

The Sociolinguistic Situation of English in Japan

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Abstract

In Japan, the overwhelming majority of the population (it is said up to 98%) has Japanese as main language. Nevertheless, several proposals have been raised up in order to declare also English as the official language of the State. The first one was suggested in 1872 by Arinori Mori. The last which had some social response was submitted in a report drafted in 2000 by the advisory board of Prime Minister Obuchi. The common feature of both proposals lies in their approach insofar as they use the language as a tool for State strategy and are lacking therefore of a linguistic rights background. We should argue this feature reflects a linguistic ideology deeply rooted into the Japanese society and strengthened during the process of modernization, which considers the language as a mere instrument. This very same ideology should also explain the minorization of the autochthonous languages other than Japanese (Ainu and the language of Okinawa).

Summary

1. Introduction
2. The situation of English in Japan
3. Linguistic ideology
4. Conclusion
5. Bibliography

1. Introduction

Japanese is a *de facto* official language in Japan. This is the case because, although it has a wide-spread social use, there is no legislation defining it as an official language. For everyday life, there is no need to know any language other than Japanese. However, this does not mean that Japan is an entirely monolingual state. We will now turn to look at the linguistic structure of Japan.

Japanese is spoken by some 125,000,000 individuals, and is the ninth most spoken language in the world, after Portuguese (170,000,000 speakers). Japan also has at least two other native languages, in addition to Japanese: Ainu and the language of Okinawa. The number of speakers of these two languages is uncertain, but it is believed that Ainu has tens of hundreds and that the language of Okinawa has hundreds of thousands. In addition to these native languages, foreign languages such as Korean, Chinese, Portuguese, Philippine, Spanish, English, Thai, etc. are also spoken. We do not know exactly how many individuals speak these languages, but we can use the numbers of foreigners on record as a reference.

Table 1. Number of Foreigners Registered in Japan (Year 2000)

Nationality	Number
Korean (North and South)	635,269
Chinese	335,575
Brazilian	254,394
Philippine	144,871
Peruvian	46,171
North-American (United States)	44,856
Thai	29,289
Indonesian	19,346
Vietnamese	16,908
British	16,525

Source: Own work based on data taken from the official website of the Ministry of Justice¹

Overall, there were 1,686,444 foreigners registered in Japan in the year 2000. In all probability, therefore, the language of the vast majority of the Japanese population is indeed Japanese, since the sum of the speakers of these native and foreign languages barely reaches 2% of the total population. Moreover, almost all speakers of Ainu and the language of Okinawa, and the majority of Korean speakers are bilingual with Japanese.

If we consider that languages other than Japanese are not required in everyday life and that the speakers of these languages are few in number, it seems logical that there is no official language legislation. However, the fact is that a number of proposals to legislate the language have been made. The latest proposal with a certain social impact was published in the year 2000 in a report drawn up by the advisory committee of the Prime Minister, Obuti² which called for the promotion of English as a national strategy, with a view to equipping it with official status in the long-term. Subsequently, Youichi Funabashi, journalist and member of this committee, published a paper in which he proposed a language act to define Japanese as the first official language and English as the second (Funabashi : 2000).

Why have these seemingly illogical proposals been made? What has been their social impact? Reflection and analysis of this phenomenon may offer us a vision of the sociolinguistic situation of English in Japan. We will now, therefore, turn to the main details of this subject.

¹ <http://www.moj.go.jp/>

² The report is available in 4 languages (Japanese, English, Korean, Chinese) at this address: <http://www.kantei.go.jp/>

2. The situation of English in Japan

2.1 Linguistic proficiency in English

Due to a lack of data on the proficiency in English of the Japanese population (the census does not include a question on language), we can only consult the results of private English examinations. These are the TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language), TOEIC (Test Of English for International Communication) and EIKEN (Test of English organized by "The Society for Testing English Proficiency"). These results are not of any statistical value, but we can use them as a secondary reference.

2.1.1 TOEFL

This test is organized by the ETS (Educational Testing Service) and is designed to gauge the proficiency in English of individuals whose language is not English. Universities in the United States and Canada require overseas candidates to obtain a certain grade in this test. Here follow part of the results from 2000-2001.

Table 2. TOEFL Result from July 2000 to June 2001

Nationality	Number of candidates	Average points (Maximum 677)
Japanese	35,121	505
South Korean	32,814	530
Chinese	92,720	560
Taiwanese	21,897	519
Indian	18,088	575
Bulgarian	559	574
Spanish	240	567

Source: Own work based on data taken from the official website of the Educational Testing Service³

Of all the countries of the world, only in the above five Asian countries does the number of candidates exceed 10,000. Bulgaria has the most candidates out of the European countries.

