Rethinking Language and Culture in Japanese Education

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Rethinking Language and Culture in Japanese Education

Beyond the Standard

Edited by
Shinji Sato and Neriko Musha Doerr

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Introduction

Shinji Sato and Neriko Musha Doerr

The current educational climate is dictated by standards and tests. The standardized tests of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have come to serve internationally to measure the success of an education system and even the well-being of a nation as a whole, pushing countries around the world to reform educational institutions and admonish public and education communities in order to achieve high scores in reading, mathematics and science. Standardized tests are also seen as a reliable way to measure individual aptitude in particular areas, often functioning as a gatekeeper to higher education. To enter certain colleges in the USA, applicants must obtain high scores on the SAT, a standardized test for college admission. (The acronym originally stood for Scholastic Aptitude Test, then for Scholastic Assessment Test; now it is an empty acronym.) The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required each state to develop standard tests for particular grades in order to receive federal funding. Similarly, exchange students must pass the Japanese Language Proficiency Test Level 1 to enter most Japanese universities.

Researchers have argued that in this climate, knowledge is treated as static and uniformly meaningful, rather than dynamic and diverse. Standard tests, such as those promoted by No Child Left Behind, are premised on a view of education as a matter of acquisition and inculcation (Hursh, 2007; Varenne, 2007). Mastery and demonstration of 'official knowledge' are accorded much more importance than flexibility, creativity and adaptability to change (Apple, 2000). Ironically, however, business leaders and government officials see flexible, creative, adaptable people as the key to the future.

Many educational scholars (e.g. van Lier, 2006), noting the paucity of ways to catch the attention of policymakers, have stressed the urgent need to conduct research to reveal the processes by which knowledge is commodified or homogenized at both the micro and macro levels so that policymakers can recognize these processes and their effects in their policy-making efforts. The most pressing questions are: What are the effects of this

climate of standards and tests? What kinds of schools, teachers and students does it reward, and what kind of learning does it encourage? What kind of knowledge does it promote, how does it do so and to what effect? What can educators and researchers do to challenge this climate?

This book seeks to answer these questions by investigating the dynamics of power relations in the processes of the standardization of language and culture and exploring researchers' and educators' roles with a focus on the case of Japan. Japan's language and culture have undergone such extensive standardization that various popular and academic discourses, both in and outside Japan, regard them as homogeneous. This makes Japan an important case for a study on the processes and effects of standardization. This book illustrates a wide range of Japanese language/culture standardization processes in numerous contexts: translation practices during the Edo era in Japan (Sakai), ideologies of the standardization of regional dialects throughout Japan's recent history (Doerr), nursery and primary classrooms in Japan (Sato, Kamiyoshi and Okubo), the Japanese-as-a-foreign-language college classroom in the USA (Kumagai and Kubota), and discussions of Japanese thought patterns in journals of Japanese language education (Segawa).

By 'standardization', we mean the processes of setting an ideal model of language and culture as a standard and directing all linguistic and cultural practices to approximate that standard.[1] Existing research on language education tends to investigate either the process of acquiring language and culture at the micro level (Uchida, 1990) or the relationship between linguistic varieties at the macro level (Lee, 2004; Mashiko, 2002; Yasuda, 1999). Meanwhile, a lack of communication persists between Japanese language educators working with 'native speakers' and those working with 'non-native speakers' (Tajiri & Otsu, 2010). This book extends to both the micro and macro levels, and to Japanese language education designed for both 'native' and 'non-native' speakers, analyzing the processes of language/culture standardization and the resistance to them by examining discourses, textbooks and classroom practices. In doing so, we suggest a new approach to the field.

This project emerged out of the session entitled 'Rethinking Language and Culture in Japanese Education' that Neriko Musha Doerr organized for the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association held in Washington DC in November 2005. The session investigated the standardization process of target languages in foreign language education in various countries worldwide. Doerr expanded the project and made it into an edited book focused on the issue of 'native speakers' (Doerr,2009).

Because some of the papers in the session had focused on Japan, Shinji Sato suggested that he and Doerr co-edit another book focused on the Japanese language cases and publish it in Japanese. Original session members who joined the project included Doerr (organizer), Sato, Takato and Kubota (discussant). Upon Doerr's request, her graduate school mentor, Naoki Sakai, kindly agreed to contribute a chapter. Sato and Doerr's colleagues – Yuko Okubo, Uichi Kamiyoshi, Yuri Kumagai and Hazuki Segawa – also joined the project, and Ryuko Kubota brought in a final contributor, Shigeko Okamoto.

In the wake of that volume's positive reception (Haruhara, 2009; Makino, 2009; Ohta, 2010; Saito, 2009), we decided to translate it into English for a wider audience; the present book is the result. We revised the introduction and conclusion for this English version to address considerations that are not obvious to international readers and updated some chapters with new literature and information. Due to a conflict in work schedules, Michiyo Takato's chapter could not be included in this book.

