THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE IN THE WORLD

The World Starts Speaking Japanese

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The Spread of the Japanese Language

As you are no doubt aware, both Japan’s overseas economic expansion and the spread of its language has recently begun to attract attention. Since the early 1980’s many business firms from abroad have begun to study Japanese business systems. As well, tourist businesses abroad are becoming more and more aware of the Japanese consumer, for both tourism and product consumption. Therefore, some foreign businesses are now encouraging their employees to learn Japanese to gain an advantage in competitive markets. This has led to a dramatic increase in the number of people studying Japanese in foreign countries. The Asahi newspaper estimates there to be approximately 2,000,000 (the actual figure is probably much higher if we include Chinese learners of Japanese. Unfortunately, no precise statistics from that country are available). And by the year 2000 (according to the Western Calendar) that figure is expected to break the 10,000,000 mark (Asahi Shimbun-March 11, 1988). Japanese is now a popular language throughout the world. However, the number of Japanese language teachers now being sent abroad is not enough to match this growing demand. In fact, support for Japanese language education overseas has only recently gotten underway.

Until quite recently, the language used by Japanese people when communicating with foreigners in Japan was usually English or some other
Western language. This situation is changing quite rapidly. It is now common for foreigners in Japan to converse in Japanese with their Japanese hosts. No one can deny that the sight of these foreigners conversing in fluent Japanese would have been unimaginable only a few short years ago. Let me clarify that when I speak of foreigners in Japan, I include foreigners from all parts of the world, not only Europeans and Americans. The most interesting aspect of this communication is that the foreigners have already received excellent Japanese language training in their own country before coming to Japan. Their amazing ability to speak Japanese fluently indicates the excellent quality of overseas Japanese language education.

**Foreign Language Education in Japan and Abroad**

Foreign language instruction in Japan is quite different from that carried on abroad. In the West, and particularly in Europe and North America, a pragmatic approach to foreign language teaching is utilized. The pragmatic approach emphasizes the importance of spoken communication, and recognizes that there is a difference between written and spoken language. For example, written communication is static and the grammar must therefore be perfect, whereas spoken communication is interactive and includes both verbal and non-verbal behaviour (such as gestures). In the pragmatic approach spoken communication always takes priority and is held in the highest regard. With this approach students try to use the language for communication as soon as possible.

An excellent example of the pragmatic approach is the FALCON program at Cornell University. The FALCON program is an intensive Japanese language course which began in 1972 and thus already has some history. The students receive 1200 hours of Japanese instruction in one
year. Classes are limited to 12 students who receive 6 hours of instruction daily. Along with full-time university students, there are diplomatic personnel, psychologists, doctors, teachers and people of various occupations struggling to keep up with the fast paced lessons. If we figure 1200 hours of instruction according to the Japanese educational timetable, it would add up to all the class hours of junior high school, senior high school and 2 years of college put together (a total of 8 years), an extremely large amount of time. After 6 months the students can manage substantial conversation in standard Japanese, and when the 1-year course is complete they can handle several complex topics. Their linguistic ability was so proficient that when I spoke with them in Japanese, I forgot I was talking to foreign students. I was quite surprised and impressed by the success of the pragmatic approach used by the FALCON program.

Once when I remarked to a student that a book I had read was really interesting and would have been useful to him, the student replied “Sir, we haven’t studied the Japanese writing system yet so I wouldn’t be able to read it.” Was I surprised by that! I think that Japanese people assume that if a foreigner can converse smoothly in Japanese, then he or she can surely handle reading and writing equally well. In fact, this 1200 hour intensive program completely excludes reading and writing and focuses exclusively on the development of speaking and listening skills.

Of course, this is but one example, but Japanese language teaching overseas usually begins by using romaji (Roman alphabet) and emphasizing the sound system. Christchurch Polytechnic in New Zealand uses a pragmatic approach similar to that of the FALCON program with great success. In fact, Christchurch Polytechnic is now the most popular Japanese program in New Zealand, and currently offers a 3 year degree program in Japanese with plans for a Master’s degree in the works. From these two
examples we can readily see how different foreign language study in Japan is from abroad.

Perhaps one of the biggest differences between foreign language instruction in Japan and abroad is the compulsory component of English education in Japan. Students in Japan must take at least 6 years of English: 3 in Junior High School and 3 in Senior High School. This creates two important problems: 1) students who don’t want to study English are forced to do so and 2) students who do want to study English must study at the slower pace of those who don’t enjoy English. These two problems are not present in the non-compulsory Japanese language schools abroad because students voluntarily take the classes and are therefore eager to learn at a faster pace.