2.1.2 TOEIC

This test is also organized by the ETS and is based and developed on the TOEFL experience. The aim is to gauge communicative skills in English. Here follows an extract of a report on TOEIC candidates 1997-1998, which groups results according to nationality.

³ <http://www.toefl.org/>

Table 3. TOEIC Result 1997-1998 *

Nationality	Number of candidates	Average points (Maximum 990)
Japanese	862,509	451
South Korean	405,822	480
Chinese	3,529	502
Taiwanese	11,462	475
Thai	27,330	487
Malaysian	1,079	669
French	45,285	632
Spanish	514	639

Source: Own work based on data taken from the *TOEIC Report on Test-takers World-wide 1997-1998*⁴

(*) The figure is the sum of the result of the IP (Institutional Program: test carried out at the behest of companies, universities, etc. for their members) during 1997-1998.

The country with most candidates throughout the world is Japan. However, compared with the other Asian countries, it has the lowest average of points.

2.1.3 EIKEN

This test is organized by "The Society for Testing English Proficiency". It is not an international test, but it is the most highly considered in Japan itself and its excellence is acknowledged by the Ministry of Science and Education. Here follow the results for 2001 at the same level as the tests above, provided by the society itself.

Table 4. EIKEN Results 2001

Level*	Number of candidates	Number of passes	Corresponding TOEFL grade	Corresponding TOEIC grade
1	30,423	2,147	610	908
Pre-1	126,387	12,960	542	751
2	419,126	88,644	456	519
Pre-2	592,962	212,965	N/A	N/A
3	819,520	411,541	N/A	N/A
4	604,773	432,430	N/A	N/A
5	375,370	303,488	N/A	N/A
TOTAL	2,968,561	1,464,135		

Source: Own work based on data taken from the official website of The Society for Testing English Proficiency ⁵

(*) As the table indicates, Level 1 is the highest.

These three sets of results are lacking in statistical basis and cannot therefore be used to find out directly the proficiency of the Japanese in English. Here, we will limit ourselves to confirming the high

⁴ The report can be found at:
<http://www.toEIC.com/>

⁵ <http://www.eiken.or.jp/>

number of candidates sitting the tests and to pointing out that the English skills of the Japanese in general cannot be very high.

2.2 Learning

In the main, English is learned in three environments: at school, in private language schools and in the home (private tutor and self-teaching).

2.2.1 The school system

At lower secondary level (12 - 15 years), all students must learn a foreign language. The subject is called "foreign language" but, in practice, this is English, because most schools do not offer any other option. The situation repeats itself at upper secondary level (15 -18 years). For example, in 1995, there were 5,501 upper secondary schools⁶ and only 160 offered foreign language subjects other than English (Okado, 1998). In other words, only 3% of schools offered foreign languages other than English as a subject. However, this does not mean that, in these cases, English was incompatible with other language subjects.

In the year 2000, a total of 4,103,717 pupils enrolled in lower secondary education and 4,165,434 in upper secondary school⁷. This adds up to a total of 8,269,151 students, almost all of whom learn English in some form or another. Moreover, the educational guidance norms of the Ministry of Science and Education, allocate 87.5 hours a year to "foreign language" at lower secondary level, and 204 hours a year at upper secondary schools (these hours are standard and may vary).

English is also taught at university. Generally-speaking, students have to learn two foreign languages, regardless of their main subject. One of these is usually English. In 2000, university students totalled 2,471,755⁸.

2.2.2 Private schools

In 1997, 1,333 private foreign language schools were surveyed. Overall, they numbered 6,152 schools and 715,051 students⁹. It is likely that the vast majority of these offered, at the very least, English as a subject. Revenue from the sector for the same year totalled 992,220,000 euros¹⁰.

2.2.3 Private (private tutor and self-teaching)

Quantitative data on private tutors cannot be found. For the self-teaching aspect, we can use as a reference the data on the courses broadcast on television and radio. The semi-state channel NHK (Nihon Hôshô Kyôkai) broadcasts language courses. We will now consider the variety of languages and the broadcasting time allocated to each language per week.

