

The Politics of Language : Nation-State, Imperialism, Egalitarianism, and Internationalization

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The Politics of Language: Nation-State, Imperialism, Egalitarianism, and Internationalization

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1. INTRODUCTION

Papers presented at this Symposium covered such a wide and varied range of topics that summarizing them in a few pages is not possible. I will therefore simply attempt to reconceptualize some of the major issues and ideas presented within the framework of comparative civilization. I will try to identify certain orderly developments in language, writing, and literacy in world history and cast the Japanese case in the world context. The developments to be identified are: (1) formation of the nation-state in 19th-century Europe; (2) subsequent colonial imperialism by European powers; (3) impact of the ideology of egalitarianism, primarily in the 20th century; and finally (4) increasing global internationalization in the second half of the 20th century.

Important factors underlying these historical processes are institutions and technology that affect language, writing, and literacy; these include printing, recording, and television, each of which deserves special attention.

2. NATION-STATE

It was Benedict Anderson who argued in *Imagined Communities* [1983] that the emergence of the nation-state in the 19th century was accompanied by establishment of standardized "official language" and by what he called "print capitalism." Declaration of an official language by the ruling body, as Latin declined as an official language, created a favored status for the language so chosen that other dialects and languages could not enjoy. A language hierarchy was thus created in which the "chosen language" enjoyed high prestige denied to other tongues in use within the nation. As printing became widespread following the invention of the Gutenberg movable-type press, governments around Europe began to print legal documents and other communications in the new, official languages. In what

Anderson cleverly calls "print capitalism," newspapers, and books too, began to be printed in the prestigious official language at the expense of other dialects. The official language, at least in written form, spread from the capital to all corners of the state. As a result, argues Anderson, citizens of the state at the opposite ends of the territory who never saw or knew each other were able to feel camaraderie by imagining themselves as part of one and the same political community. Indeed, now they did belong to a community defined by a shared writing system if not a common spoken idiom. Thus standardized writing systems contributed enormously to creating a sense of unity among members of the state and a sense of identity with the state; it made possible the nation-state as a conscious, "imagined" phenomenon for its citizenry.

While each state created its own official language and spread its use within its boundaries, neighboring states, armed with their own distinct official languages, followed suit. One important consequence was that national boundaries became linguistic boundaries; official languages used on either side of the boundary were often mutually unintelligible even when the adjacent spoken dialects imperceptibly merged from one into another. Sharply drawn boundaries of official languages thus helped to reaffirm national boundaries and reinforce national identity.

Anthony D. Smith [1986] has argued for the ethnic origin of the modern state, but prominent among the primordial qualities of the *ethnie*, as Smith terms it, is the use of a shared language. The modern state, by creating an official language and using it to define itself culturally, was wittingly or unwittingly availing itself of a pre-modern means of self-definition.

But official language was not only a means for establishing national identity. It also used as a means of political control, and for the constitution (if there was one), statutes, regulations and laws pertaining to citizenship. Indeed, only those who could understand the official language could be controlled. Spread of the official language thus became an urgent task for the state, not only to develop in its citizenry a sense of national identity, but also, ultimately, a sense of loyalty and patriotism. Modern governments spend considerable effort operating national educational systems, one of whose major objectives is to spread literacy, *i.e.* the writing system of the official language.

Some states, such as France, went so far as to establish an official academy to control the grammatical as well as lexical usage of the official language. Others were less blatant, but some form of standardization was inevitably exercised in all of them. If only by adopting a given language or a given dialect, the state sanctioned one language or dialect above all other rivals.

Let us reflect on the Japanese case in light of the European experience. The fact that Japan was an island nation from earliest times meant that the state boundary was well defined at the start of its modern period. Creation of a nation-state in the sense of defining boundaries was not a "problem" in Japan the way it was in Europe, as Calvetti observes. Language had to be used to define boundaries in Europe because they continually shifted through the course of history with rise and

fall of kingdoms and empires. Japan also faced an easier task because, within its boundaries, there were no major non-Japanese ethnic groups or languages that could challenge the political legitimacy of ethnic Japanese. The Ainu and the Koreans—the two notable ethnic minorities in Japan—were too small in number and too weak politically to create any threat to the sovereignty of the Japanese state.