Furthermore, in Japan most of the English instruction is for written language (reading and writing) with little emphasis on spoken communication. There is very little opportunity to use their English in communication. Some students may therefore find English useless and only another chore. The students in the FALCON program, however, use their Japanese everyday to communicate with their teachers and friends, making their Japanese useful and enjoyable. Students of the FALCON program usually continue to use their Japanese skills after the program is complete. In Japan however, within a few months of graduation, Japanese students of English generally lose their enthusiasm and ability to speak English. This is a very disappointing result. Contemporary Japanese foreign language teaching, it seems, must look to other programs such as the FALCON program, to produce better results.

Already more than 100 years have passed since English language education was first introduced in Japan. From the beginning of this period the Japanese people have attempted to absorb Western languages and
cultures, and have not tried to teach the rest of the world their own splendid language and culture. Japan's relationship with other cultures has not been mutually symbiotic. It has been a one-way, import only, relationship. In fact, a review of Japanese history reveals some noted figures, such as the famous writer Naoya Shiga, who even advocated abolishing the Japanese language and making French (or some other tongue) the national language.\footnote{Shiga, Naoya (1893-1971), a famous novelist criticized the Japanese language and suggested that it be replaced by English, which he considered beautiful. Another famous example is Mori, Arinori (1847-1889), the first Minister of Education in Japan, who suggested replacing the national tongue with French and that it should be the primary language in government and education.}

The Diffusion of the Japanese Language

Ordinarily, the movement of languages goes hand in hand with the movement of people. For example, in Melbourne, Australia there reside immigrants from 94 foreign countries, a veritable international society with a population of some 3,000,000. Among the nations present are the English, Irish, Greeks, Italians, Chinese and Czechs, and many more. Because of this diversity there are various foreign language speaking communities within the same city. Germans gather together to speak German in their neighbourhood. There is an area called Chinatown where Chinese is spoken in every shop and home, and another area called Little Italy where Italian can be heard on every street corner. The people have brought their language and culture with them to Australia. The city of Melbourne is but one example of language following people.

An examination of the Japanese language shows that its diffusion
abroad is unique. Rather than being spread by the movement of people, Japanese has been carried abroad by Japanese products and economy. Japan's remarkable economic expansion has forced foreign countries to become familiar with Japan and its language. They have begun to wonder what makes Japan successful. They have become interested in learning about Japan in order to attract Japanese tourists, export products to Japanese consumers, and to improve their businesses by examining Japanese business practices. Therefore, it is the Japanese economy that has provided the stimulus for interest in the Japanese language, and not the emigration of the Japanese people.

Furthermore, things Japanese have recently come into fashion. Nowadays, no matter what nation you visit, you can dine at Japanese restaurants. If Japanese restaurants in foreign countries depend on serving an exclusively Japanese clientele, they will be in danger of going out of business. Thus, Japanese eateries must look to the local non-Japanese population for their customers. The only reason the Japanese restaurants are successful is that the local people enjoy Japanese cuisine enough to frequent such shops.

Professor Adnani of Malaysia University, who holds a Ph.D in Linguistics and who once shared an office with me for a year at Cornell University says with great embarrassment "If you said 'Made in Japan' 30 years ago it was a synonym for 'Inferior Goods', but now it's a synonym for 'Superior Goods.'" These days, foreigners seem to feel that most Japanese products are likely to be of superior quality.

We have reached a period in history when foreigners are willing to accept Japanese products and ideas. Naturally, this includes Japanese cars, cuisine, traditional arts such as flower arrangement and the tea ceremony, Japanese calligraphy and Japanese style traditional music in
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addition to the already popular marital arts of Kendo and Judo. Before the Japanese realized it, these parts of our culture have gained the respect and appreciation of people all over the world.

Within a few short years Japanese culture has made an impact on the world. And as I mentioned previously, the medium for the spread of the Japanese language around the world was not so much the Japanese people themselves, but rather Japan’s robust economy, its culture and its products. The Japanese language and culture has ceased to be the exclusive property of Japanese people, and I believe the time has come when we must recognize and accept this fact. The Japanese economy has begun the diffusion of Japanese around the world, and it is now up to the people of Japan to carry it abroad, and teach it to those who wish to learn.

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