⁶ Data taken from the official website of the Statistics Centre (<http://www.stat.go.jp/>)

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Data taken from the official website of the Statistics Centre (<http://www.stat.go.jp/>)

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

Table 5. Televised Course: Languages and Weekly Broadcasting Time (April 2002-March 2003)*

Language	Weekly Language Broadcasting Time (minutes)**
Italian	30
Russian	30
Spanish	30
French	30
Chinese	30
Korean	30
German	30
English	100
Japanese	25

Source: Own work based on data taken from the course textbook "English Conversation".

(*) This table does not include children's programmes in English.

(* *) The weekly broadcasting time for English is the sum of five different courses.

Table 6. Radio Course: Languages and Weekly Broadcasting Time (April 2002-March 2003)

Language	Weekly Language Broadcasting Time (minutes)
Italian	120
Russian	120
Spanish	120
French	120
Chinese	120
Korean	120
German	120
English	540

Source: Own work based on data taken from the course textbook "English Conversation".

* The weekly broadcasting time for English is the sum of 6 different courses.

There are eleven English courses in total, and 10 of these use textbooks that are published every month. The total number of these textbooks printed each month is 4,420,000¹¹. This confirms that English has a greater presence than other languages.

2.3 Use of English

In everyday life, there is no need to use English as the vehicular language. The few areas in which English is used generally are limited to some university courses and certain departments of large international corporations. Let us now turn then to the business world.

Here, we will analyse two surveys. One is a survey carried out on TOEIC candidates regarding the frequency with which they used English in the workplace. In the year 2000 (April 2000 to March 2001),

¹¹ Data obtained from a telephone query to the publisher.

there were 493,184 candidates, of whom 185,143 confirmed that they needed to use English in the workplace¹².

The second survey was carried out by the Japan Overseas Enterprises Association¹³ on its members. At the end of 1999, the Association had over 347 member-companies, of which 130 answered the survey. A total of 32 (24.6%) of these 130 companies answered that they preferred to recruit candidates with English skills. Fifty companies (38.5%) included an English test in their recruitment process. A total of 31 (23.8%) companies said that they took English skills into account when promoting staff¹⁴. Below are some examples of company language requirements.

Table 7. Examples of English Requirements

Company	Language requirements (the figure refers to TOEIC points)
IBM Japan	Head of Department 600 Deputy Manager 730
KOMATSU (construction machinery)	Intermediate management 500
KAOU (domestic products)	Main foreman 450 Head of Department 500 Staff of the international department 650
SHARP	Staff of the international department 600
SMK (electronic components)	The internal vehicular language is English and Japanese.

Source: Report about the general study of the current status of English teachers and their ideal model¹⁵.

Given the growing trend to request English language skills, people are now beginning to talk of the "English Divide". That is to say, individuals with a knowledge of English have a superior economic status. In this situation, English is a discriminating factor, both professionally and economically. A study entitled "English Proficiency and Earnings of University Graduates: Is the English language forming a new upper class in Japan?"¹⁶ discusses the possibility of this division and confirms that it exists. However, this is only a partial study and cannot, in our opinion, be confirmed generally.

We have now seen the general situation of English in Japan. Despite the lack of statistical basis, we can observe certain points.

1. There is no need for knowledge of English in everyday life.
2. In the business world, certain sectors need staff who are able to communicate in English. However, this is not a generalized phenomenon.
3. Nevertheless, not only are there many students of English, there are also many candidates for English proficiency tests.

¹² This figure was extracted from the report on TOEIC *Data & Analysis 2000*, which can be consulted at: <http://www.toeic.or.jp/>

¹³ http://www.joea.or.jp/english/e_index.htm

¹⁴ One of the newspaper articles on this survey can be found at: <http://www.isize.com/>

¹⁵ Available at: <http://www3.justnet.ne.jp/~shiensakai/terg.htm>

¹⁶ Available at: <http://www2.osipp.osaka-u.ac.jp/~matusiqe/>

From these three points, we can conclude that there is an discrepancy between the need to learn English and the actual learning of the language.

3. Linguistic ideology

In the introduction, we mentioned the proposal of giving official status to English. In fact, this type of proposal dates back to 1872, when the Japanese society was rushing to modernize itself. Arinori Mori, the first Japanese diplomat in the United States, wrote to W. D. Whitney, the renowned linguist and Yale professor, to ask his opinion on the adoption of English in Japan. Here is an extract from this letter (Kawasumi 1978: 47).