Creation of an imagined community was all the easier because of the shared—not to say identical—culture throughout Japan deriving from primitive Shintō beliefs, folk Buddhism, wet-rice subsistence agriculture, etc. The complex writing system, including styles as diverse as *kanbun*, *sōrōbun*, and *kanamajiribun*, had matured by the modern period, was shared by the ruling elite throughout the nation, and endorsed by the Meiji state. Though not yet totally standardized in the early years of Meiji, a system was already in place as the state emerged that could be used as a basis for establishing a more or less standardized orthography. (As Umesao has repeatedly observed, however, complete standardization of Japanese orthography, in the theoretical sense, has yet to occur even today.)

State control in Japan was, in sum, exercised through a pre-existing writing system in which the constitution, statutes, and ordinances were cast. But that was not all: an artificial, standard Japanese (called *hyōjungo* or *kyōtsūgo*), based on the dialect of Tōkyō, also came into being; it is a common language used by all Japanese but it really exists only in written form. "Standard Japanese" in spoken form is actually far from standardized, for its pronunciation is affected by the phonology of individual dialects. A critical element of the importance of literacy lies in this very fact: it was only through writing that a common means of communication could be established and an imagined community created.

This written form became the official language of school instruction. Literacy in Japan has always meant understanding this written form of the "standard language." The modern Japanese government established an extensive educational system, like those of Europe, instituting universal compulsory education. To be sure, Rubinger's report at this symposium clearly demonstrates that the success of universal education in Japan has been grossly exaggerated by falsely assuming that literacy is directly proportional to school attendance. There can be no question, however, that through the educational institution, the state successfully created a means of controlling its citizenry and developing an important tool for building loyalty to the state, taking its citizens far beyond provincial localism based on *han* loyalty and the regional dialects of feudal days.

At present the Japanese government specifies the *kanji* that are to be taught in school and how they are to be written. Beyond officially certifying a list of *kanji*, the government also monitors language usage through the certification of all texts by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science. Designation of personal names are also controlled in the sense that they must use characters (*kanji* and *kana*) from a government-approved list.

3. IMPERIALISM

Colonial control of the world by European nations began, of course, long before the formation of the nation-state in the 19th century, but it was accompanied by what one might call "language imperialism." This "language imperialism" was part and parcel of the larger political and economic control of colonies and served to maintain and perpetuate it.

Colonial powers naturally used their official languages as a means of control, at least to the extent that legal documents pertaining to colonial control were written in the official language of the European power controlling the colony, that the officials sent by the home government spoke it on official and unofficial occasions, and that this language was used for communicating with colonial subjects. This meant that at least some of the colonial subjects—those who were in the position of playing the role of cultural broker—had to learn this language.

In order to facilitate this process, colonial powers sent colonial subjects to their home countries for education. At the same time, the colonial administration, along with Christian missionaries, established educational institutions in the colony, where the language of the ruler was taught and used in instruction. As a result, there arose a cadre of colonial subjects whose native tongues may have been totally unintelligible to one another (because they belonged to different linguistic groups) but who understood each other in the language of the ruler. "Language imperialism" is seen also in the fact that colonial rulers compiled reports in their languages on natural and cultural conditions of the colonies, as Someya reported for Indonesia. These reports form an indispensable basis for future research, but, ironically, much of the information on colonies is locked up in the language of the colonizers.

At any rate, through "language imperialism," colonial subjects, at least those in the elite strata, became inextricably tied to the language of the rulers whenever they wished to gain knowledge about their own environment, culture, and history or aspired to participate and succeed in the colonial master's social, economic, and political institutions. The natives who served in the lower echelons of the colonial bureaucracy—the upper positions were monopolized by white rulers and their immediate helpers—all had to use the official language of the colonizing power.

Japanese imperialism deviated little if at all from the European pattern as far as language was concerned. In Korea, Taiwan, Manchuria, and Micronesia alike, the Japanese language (*i.e.* what by then had become established as "standard Japanese") was the official language of control and governance. "Language imperialism" was part and parcel of the establishment of colonial government and schools, where Japanese was used as the official language. Generations of colonial subjects grew up learning Japanese as the second language well enough to use it for communicating with Japanese visitors years after liberation and independence. Japanese conducted scientific research in all the empire's colonies, brought back reports, and published their findings in Japanese. Perhaps best known among

them are the investigations sponsored by the South Manchurian Railroad Company in northern China on all phases of natural and cultural sciences; in some cases, they constitute the only prewar data available.

