry 'national language' in the *Comprehensive Dictionary of National Linguistics* (*Kokugogaku daijiten*) confirms the semantic expansion of this term. It states:

> [Following the Meiji restoration], the perception of Japanese shifted from the idea that one's language is the index of one's native province (*kotoba wa kuni no tegata*), that is to say, from different languages in each feudal domain, to the idea that Japanese is the language of the state, and what is called national language (*kokugo*) came into existence. (Kokugo Gakkai, 1980: 861)

The term *kokugo* as national language thus designates something that had not existed in pre-modern Japan. National languages are modernist ideological constructs, and the case of Japan does not constitute a deviation from this definition.

The idea of national language as we know it today was not developed in Japan, however. Its origin is historically tied to the emergence of the European nation-states and to their efforts to establish a common identity through one national language by one specific name. Examples of this are German, French, Russian or Italian. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) was the first to use the term national language (*Nationalsprache*), and was influential in the popularization of the idea of an isomorphism of language and nation (Ising, 1987: 335). Herder and other German philologists such as Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) argued that language was one of the conditions that formed a nation, in the same way as climate, religion or political systems do (Coulmas, 1997). By relating language to the world-view and collective identity of a nation, an ideological construct was established in which variation of language within a nation was downplayed, if not forcibly suppressed. It is for this reason that national languages are represented by – if not equated with – their standard varieties. As an effect, the term national language should not be taken at face value, nor too should that of standard language. Standardization, in the sense of creating a homogenous speech community, is an impossible undertaking as variation in spoken language is irrepressible (Joseph & Taylor, 1990; Milroy & Milroy, 1985).

The fact that national language and standard language are ideological constructs does not mean that they bear no relation to the sociolinguistic field they claim to represent. The establishment of standardized national

languages has far-reaching effects on the sociolinguistic field. James Milroy writes the following on this issue:

> The establishment of the idea of a standard variety, the diffusion of knowledge of this variety, its codification in widely used grammar books and dictionaries, and its promotion in a wide range of functions – all lead to the devaluing of other varieties. The standard form becomes the legitimate form, and other forms become, in the popular mind, illegitimate, because, of course, it is important that a standard language, being the language of the state and, sometimes, a great empire, should share the (glorious) history of that nation state. (Milroy, 2001: 547)

With regard to Japanese, Yasuda Toshiaki (1999a: 34–35) comes to similar conclusions, drawing attention to the fact that local varieties of Japanese became representative of backwardness after the Meiji restoration.

Standardized national languages have to provide for what Paul Kroskrity (2000: 28) calls 'the horizontal camaraderie of citizenship in a nation state'. As powerful symbols of nationhood, national languages take their particular shape as a result of discursive solutions to the historical, social and political contexts from which they emerge. Grammarians, lexicographers, teachers and so on need to respond to the broader socio-political contexts in which they pursue the task of standardizing and codifying language (Jernudd & Neustupný, 1987). Let us therefore turn our attention next to some of the problems faced by Japan, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2–4.

Problems and Tasks of Japanese Language Modernization

Even the most basic grasp of mathematics will support the claim that linguistic nationalism is ideology, for whilst there are more than 6000 languages in the world, there are only 200 states. That is to say, the proportion of languages to nation-states is roughly 30 to 1, which means that the vast majority of states are multilingual. Japan is no exception. In order to join the modern world and create 'the Japanese' as an imagined community, Japan invented itself as monolingual, a process which required suppression of linguistic diversity. However, the problem posed to the state by linguistic minorities was not seen as important until the early 20th century, by which time the modernization of Japanese had largely been achieved and national language been spread to all but the peripheries of the Meiji state. Thus, the issue of linguistic diversity was left alone, whilst other, more pressing issues of linguistic modernization, were dealt with. One such issue was diglossia, whilst another was the

widely held view that only western languages could be developed into standardized modern languages. Let us therefore briefly review these two issues.

As in many other countries, one of the most important undertakings of linguistic modernization in Japan was the dissolution of diglossia. In diglossic situations, the high variety (H) cannot be exchanged for the low variety (L) in order to signal social distance or proximity. According to Charles Ferguson (1959: 338), three developments contribute to a decline of diglossia: (1) increasingly widespread literacy; (2) increasing communication over geographical distances; and (3) the desire to establish a standard language. Most important, however, is that the dissolution of diglossia requires that those proficient in the H-variety take part in the establishment of the L-variety for all uses, including writing. Although proficiency of the H-variety corresponded to the group of the educated elite in Japan, the H-variety was used exclusively for the written form of the language. The various written styles (*bungo-tai*) with Sino-Japanese (*kanbun*) at the apex were never used in any other context but writing by anyone at any time, nor did they constitute a native language to anyone. The only way to acquire the H-variety was through formal education. The complementary distribution between H and L had been very stable; neither were written forms ever intended to be used as spoken language, nor were spoken forms considered suitable for serious writing before the 1870s, with very few exceptions (see Carroll, 2001; Seeley, 1991; Twine, 1991 for details).

In its attempts at language modernization, Japan was also forced to confront the western perception of Indo-European languages as constituting the top of a linguistic hierarchy, one in which Japanese was placed far below. Edward Said's (1978: 40) dictum that the west saw the Orient as 'irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus that European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal"' was manifested in western perceptions of oriental languages too. Paul Garvin stresses this point in stating that:

> Traditionally linguistics used to distinguish languages such as those of Europe from primitive languages such as those of the native populations of the different regions of the world that were colonized by Europeans. According to this tradition, only civilized languages are capable of a standardization process, while the so-called primitive languages are destined to remain underdeveloped since they do not have the inherent potential for the development of the attributes required for modernization. (Garvin, 1993: 45)

In addition to the existence of that ideology in which the character of a nation is seen as being embodied in its national language, and that in which