"The spoken language of Japan being inadequate to the growing necessities of the people of that Empire, and too poor to be made, by a phonetic alphabet, sufficiently useful as a written language, the idea prevails among us that, if we would keep pace with the age, we must adopt a copious and expanding European language. The necessity for this arises mainly out of the fact that Japan is a commercial nation; and also that, if we do not adopt a language like that of English, which is quite predominant in Asia, as well as elsewhere in the commercial world, the progress of Japanese civilization is evidently impossible. Indeed a new language is demanded by the whole Empire."

Mori's proposal was clearly made from the perspective of a national strategy which involved accepting the linguistic hierarchy and placing the State at the highest level. This would be very practical, if language were a mere instrument. This linguistic ideology is the simple "language=instrument"¹⁷. Whitney replied to Mori's proposal pointing out the dangers of linguistic segregation in Japanese society, amongst other aspects.

One hundred and twenty-eight years later, the above report was published. The following is an extract¹⁸.

"It will not be easy to ride the waves of the information technology revolution and globalization. The only way to cope will be to expand domestic use of the Internet and of English as the international lingua franca. People should be familiarized with both on a mass level in childhood. Lest there be any misunderstanding, we stress that Japanese is a wonderful language. We should nurture culture and cultivation, sensibility and thinking power, by treasuring Japanese and acquiring good Japanese language skills. But to argue that this means rejecting foreign languages reflects mistaken, zero-sum thinking. It is a fundamental fallacy to believe that cherishing the Japanese language precludes studying other languages or that caring for Japanese culture requires rejecting foreign cultures. If we treasure the Japanese language and culture, we should actively assimilate other languages and cultures, enriching Japanese culture through contact with other cultures and showing other countries the attraction of Japanese culture by introducing it in an appropriate fashion in their languages. English has become the international lingua franca, a process accelerated by the Internet and

¹⁷ However, Mori was not an ordinary supporter of this ideology, he was in fact very radical, because he also proposed a reform of English that sought to eliminate the irregularity of verbs (e.g. replacing "saw" and "seen" with "seed", "spoke" and "spoken" with "spoked"), spelling, etc. Let us not forget that this language reform was suggested before esperanto.

¹⁸ Page 20 of Chapter 6 of the report mentioned in Note 1.

globalization. So long as English is effectively the language of international discourse, there is no alternative to familiarizing ourselves with it within Japan. Even if we stop short of making it an official second language, we should give it the status of a second working language and use it routinely alongside Japanese.”

The discourse sounds different, but it is essentially the same. The argument for respecting Japanese has been included and Mori’s pessimism regarding the Japanese language is absent. However, the linguistic ideology forming the basis of the argument is the same. Linguistic hierarchy is not questioned; rather, we are invited to take advantage of it.

A further point in common is the dimension of the vision. Both discourses are based on the point of view of the State, not of the individual. The perspective of the linguistic rights concept is lacking, which suggests the reason why Japan regards its native languages other than Japanese with disdain.

4. Conclusion

The enthusiasm for learning English does not coincide with the real need for English skills in Japanese society. It could be said that the cause of this phenomenon is the linguistic ideology considering language as a mere instrument and promoting a discourse that simply praises and admires the circulation of language. This ideology is not only political, it has also become established in individuals. Many people learn English when they do not have any urgent need to do so and they sit the proficiency tests voluntarily, personally footing the costs. Let us not forget that, back in 1997, revenue from private language schools reached 992,220,000 euros.

In Japan, other languages, apart from English are spoken. There are even two native languages, other than Japanese. There is also a fairly large Korean linguistic community. Looking back to the past, it would not seem strange to see a proposal offering official status to all of these languages. The first two have been minoritized throughout Japan’s modernization process and the latter is the language of the ex-subjects of the Japanese Empire (most Koreans living in Japan today are individuals who came from the Korean peninsula to set up home on the archipelago when they were Japanese, or they are the descendants of the latter). However, none such proposal has been made. The indifference towards these languages is not so alien to the enthusiasm for learning English. Indifference and enthusiasm are the two extremes of the same rule that gauges the value of a language by its market value. Let us not forget the overwhelming presence of English in education and in courses on radio and television.

Throughout Japan’s modernization, a number of proposals for making English an official language have been put forward, and some of these have been the object of social debate. Nevertheless, a linguistic census has yet to be carried out. None of these proposals and debates have had a scientific basis; they have been based solely on ideology, revealing just how fictitious the need for English that has been circulated actually is. A linguistic census is now required, not to discuss whether or not English deserves official status, but to prepare a language policy that protects the linguistic rights of the speakers of Japan’s minoritized languages.

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