4. TREND TOWARD EGALITARIANISM

The ideology of equality is not new to the 20th century. The French Revolution was carried out in the name of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* at the end of 18th century, but equality did not hit the world with full force until the 20th century. It was, of course, foreshadowed not only by the popular revolutions of 1848, but also by the recognition of the rights of the individual in the United States Constitution, the general abolition of slavery by 1865, the ideology of individualism implicit in the Protestant variety of Christianity, and in the numerous other precursors of what has blossomed into a worldwide movement toward equality in this century. After the World War II, former European possessions fought for liberation and won independence one after another until, today, only a handful of protectorates, trust territories, and crown colonies remain. Most post-colonial nation-states have joined the United Nations, becoming members alongside their former masters. All the nations of the 20th century, whether of the vintage European variety or their post-colonial copies, espouse democratic principles, allowing universal suffrage in most cases or, at least, declaring adherence to egalitarian principles despite violations of those principles that continue to be reported from virtually all of them.

It must therefore be kept in mind that egalitarianism is only a trend, not a monolithic reality. Inequality abounds throughout the world. Even the Soviet Communist Revolution, predicated on a "withering away of the state" and the coming of a truly egalitarian, communal state of affairs, has failed miserably to achieve its proclaimed goal. The force of egalitarian ideology remains strong nevertheless. Counter-tendencies toward inequality and discrimination by ethnicity and gender seem destined, in the long run, to fail in the face of an overwhelming drive toward equality for all races, ethnic groups, and sexes.

This political trend can be seen as a prelude to a trend toward language equalization emerging in the 20th century. One aspect of this trend is contained in the educational programs of the nation-states of the 20th century, which require their citizens to acquire literacy so that they can become better citizens, better serve the state, and be more effectively controlled and governed. In this process, literacy has ceased to be a privilege of the ruling elite and a means of access to esoteric knowledge and become a means for the ruled, the controlled, and the subjugated to achieve some of the privileges once enjoyed by only a handful of individuals. Through the spread of literacy, larger and larger numbers of citizens are able to participate in and enjoy the culture formerly reserved for the rich and powerful few.

The Indonesian case illustrates this equalizing trend: the Indonesian language, relatively devoid of hierarchical expressions and grammatical constructions, has been adopted as the national language instead of Javanese, which is replete with

elaborate “respect language.” There were undoubtedly other reasons for the adoption of Indonesian as the national language as well, such as the relatively greater range of Indonesian throughout the population compared with the range of other languages. Nonetheless, the congruence between the selection of Indonesian and the “democratic” ideology of Indonesia cannot be totally ignored. I would even venture to guess that, had the Indonesian language not, for some reason, been available for adoption as the national language, and had Javanese been adopted for this purpose, the Javanese language would have undergone simplification of its honorific structures and other features expressive of hierarchical relationships.

Several patterns are discernible in the ways that particular languages are selected for adoption as official in post-colonial nations. One is to adopt the language of the former ruler. For the colonies whose dominant population shared a culture with the former ruler (e.g. the United States, Australia, and New Zealand), this was a natural course of development. Most colonies, however, included non-European populations—aborigines in Australia, the Maori in New Zealand, Amerind tribes in the New World, etc.—that were subjugated by colonists and remained subjugated in the post-colonial nation-state. Language policy toward these native populations repeated the policy of the former colonial masters: the post-colonial nation ruled over its indigenous populations with its own language and forced it upon them. The natives had to wait generations before their cultural autonomy could be recognized—and many are still waiting.

European powers often drew colonial boundary lines arbitrarily for reasons of political expediency without any regard to linguistic and cultural discontinuities among indigenous populations; this was the case in India and Africa. Many different linguistic and ethnic groups were thrown together in a single colony. When these colonies became independent, most of them could not rid themselves of the colonial European language simply because they could not find a substitute native language that a majority of citizens would accept. Thus they were forced to adopt the language of the ruler from whose yoke they had longed to be free.

Indonesia and Tanganyika are two notable cases constituting a third pattern in which, as reported at this symposium, the ruler’s language was not adopted, but instead a local language of wide usage—Indonesian in the former case and Swahili in the latter—became the national language. These two represent somewhat different situations in that Swahili serves as a *lingua franca* for a vast area of East Africa, whereas Indonesian, though similar to Malaysian, is a language not shared by other nations and confined to only one part (albeit a large part) of Indonesia. An important consequence of this difference is that Indonesian is the national language not only because it has official status but also because it is spoken only in Indonesia; therefore, the language itself can be used as a symbol of national identity, whereas Swahili cannot serve the same function.