Expanding on the anthropological approach taken in the original session on standardization, we sought a more interdisciplinary project. Because our own subject positions in academic fields affect how we approach the topic of standardization, a brief introduction to our academic backgrounds is provided below.

Sato is senior lecturer and the director of the Japanese language program at Princeton University. He specializes in educational anthropology with a focus on language education. Doerr received a PhD in cultural anthropology from Cornell University and currently teaches at the Salameno School of American and International Studies at Ramapo College of New Jersey. Her areas of interest are language politics, formation of subjectivities, nationalism, neoliberalism, governmentality, globalization and the politics of schooling. Kubota is a professor in the language and literacy education program at the University of British Columbia. Her research interests include bilingualism and bilingual education, cultural and ecological studies, gender, language education and pedagogy. Sakai is a professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and East Asian Studies at Cornell University. He has published in the fields of comparative literature, intellectual history, translation studies, the studies of racism and nationalism and the histories of semiotic and literary multitude – speech, writing, corporeal expressions, calligraphic regimes and phonographic traditions. Okubo received a doctorate from the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests include migration and transnationalism, the (nation) state and education/learning. She looks at how concerns of race, ethnicity and nationality translate into the everyday practices of schooling and are reshaping ideas about national culture and identity in Japan today.

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The chapters by these contributors from various fields offer analyses and raise questions about the process of Japanese language and culture standardization from an interdisciplinary perspective encompassing cultural anthropology, East Asian studies, foreign language education and sociolinguistics. For international readers who may not be familiar with the Japanese context, we will next briefly summarize the history of views of Japanese culture, standard language and the education system.

Culture: 'Japanese Culture' and *Nihonjinron*, Theories about the Japanese

Japanese culture is often said to be homogeneous. This, however, is a historically constructed view that ignores not only regional difference but also class, ethnic, gender and age differences that exist throughout the Japanese archipelago. Moreover, the belief that Japanese culture is homogeneous is based on the assumption that there is a bounded unit called Japan, that it is static, and that it can be explained with several key notions. Bourdieu (1989) argues that to impose one's vision (and division) of the world on others is to reproduce one's domination over others: this is what is at stake in political struggle – and in the debate over what is considered 'Japanese culture'.

The investigation and teaching of 'culture' are often linked to the political and economic domains. In Japan, for instance, the notion of culture arose in the 19th century to describe the way of life and customs in Japan's colonies. Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a study in cultural anthropology published in 1946, was initiated at the invitation of the US Office of War Information as part of an effort to understand

America's wartime enemy, Japan. In the USA, research on Russia during the Cold War, research on Japan (especially its schools and business practices) during its 'economic miracle' (Vogel, 1979) and the recent popularity of Arabic language learning are other examples of how politics and economics can spur people to learn about the cultures of particular others.

Within Japan, the question 'What is Japanese culture?' was addressed as early as the 18th century (Sakai, 1996). However, the primary influence on the concept of Japanese culture as a singular and homogeneous unit was the establishment of the nation state of Japan in the late 19th century, along with the ideology of the nation state being constituted of one nation, one language, one culture (Yasuda, 2003). The modern nation state of Japan began in the second half of the 19th century, when the Tokugawa shogunate, after 250 years of political dominance, transferred its power to the Japanese emperor and opened the country's doors to the wider West,[2] ending its isolationist policy. The new Meiji government then set to building the foundation on which a centralized imperial state could become a member of the 'international' society (Passin, 1967). To develop a modern nation state in line with its ideology, the Meiji government established national systems for education, railroads, communication and the military, laying the groundwork not only for the imposition of standardized knowledge, discourses and practices deriving from the capital, Tokyo, but also for more interaction between people from various regions (Gluck, 1989).

In recent years, the notion of Japaneseness has been crystallized in a field of study called *nihonjinron* (Japanology; theories about the Japanese), a set of pseudo-academic theories popular in the 1960s and 1970s that continue to enjoy prominence both in and outside Japan. It delineates and discusses unique features of the Japanese culture, language and personality. From a Japanese point of view, *nihonjinron* helped explain both Japan's economic success in those decades and the lack of acceptance of Japanese ways abroad, and boosted nationalistic pride. From a non-Japanese perspective, it derived from and bolstered the image of the exotic cultural Other in the existing anthropological framework of the patterns of culture school established by Ruth Benedict, whose *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Benedict, 1946) is a *nihonjinron* classic.

Reflecting the ideology of nation states (Anderson, 1991), *nihonjinron* assumes a tight correspondence between the Japanese nation, Japanese language and Japanese culture, all imagined to be static and internally homogeneous. It constructs the genealogical coherence of the history of the Japanese people, language and culture by presuming that the subject of its expression has been in existence continually (Sakai, 1997). That is,