A fourth pattern of national language formation is for a small native group who seize political power after the departure of the colonists to make its language the national standard, as Tagalog speakers did in the Philippines. This conferred

an enormous advantage on Tagalog speakers by giving them political access unavailable to others. Tagalog is still spoken by only a small segment of the Philippine population, forcing political leaders to address the nation in English. Though similar to the second pattern, in which the colonial master's language is adopted as the national standard, the adoption of a minority native language differs in that the standard is *de jure* rather than *de facto*.

Turning to the Japanese case, we clearly see similarities with the world patterns. Though literacy was not restricted by edict to the *samurai* class during the Edo period, its spread to other classes was limited. Earnest effort to spread literacy to the whole population had to wait until the Meiji period, when the rise of literacy became part and parcel of the much wider movement toward social, political, and economic equality. Rubinger's findings coupled with the SCAP investigation of literacy in 1948, which showed only a small percentage of Japanese to be fully literate (also discussed at the symposium) suggest that the claim of a high literacy rate already in late 19th-century Japan needs to be reexamined. Nevertheless, educational institutions have steadily increased in number and in enrollment from Meiji to the present, and an increasing number of Japanese have been receiving education for longer and longer periods of time. Means for spreading literacy (in "standard Japanese") have also expanded from schools, newspapers, magazines, and books to radio, television and, most recently, computers. Universal conscription, inaugurated by the Meiji government in an effort to make *samurai* out of every Japanese man, contributed to the same end, for conscripts were required to read the Imperial Rescript for Soldiers and Sailors as well as military regulations; moreover, they had to understand commands given by officers in standard Japanese, although, as Umesao pointed out in our discussions, comprehension of the official Japanese by conscripts in the 19th century was far from perfect.

Along with the trend toward leveling in the populace through the spread of literacy, another egalitarian trend began in Meiji, though it too has not yet brought about completely satisfactory results. This is the so-called *genbun itchi* movement, members of which advocated a style of writing that would better reflect "spoken Japanese" (again, the standard language, of course). The discrepancy between written Japanese, which had prevailed until well into Meiji, and the colloquial language was enormous. The need to adjust the writing system to better reflect standard Japanese and thus make the language easier to read and write was widely recognized. Although reform proceeded slowly and incurred setbacks, the writing system has, after a century, been simplified and brought into closer accord with the spoken language. As a result, the standard language has become much more accessible to the common people than it was a hundred years ago, when official documents were written in *kanbun* or *bungotai*.

We should also note in this connection the simplification of the writing system after World War II. The large number of *kanji* used up to 1945 has been reduced to a basic minimum of approximately 2,000. In addition, the *kanji* themselves have been simplified, allowing for easier learning and easier usage.

A third equalizing trend in the development of Japanese language is the simplification that has taken place in "respect language." Several members of the symposium pointed out the decreased hierarchical distance between imperial writing and speech. Emperors Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa (until the end of the World War II) never directly spoke to their subjects. Their writings were limited to imperial rescripts, which always referred to the emperor as *chin*, a self-referential form reserved strictly for the emperor. After the end of the war, the emperor referred to himself as *watakushi*, a self-referential form used by ordinary Japanese. The present emperor, Heisei, is even more "democratic" in that he addresses Japanese people as *minasan*, rather than *jinmin* or *kokumin*, words which imply less intimacy and greater distance, formality, and consciousness of hierarchy.

The honorific forms used by ordinary Japanese have also gone through and considerable simplification over the past hundred years, especially since World War II. Perhaps because this is so obvious, no paper presented at this symposium touched upon this point. Some argue that the honorific system is being "corrupted" (*midarete iru*); it certainly is going through a period of change—old rules are being violated while new ones take form. This does not necessarily mean that rules and regularities are lacking, however; it means only that linguists have not caught up with reality in their descriptions of the system.

Turning to Japan's former colonies, the postcolonial situation is instructive as far as language phenomena are concerned, since it is not an exact repetition of what has been observed among former European colonies. The areas that Japan colonized were monolingual, so there was no problem in deciding what language to revert to after liberation. Korea reverted to Korean as the official language and Taiwan to Chinese.

The intensity of anti-Japanese feeling in Korea resulted in a complete ban on the use of Japanese both in its written and spoken forms immediately following independence. It has been only in recent years that this ban has been lifted and learning Japanese has become a vogue; today it is being studied by a large number of Koreans, mostly of the postwar generation, who have no experience of colonial humiliation. On the one hand, these Koreans want to learn advanced science and technology from Japan in order to catch and keep up with Japan and the West; this desire is at least as strong among Koreans today as it was among Japanese during the Meiji period. On the other hand, the largest number of tourists in Korea are Japanese: in order to cater to them and to earn *yen*, Koreans in the tourist industry are studying Japanese.

Colonial rule over Taiwan was much less repressive than over Korea, and Taiwanese did not react with as much vehemence as the Koreans in rejecting Japanese. In a few years, Taiwan was "invaded" by the mainland Nationalists, who established Mandarin, rather than any of the local (southern) dialects, as the official language, thus creating a language hierarchy with Mandarin at the top. Manchuria reverted to China after Japan's defeat, and Chinese became the official language for the area. Thus no former colony of Japan has adopted Japanese as its

official language. Japan's occupations of these colonies was short-lived compared with European counterparts, and its linguistic impact correspondingly slight.

Just as former colonies such as the United States, Australia, and Brazil have subjugated their native populations, Japan has turned its Ainu minority into colonial subjects. In the so-called "Americanization" program, the United States government removed Native American youths from their reservations and placed them in boarding schools, forbidding them to use their native tongue. The Japanese government followed a similar policy of obliterating the Ainu language and imposing its own. The small size of the Ainu population, coupled with its relatively primitive level of technology, enabled Japan largely to succeed in carrying out this policy.

Clearly, the trend toward egalitarianism in language is by no means a smooth, unidirectional process. Instead, it involves backward as well as forward movements, though the net effect on a global level is one of advance.

5. INTERNATIONALIZATION

If we understand Internationalization to be the process of nation-states affecting one another in varying degrees politically, economically, socially, and culturally, then the internationalization of language certainly is part of this process. Such processes have occurred since ancient times and left their mark on languages throughout the world. The impact of the languages of colonists on native languages in colonies is just one example. One may not immediately think of categorizing the colonial situation as "international" since that term implies interaction of two sovereign nations rather than a sovereign state and a colony, a relationship that is politically lopsided and creates a linguistic situation absent in a nation-to-nation relationships. When colonies become independent, however, the relationship between them and the rest of the world, including their former masters, is, strictly speaking, international. Let us consider some other types of linguistic internationalization.

Perhaps the simplest case is the borrowing of words and other linguistic structures. Japanese, of course, is replete with loanwords from Chinese and Western languages, notably English. These loanwords are not evenly distributed throughout the lexical landscape. Instead they form discernible clumps. If, for example, one opens a newspaper to the radio music listings, one finds a veritable ocean of Western loanwords in *katakana*. Areas of scientific discourse also manifest a heavy infusion of Western loanwords. Beyond mere words, use of verb forms in *-(r)areru* in the sense of the passive voice found, for example, in English entered Japanese through the conventions of translation, and has now become an accepted part of "translation Japanese." Though quite uncommon in colloquial Japanese, such passive forms in works directly translated from European languages no longer faze many Japanese readers.

A very different kind of language internationalization is the phenomenon of a

multinational *lingua franca*. We have already looked at Swahili in East Africa; diplomatic French is another example. English, on the other hand, has become a *lingua franca* in scholarly fields. English-language scientific journals are published even in some non-English-speaking countries, not only in postcolonial, British commonwealth countries but also in Scandinavia and other parts of the Continent. English is also fast establishing itself as a *lingua franca* of international business. On the one hand, this reflects the lingering influence of the British Empire, and, on the other hand, the spread of American business, particularly U.S.-based multinational corporations, throughout the world. The combination of these two factors has created an immense number of people who speak English as a second language.

The chances of Japanese becoming internationalized in this sense of the term seem to be rather slim. Japanese words have been absorbed into foreign languages to only a modest extent. Japanese has not been adopted as the official language of any nation except Japan, nor is it a language of international diplomacy. It is not even one of the official languages of the United Nations. Japanese is not used for communication among speakers of other languages; though hundreds of thousands of foreigners are now studying Japanese, their aim is to communicate with Japanese.

In sum, Japanese does not qualify as a *lingua franca*. One would hardly expect a Swedish scientist to use Japanese in communicating his ideas to a Spanish, Indian, or Nigerian colleague. Only languages such as English, French, German, Spanish and Swahili serve widely in this capacity at present. And it seems unlikely that the role of Japanese on the international scene will change much in the future. One must therefore expect Japanese to have to rely increasingly on other languages, particularly English, when participating in the international community.

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